



We will soon consider conflict in differing situations, at differing levels of human experience. Before we do that, however, it is useful to consider the relationship between conflict and stress.

Most of us associate conflict with stress. Conflict is all about people yelling, getting upset, and perhaps even becoming physically violent — all of which are quite stressful. And yet it is also the fear of stress that makes many of us go out of our way to avoid conflict and, by so doing, perhaps settle for an outcome that is less than ideal. Perhaps if we learnt to manage stress better, we would be better able to deal with conflict. Let's now consider some aspects of this basic phenomenon, and perhaps if we can remove some of the fear that many of us associate with stress, we can put conflict in a clearer perspective.

STRESS: WHAT HAPPENS

Most of the stress reactions we undergo are biologically programmed within us. They are part of what is called the *fight/flight/freeze response*, which equips us to meet physical threats in our environment in different ways:

- to fight — to be ready to attack and attempt to defeat the threat
- to fly — to run away from the threat
- to freeze — to simulate death, to discourage the threat.¹⁰

Most stress symptoms can be understood in terms of these responses (table 2.1). These responses are effective when the threat we face is physical — a wild beast, for example. They served our caveman ancestors well, which is why cavemen had descendants. They were *adaptive* — that is, they helped our ancestors adapt to a hostile environment. They can be ineffective, or *maladaptive*, however, when the 'threat' is symbolic — such as that presented by a person we are arguing with, who has no particular desire to escalate the conflict to physical violence. Modern humans usually have to think their way out of problems and conflicts, which means effective functioning; however, all too often fighting, flying and freezing get in the way of functioning.

Can we control, or at least influence, such instinctual responses? This is very much a matter of controversy, although many stress management analysts argue that techniques such as meditation and progressive relaxation¹¹ can in fact weaken and perhaps even neutralise the fight-flight-freeze response.

Remember, of course, that a controlled amount of stress or arousal can, in fact, improve our arguing performance rather than detract from it: we might be stimulated to perform better, in much the same way that actors or athletes

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might perform better with a certain amount of stress. In this sense, the fight-flight-freeze response can still be thought of as adaptive. This type of benign stress can, in fact, be a pleasurable experience, particularly when you convince the other person of the validity of your views.

Table 2.1: The fight/flight/freeze response

Response	Purpose	Facilitated by	Explanation
To fight	to threaten; to be ready to attack and attempt to defeat the threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased flow of adrenalin in body • pupils dilate, eyes widen • increased heartbeat causes increased blood flow towards muscle groups • blood flows away from face, causing blanching • blood flow into, and activity in, intestines decreases, possibly causing nausea, loss of bowel control • increased perspiration • increased rate of breathing • saliva production reduced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes body to high level of physical arousal • more information about threat is taken in • body is prepared for physical activity • blood being redirected to muscles • blood being redirected to muscles • cools down body when in high physical arousal • more oxygen available for body in high physical arousal • gland secretion shut down to ensure that scarce body resources are available for other processes
To fly	to protect; to run away from the threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • averting eye contact • running away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoidance • live to fight another day
To freeze	to discourage; to simulate death so that the threat will lose interest or become confused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • becoming immobile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sends message — you don't want to bother with me

A MAP OF STRESS

Can stress, then, be a good thing? Yes, if we understand it properly. Hans Selye has suggested that stress is more complex than we might think, and that it can be understood in terms of four different types (figure 2.1).

Distress is the kind of stress that we normally think of as stress per se. But we can also feel *eustress*, or good stress. Thus we might experience strong pleasant physical and psychological reactions when we win a race, receive applause from an audience, or experience love and/or sex. Distress, by contrast, might occur when we lose a race, are booed by an audience, or are deprived of love or sex. In both sets of circumstances, we might cry, cry out, touch ourselves and others, have rapid heartbeats, and so on. *Bustress* thus has more than a passing resemblance to good or useful conflict (see pp. 1-2 and p. 114).

Distress and eustress relate to the quality of stress. In figure 2.1, understress (hypostress) and overstress (hyperstress) relate to the quantity of stress. Overstress is fairly straightforward: this occurs when we are too 'psyched up' to perform well in any circumstances. Understress is less straightforward: this occurs when we are underchallenged or understimulated — for example, in a boring job, or in a solitary confinement cell.

Figure 2.1 could be seen as a map of stress. On such a map, however, our stress might be better mapped as a dynamic line rather than as a single dot. The work of police officers, or soldiers during wartime, is often characterised as 95 per cent boredom (hypostress) and 5 per cent terror (hyperstress).

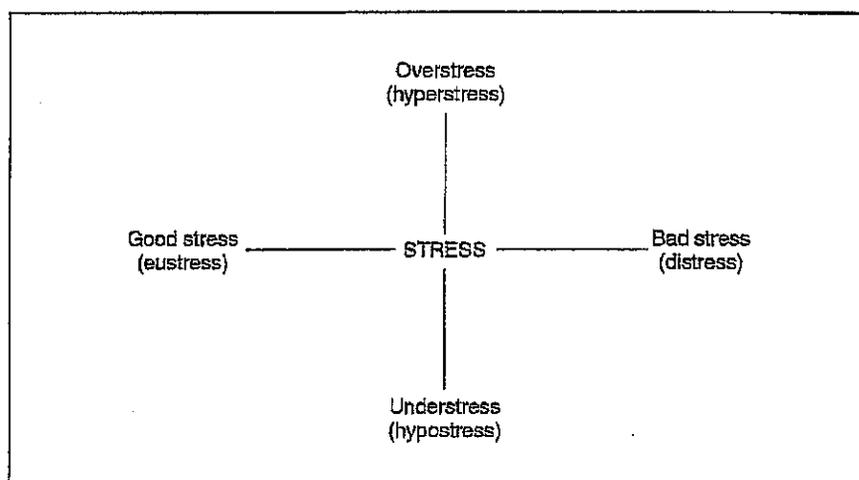


Figure 2.1: Selye's model of stress

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STRESS PERSONALITIES: WHAT TYPE ARE YOU?

Another aspect of stress we need to consider is the concept of stress personalities. Research in the past few decades has suggested that people react to stress in different ways, and that differences in response can help to explain differences in human health.

This personality model suggests that Type A people are rarely at ease with themselves or their circumstances, are continually on the go and, as a result, may be prone to stress-related diseases, such as heart disease. Type B people, in contrast, are more at ease with themselves and their circumstances and, as a result, may be less prone to such disease.¹²

The model is still controversial, but there is enough evidence for its validity to at least make us take note of it. In particular, some research suggests that Type A people are more likely than Type B people to be involved in conflict situations, and that when Type As do get involved in conflict, they are less likely to use flexible strategies such as accommodation, collaboration and compromise (see pp. 12-14).¹³ What type are you? Complete the questionnaire (table 2.2) to find out. Answer the questions by indicating what *most often* applies to you.

