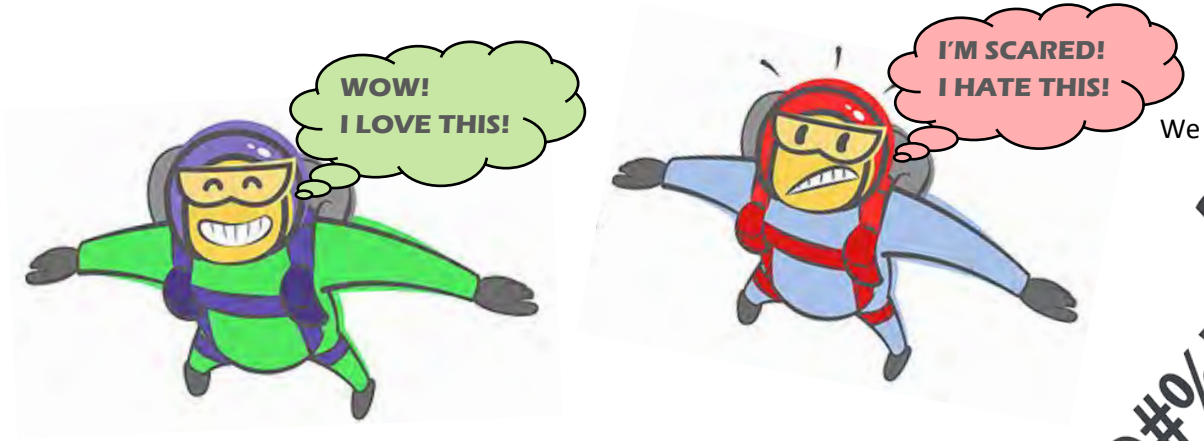
STRESS—We all experience it differently

Stress is a very subjective topic - it means different things to different people. No one person experiences a ‘stressor’ in the same way; what might be a stressful situation for one person maybe an exciting challenge for another. For example, the thought of skydiving, or being asked to do a presentation in front of a group of work colleagues.



We

The decisions that we take in specific situations are based on our sensory inputs (i.e. the things we see, hear, and feel) and in relation to stored memories (i.e. what happened the last time we were in a similar situation). Each of us judges stressful situations differently, whether these stresses are real or imagined; in response, the hypothalamus (at the base of the brain) is activated, initiating the release of stress hormones. It is our own subjective perception of threat that may or may not trigger a stress response. Research has proved that there is considerable variation in the amount and type of hormone released by different people in response to various stressors – it is not a simple physiological process.

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STRESS—We all experience it differently

Degree of the stress response



A stress response can also vary – from slight to maximum. The degree of stress response and its changes within the body is directly proportional to the degree of perceived danger. For example, if you think the threat is minor, you will experience a minor stress response – a small number of stress hormones secreted into the bloodstream. These produce minor physiological, psychological, and emotional changes. However, your body will produce a dramatic stress response, if you believe you are in grave danger.

Generally, we will acutely notice the effects of a significant stress response because the changes within the body are significant. That is often not the case with minor stress responses as the changes within the body can be almost negligible. However, you can be sure that **the body does experience a stress response every time we think we are in danger**, and this constant, recurring stress response can lead to various health problems.



Stress moments throughout your day

We are exposed to mild stressors multiple times each day, each producing a slight stress response. These stressors can be physical or emotional, real or imagined. For example, an alarm clock going off, receiving a new assignment via email, a difficult phone call, a niggling injury, etc. We can call these ‘micro stress moments’.

At the other end of the scale, there are acute stressors which more troubling situations can bring about. For example, being pulled over for speeding, getting into a heated discussion with your partner, taking an exam, etc. We can call these ‘macro stress moments’.

Then there are the ongoing or recurring micro or macro stress moments. For example, a sizable work project, a family conflict that’s been going on for a long time, dealing with personal finances, a health issue that’s been bothering you, worrying about a problem with the kids, a relationship that isn’t going well, an important decision coming up in a key area of your life. These may be issues that are bothering us longer term, niggling away in the background and surfacing from time to time, causing a continued stress response whenever we think about them.

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STRESS—We all experience it differently

Repeated activation of stress within the body

Researchers have discovered how and why the stress response occurs as well as insight into the long-term effects of the repeated activation of the stress response on the body.

