

Active Steps to Reducing Stress

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Extract

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Introduction About this book

Welcome to Active Steps to reducing stress. In this book we look at practical ways to feel calmer on a regular basis whether at home or at work. If you approach the ideas we talk about with an open mind, and try out as many of them as you can, you will soon be feeling calmer and more in control of your day-to-day life.

To get the ball rolling we've answered some frequently asked questions we have encountered when talking to people about this book. We'll then discuss briefly our approach and how best to use this book – this will be helpful so please don't skip it!

You'll then be ready to get cracking on Section 1 and begin learning and practising lots of great stress-busting techniques.

There is an accompanying CD that has a 20-minute guided relaxation exercise inside the back cover. This will be discussed later in the book.



i) Frequently asked questions

Should we reduce our stress?

Stress and the feelings that go along with it occur everyday. This could be at home, at work and when we're out and about. If well managed, it is a part of getting things done, challenging yourself and coping with difficulties. For example, we all regularly need to cope with the stress of a busy day ahead. This can be well managed in a variety of ways: a good night's sleep, preparation for the day, good time management and positive thinking. This is a normal situation, which we all encounter from time to time.

However, poorly managing the above situation will only make the feelings of stress worse. Continued experience of stress is uncomfortable and unhealthy. It is important, therefore, to learn how to control stress whenever possible. Developing an alternative to continued stress and anxiety results in many benefits including improved physical health, energy and motivation plus enhanced relationships, feelings of well-being and control.

Throughout life, we are likely to experience significant overload (when we feel we have too much to do), intimidating new situations (such as an interview or a difficult new project), worrying everyday events (an argument), and very occasional crises (such as bereavement or redundancy).

Many of these cannot be prevented, but our ways of coping with them can be improved, giving us greater self-confidence for dealing with future events.



Can a self-help programme work?

All self-help books set out with the same aim – to help the reader improve a particular health or life issue. If, as is often the case, the reader experiences positive change through self-help, they will not only feel the benefit of the improvements they have made, but also have gained the extra confidence of knowing that they did it for themselves. For a self-help book to work we not only need the initial motivation to pick it up, but also to read it, practise the new ideas and persist with them when we find they work. These new skills will stay with us if we keep using them.

We are not saying that by using this or any other book we can gain complete control of our life or our stress. Life *is* difficult, and will continue to be so. But it is not helpful to get stuck in a rut – thinking and doing the same things, the same way, day after day, and feeling the same way too. We need to be open-minded to new ideas that can help, and then give them a go.

What is the 'Active Steps....' series?

This is a collection of books covering common health and lifestyle topics. We hope that each one will inspire you to improve actively and positively four crucial areas of living – your thinking, lifestyle, communication and behavioural skills, to help you fulfil your health and life goals. The series emphasises your own ability to manage your health and uses non-medical language. The ideas are simple, practical, yet effective – for fast and long-lasting results. This is the first of the series.



Who are the authors?

We are psychologists who have an interest and experience in helping people improve their health and healthy behaviour using practical ideas which work.



James Koch

I'm a psychologist living in Bristol. I developed a keen interest in health and fitness from an early age. I represented England at rugby and Wales at hockey at junior level. Having gained a degree in psychology I spent the next few years setting up and running my own businesses in the leisure industry, spending much of my time in pubs and clubs in line with my work. This was great fun but I developed some habits along the way, which contributed to my own feelings of stress and anxiety.

Researching, writing and testing out the Active Steps approach has helped me identify what works for me. I try to stay focussed on the things that help me feel calm and I spend much of my free time keeping fit and pursuing my creative passions: music and photography.

I hope some of the ideas in this book can help you too.



Hugh Koch

I am a clinical psychologist in Cheltenham. Over many years I have developed a positive, solution-oriented approach to helping people with mental health problems. I had previously worked as a hospital manager and am currently a director of a medico-legal firm. I have spent time with people in a variety of settings finding practical steps they can take to solve their personal problems and feel less stressed.

