

## Webinar on Demand

= 0.5 CPD learning hours

## Reflective Learning Material

### Breaking the Stress Cycle (ISMA Global Stress & Wellbeing Summit, November 2022)

With Emily Hutchinson, Chartered Psychologist

#### What is the stress cycle?<sup>1-3</sup>

The stress cycle starts with a stimulus to the brain, which could be something familiar like hearing your own name, or it could be something negative such as a perceived threat. The brain then matches this information to information learnt from previous similar experiences, triggering a physiological response. These psychological responses are labelled as emotions that may cause destructive thought patterns, which then present in physical behaviours such as withdrawal or irritability.

Adopting certain behaviours as a response can reinforce and continue this cycle. Therefore, for example, if we can learn how to calm our psychological response, we can learn to break the stress cycle.

#### The mind-body connection<sup>4</sup>

Mental and physical health are often referred to as two separate things, however research has increasingly highlighted the strong connection between the two, referred to as the gut-brain axis. The stress response has been shown to have an immediate effect on the gut, slowing down digestion and causing other gut problems. The gut-brain axis is a bi-directional pathway, which is why the health of the gut can impact how we feel emotionally, giving thought to how we manage the stress response through our physiology, as well as through our psychology.

#### Self-care for healthcare professionals<sup>1-9</sup>

In the webinar, Emily talks about some practical considerations and self-care tips to help break the stress cycle, some of which are explored further below:

- **Know yourself:** There are a lot of individual stressors and abilities to withstand pressures, so it is helpful to understand what your stressors are, what your signs are, and what makes you feel better.
- **Address the environment:** Stress is a normal reaction to have in a stressful environment, but it can help if you understand what you can control about that environment.
- **Widen the perception gap:** Between noticing a stimulus, and responding to it, there is time to choose our response, but we can only do this if we have an awareness of what is happening in our brains.
- **Work with our bodies:** There is a very strong link between our physical health and our mental health.
  - **Exercise** – Moving in any way is a great way to get rid of the chemicals produced during the stress response, and calm us down.
  - **Focus on breathing** – When we are stressed, our breathing tends to become faster and more shallow. Try to focus on slowing your breathing down, and breathing into your abdomen.
  - **Focus on adequate rest** – We all need rest, and not getting enough rest, sleep or not being able to switch off can exacerbate the stress response and reduce resilience.
  - **Look after your diet and gut health** – We are starting to understand more about the role of our gut in wellbeing and how the gut and brain are connected, therefore looking after your gut health can positively impact your emotional weather.
- **Manage our thoughts:** Techniques such as CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) and mindfulness encourage you to recognise and challenge your thoughts to see if they are really valid.

#### References:

1. Nagoski E, Nagoski A. *Burnout: Solve Your Stress Cycle*. London: Vermillion; 2020. 2. Chu B, et al. *Psychology, Stress Reaction*. Treasure Island, Florida: StatPearls; 2022. 3. Van der Kolk, B. *The Body Keeps The Score*. New York: Penguin; 2015. 4. Lee Y, Kim YK. Understanding the Connection Between the Gut-Brain Axis and Stress/Anxiety Disorders. *Current Psychiatry Reports*. 2021;23(5):22. 5. Brooks AW. Get excited: Reappraising pre-performance anxiety as excitement. *Journal of Experimental Psychology. General*. 2014;143(3):1144-58. 6. Gu J, et al. How do mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction improve mental health and wellbeing? A systematic review and meta-analysis of mediation studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 2015;37:1-12. 7. Sharon-David H, Tenenbaum G. The Effectiveness of Exercise Interventions on Coping with Stress: Research Synthesis. *Studies in Sport Humanities*. 2017;22:19-29. 8. Nestor J. *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*. New York: Penguin; 2021. 9. Bloemendaal M, et al. Probiotics-induced changes in gut microbial composition and its effects on cognitive performance after stress: Exploratory analyses. *Translational Psychiatry*. 2021;11(300).