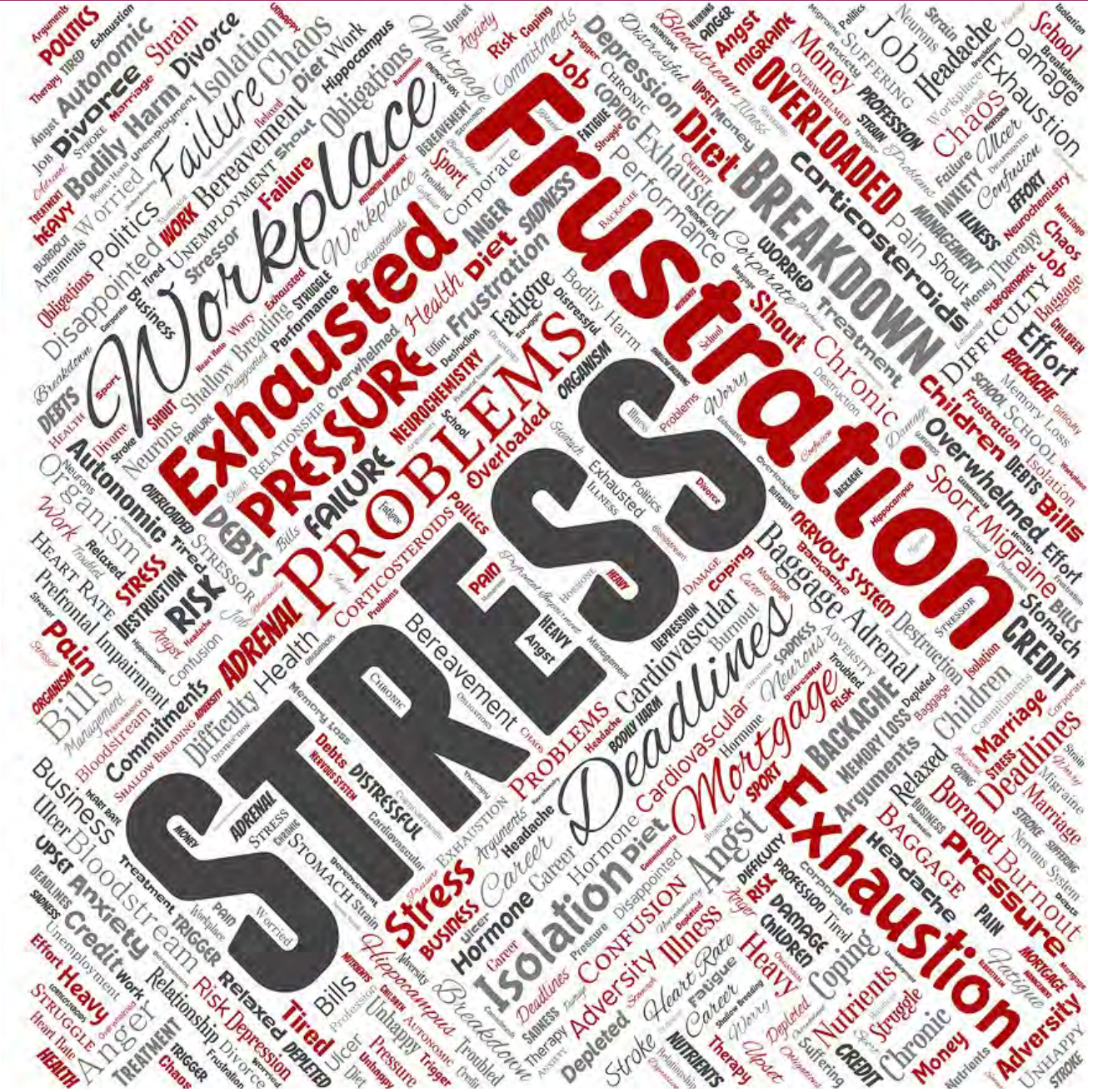
When a stress response occurs to thoughts that you can **neither fight nor run away from**, your body has no way to get rid of the chemicals released into the body. Consequently, they can build up over time, becoming toxic and can cause disease. Therefore, in modern life, a major threat to our health is the threat of being attacked by our in-built defence system. This can be either multiple instances of different acute stressors (a series of unrelated stressful events) or experiencing the same stress repeatedly.

These multiple instances can add to a state of chronic stress where the body's stress response is constantly triggered. After a while, this affects the body and contributes to the health problems associated with chronic stress.

