

Don't sweat the small stuff

Increasing work loads, longer commutes and the pressure to make every second count. Life is demanding more from us, but a shift in perspective can often help us manage our response. Clinical psychologist **Fiona O'Doherty** gives her view



One man's stress is another man's challenge! Why is it that for any two people in the same event or set of circumstances they will suffer different levels of stress? Put the same two individuals in different circumstances and the effects could be reversed.

Defining what stress is and how we should respond to it makes sense only when focussing on individuals and their unique set of stress triggers. Biological science has looked for explanation for stress in differences in genes, differences in brain structures and differences at the chemical levels in the body. Psychological sciences have looked for differences in the person's early life experience or in personality. But whatever the origins of such feelings,

differences in stress levels are determined by how one thinks about a situation and not by the situation itself.

In everyday life we all make what psychologists call 'thinking errors'. We exaggerate, jump to conclusions, catastrophise (think the worst will happen) and overgeneralise (thinking that one instance of an event implies the pattern will repeat). We can see the world in extremes of black or white and often ignore the grey reality in between.

This doesn't really matter unless one develops a repeated pattern of thinking-errors that always results in negative interpretations of life. That is when thinking errors become destructive. That is when we suffer stress.

Changing one's thinking patterns is not really so difficult if one is prepared to take a long hard look at the stressful circumstances and ask oneself if one is making any of the thinking errors listed above. If the answer is 'yes' then ask yourself 'what is nearer the truth?' and 'even if the worst happened, how bad could that be?'

Such an audit of ones thinking every now and then should appeal to accountants, and it is surprising how effective it can be at rebalancing stress levels. ■

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