Looking back on my early family life, it was happy but stressful and I had an underlying level of anxiety, which I learnt to manage using techniques, which we are now writing about. I have been married for 32 years. I like playing guitar and keeping fit by running, cycling and the occasional triathlon.

We are both keen to make 'psychology' ideas more available and understandable – we believe there are many straightforward techniques that we can all use to feel better in our everyday lives. Throughout the book we will explain how we reduce our own stress when we think this will help illustrate a point.

How does it work?

This book uses ideas taken from 25 years of research in the UK and USA into cognitive-behavioural therapy (C.B.T.) and other solution-based approaches. C.B.T. is widely acknowledged as crucial to understanding how psychological difficulties are caused, maintained and treated both within the public health (N.H.S.) and private health sectors. Although other approaches are practised, C.B.T. is the main psychological therapy endorsed by the N.H.S. National Institute of Clinical Excellence (N.I.C.E.).

What is an Active Step?

Reading this book will not in itself make you calmer. You will need to actually put the good ideas in this book into *action* in order to experience and maintain the benefits. An Active Step (or **AS** for short) is a technique to help you develop a more proactive ability to manage your stress and feel more confident about doing so. The aim, with each Active Step, is to make it clear what you can *do now* to make a start on each topic in this book. This means, literally, today and tomorrow. We hope that this will help you get started on making the changes you want to. After all, it's often getting started that's the most difficult part of any task.

You may feel that we are stating the obvious with some of the Active Steps. But that is the point – they are straightforward. Getting started and completing any task can be easier if you break it down into small chunks that you complete one at a time, starting at the beginning (today) and progressing bit-by-bit. This approach - identifying the first Active Step to complete a task - can be applied to stress and most other areas of our lives. We can start to think in this way in order to get us started and 'on the road' to our desired destination – wherever, whatever that may be. Don't worry too much now about what an Active Step is – it will become quite clear as you read on. We will explain how to use them throughout the book.



ii) The 'Active Steps' approach

Although you, the reader, will need to do most of the work, we have tried to write the book in a way that will help you to succeed. Here's what we think works best:

A positive approach

We will help you focus on your goals, your strengths and what you can do in the present and future rather than dwelling on the past. How we want to feel and what we want to do is more achievable if we think positively and expect success. Being positive is a great talent we all have in different amounts - we will try to help you feel more positive, energetic and inspired about aspects of your everyday life. Positivity is infectious – see how it spreads.

A practical approach

We describe the information clearly and concisely using everyday language. To get you started, we suggest a series of tasks in the form of Active Steps.

An active approach

To start experiencing benefits, you will need to put the ideas in this book into action. And the sooner you do, the sooner you will start to feel the benefits. To help with this, the Active Steps throughout the book show you what you can *do now* to get started on each important topic. More and more we want you to adopt an active approach both in what you are doing (the action) and when you do it (now).

As you are reading the book, experiment with as many Active Steps as you can. Even if you just try out one or two, this will lead to some immediate benefits today and tomorrow. At the end we will discuss ways to bring the Active Steps together into coherent plans.



A step-by-step approach

Usually, we can only achieve lasting change by making small steps, one at a time. Completing one step and feeling the benefit helps make us more motivated and encouraged to try the next one. This will build up your momentum gradually. It will require patience, determination and lots of practice - but it will be worth it.

A TLCB enhancing approach

TLCB stands for thinking (T), lifestyle (L), communication (C) and behaviour (B) - these are four key components of healthy living and working. In different ways, we do these things all day, everyday, and they strongly affect how we feel. They can make us feel bad (stressed) or feel good (calm). Soon you will be an expert in each of these areas. You may be wondering why we've shortened it to the TLCB acronym. Well, we will regularly refer to these four areas as a combined unit throughout the book. For successful stress control they *all* need to be addressed. We hope using the TLCB acronym will help you to remember these four areas, and the importance of them being used *together*.

An action planning approach

Remember: the *action* is what will actually make the difference – taking the ideas in this book off the page and bringing them to life. A clear *plan* will help you remember when, where and how to do this so that you don't forget, and so that you keep making progress in the short and longer term. Don't worry about this too much now, we will help you design your own action plans later in the book.