The stress epidemic

It is a scary thought that **80%** of all GP consultations are thought to be stress related.

We are living through a stress epidemic, which has been further heightened by the coronavirus pandemic. In fact the World Health Organisation has referred to stress as being 'the health epidemic of the 21st century'!



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STRESS—We all experience it differently

What can we do to help manage our stress levels? The 'stress bucket' model allows you to visualise and get you thinking about what contributes to your own stress, and what you can do about it.

What is in your stress bucket?

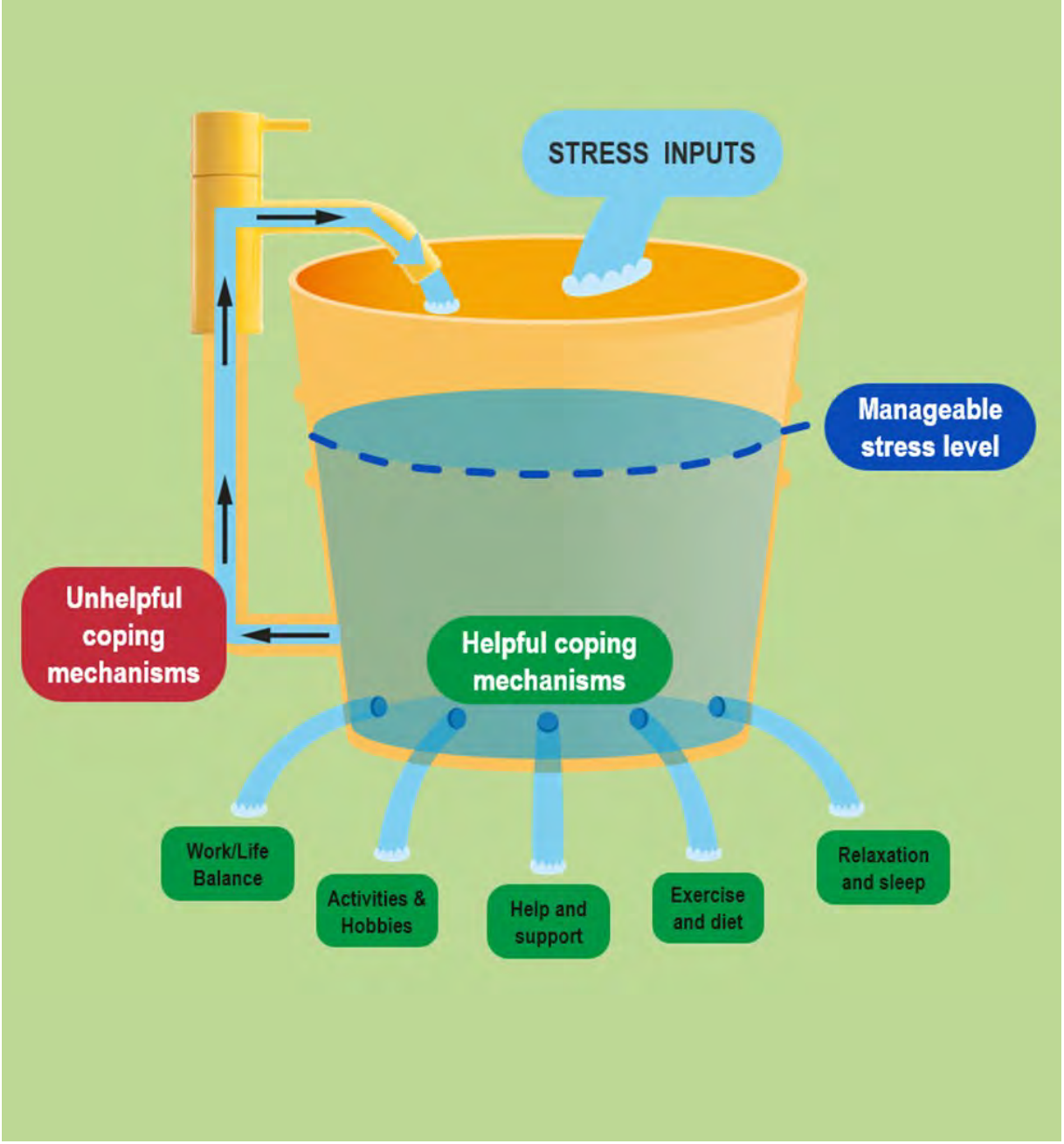
Everyone has their own virtual 'stress bucket', which is unique to all of us and varies in size depending on how resilient you are or how good you are at coping with stress. The more resilient a person is to stress, the bigger their stress bucket. The smaller the bucket, the more vulnerable an individual is to stress, as it doesn't take much to fill their bucket up to overflow, which is where we don't cope well!

Stresses flow into the bucket on a daily basis. These may be small stresses or annoyances that have happened during the day, or larger long-term stresses, like a challenging work project. However, as has been outlined, what is stressful for one person isn't necessarily stressful for another.

So, think about yourself… what fills up your stress bucket? Have you got a large bucket (resilient) or a small bucket (less resilient)?

STRESS INPUTS – Example factors that may fill up a person's stress bucket:

- Financial pressures
- Lack of sleep
- Family/relationship issues
- Health concerns
- Worries at work
- Poor diet



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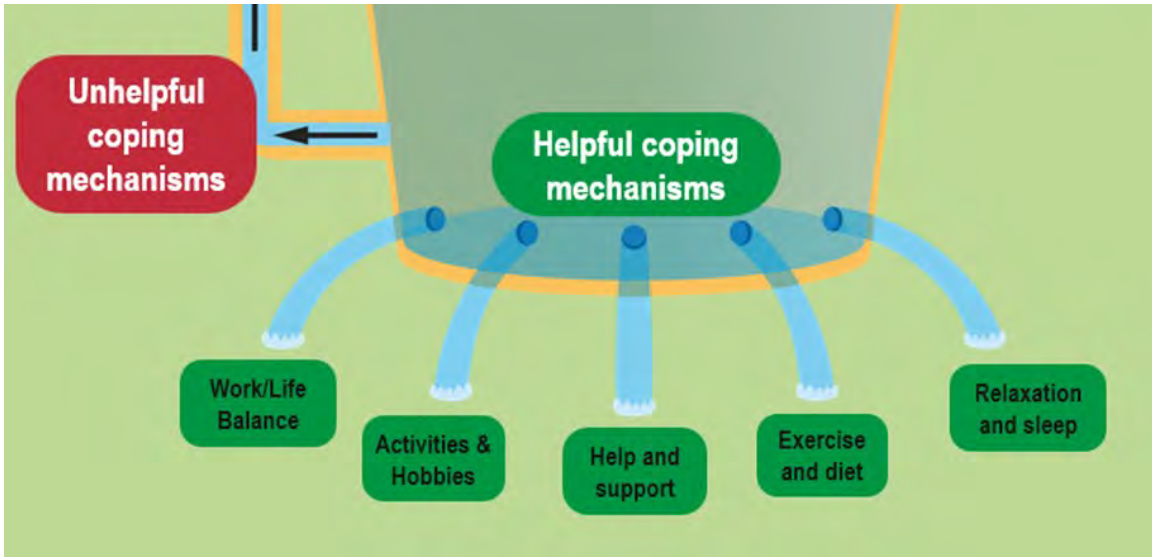
STRESS—We all experience it differently

Helpful coping mechanisms

What are the coping mechanisms that you use to de-stress? Helpful coping activities are represented by holes in the bottom of the bucket, which allows 'stress' to flow out or dissipate.

The following list, while not exhaustive, shows helpful coping activities that may help to reduce stress:

- **Work/Life Balance** – Ensure you take time away from work to relax.
- **Activities & Hobbies** – Do things you enjoy and relax you. Consider yoga, meditation, playing sports, or arts & crafts.
- **Help and Support** – Friends, family, colleagues and professional help if needed.
- **Exercise**—Even a quick walk, cycle, or swim – does not have to be hard exercise – but some regular exercise is essential!
- **Diet** – Eat well with a balanced diet and regular eating times. Overloading on sugar will create stress by spiking insulin levels and causing swings in energy. Maintaining adequate hydration is also an important factor in brain function.
- **Relaxation and Sleep** – quality and quantity of sleep are essential in achieving good mental wellbeing. Lack of sleep is a significant contributor to mental ill-health.



Unhelpful coping mechanisms

Be mindful of unhelpful coping mechanisms because these add to your stress. For example, using alcohol, drugs, smoking, not getting enough sleep or working excessively long hours, pretending/hoping that problems will just go away, rather than tackling them.

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