

Personality Type and Stress

A Coaching Tool for Effective Executive Functioning

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One of the key sets of tools successful executives can have is a collection of self-management skills. **Knowing how we respond to stress can be particularly valuable information for self-management.**

Specifically, executives need to know how they may behave when they are under stress, and as their range of coping responses decreases, how they may behave under even more chronic or acute stress. Beyond awareness of *how* one might respond, a person also needs possible solutions for returning to a less stressful state—ways to perceive circumstances, or to behave, differently.

Research, experience, and an understanding of type dynamics give useful clues to how executives of different types may respond to stress and how they might help themselves return to a less stressed state. To learn more about type dynamics see the Resources at the end of this handout.

On pages 2 through 5, each of the sixteen types is listed with descriptions in the following categories:

- (1) Moderate stress reaction.** When under stress, people tend to turn to their dominant function to help them get back to a less stressed state. This is the behavior that may be exhibited when their natural style is over-emphasized. They will begin to overuse their dominant function while “forgetting” to turn to the balancing qualities of their auxiliary function. For example, a dominant extraverted Thinking type (e.g., ESTJ or ENTJ) will tend to overuse the Thinking function, and forget to stay open to new information that might be brought in through his or her auxiliary function (e.g., introverted sensing or introverted intuition).
- (2) More extreme stress reaction.** The extremity of stress may come from extended moderate stress or from an exceptionally stressful acute event. This is the behavior that may be exhibited when the person’s dominant function shuts off and his or her least-preferred function takes over (often referred to as being “in the grip” of the inferior). The dominant function ceases to be available consciously, and the executive is operating increasingly from his or her unconscious mental function(s). For example, a dominant Extraverted Thinking type (e.g., ESTJ or ENTJ) would find that thinking is less available, and that he or she is immersed in the least-preferred Introverted Feeling function.



- (3)** *Some solutions.* What are the behaviors one might change or perspectives one might take that may help an individual of that type through the stress response—to return to a more balanced and less stressed state? This section describes behavioral and perspective changes that can be helpful in working through the stress response. As a rule, working with and managing the more extreme reactions (i.e., being in the grip of the least-preferred function) often involves engaging the auxiliary function.

General Solutions for Overcoming Stress

There are behaviors in which executives of all types can engage to help them through the stressful period, including: exercising, getting enough rest, limiting alcohol/caffeine or other substance use, finding time away from work or at least changing the setting, and finding a trusted person to talk to.

Other Tips for Using this Handout

If you can catch yourself or someone else engaging in the *moderate stress reaction* behaviors, it's usually easier to intervene and make a behavior or perspective change at that point. If you catch yourself or someone else engaging in the *more extreme stress reaction* behaviors, intervention requires more careful and sensitive support. People in the grip of their least-preferred function are often not open to hearing about it from others—though they may need support. Opportunities to engage the auxiliary function and take a new perspective will come at that individual's own pace.

Ideally, we become increasingly aware, and able to manage in a proactive way, the circumstances that we know create stressful responses in us. Thus, in service of our ongoing self-development and self-management, it behooves us to ask ourselves the following:

- (1)** In what circumstances are we likely to have an excessive reaction to stress, and when are we likely to be thrown into the grip of our inferior least-preferred function?
- (2)** How can I recognize it when it happens and what is the best way for me to get out of it when I or others notice me behaving this way?

Coaching (either of one's self or of others) in a developmental context reminds us that eruptions of the least-preferred function are teaching moments—opportunities for development. They are reminders that there are other parts of our psyche that need attention, respect, and development. They are also reminders that the world doesn't work only in the way that we might believe—seen through the eyes of our type. At a minimum, understanding what happens when we are immersed in our less-preferred function can help us make sense of our responses to stress.

Type, Stress, and Executive Functioning

On the following four pages, you will find stress behaviors that you may notice in yourself or in others.

ISTJ

Moderate stress reaction

- Nose to the grindstone; increased irritability
- Stubbornness; over focus on detail and organizing
- Withdrawal and increased quietness

More extreme stress reaction

- Feelings of loss of control or confusion
- Excessive doom saying; anticipation of only negative futures
- Unusually impulsive behavior

Some solutions

- Use your Thinking function to prioritize, eliminate some tasks, and know that things will work out
- Remember that life doesn't always follow "the plan," and that it's important to be flexible

ISFJ

Moderate stress reaction

- Nose to the grindstone; increased irritability and sense of pressure
- Stubbornness; over focus on detail and organizing
- Withdrawal and increased quietness; fatigue and other physical symptoms

More extreme stress reaction

- Feelings of loss of control or confusion
- Excessive doom saying; anticipation of only negative futures
- Unusually impulsive behavior

Some solutions

- Use your Feeling function to connect with others, seek support, and remember what's important to them; talk about your fears and concerns
- Remember that life doesn't always follow "the plan," and that it's important to be flexible

ISTP

Moderate stress reaction

- Withdrawal and quietness, increased irritability
- Excessive thinking and cogitating with emphasis on logic; increasing insensitivity to others
- Become very task-oriented and focused on busywork

More extreme stress reaction

- Emotional outbursts
- Feelings of not being liked or appreciated
- Forgetfulness, disorganization, confusion

Some solutions

- Acknowledge actual outer-world changes in your behavior; find quiet time and space for yourself
- Remember that real life doesn't always make sense and that people (including you) are intellectual and emotional beings

ISFP

Moderate stress reaction

- Withdraw, become quiet, and begin noticing physical symptoms of stress
- Become hypersensitive to imagined slights
- Avoid or put off actions that might create discomfort or conflict

More extreme stress reaction

- Become extremely critical of others
- May find self or others to be terribly incompetent
- Exaggerated and impulsive directing or organizing of environment or others

Some solutions

- Acknowledge your strong feelings, return to the basics, and build on the skills that you know
- Begin to own your power and your need to compete and achieve

INFJ

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Withdraw into the inner world of images and possibilities; become quiet
- ▶ Moodiness and perfectionism
- ▶ Become very busy; focus on low priority tasks

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Become obsessively concerned with detail; feeling out of control
- ▶ Angry and critical at people and/or things
- ▶ Over focused on gratifying the senses

Some solutions

- ▶ Use your Feeling function to recall what is truly important to you; prioritize
- ▶ Remember that real life does not always fit one's inner image and that visions can be unrealistic and/or take time to realize

INTJ

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Withdraw into the inner world of images and possibilities; become quiet
- ▶ Stubbornness and increased irritability
- ▶ Become very busy; focus on low priority tasks

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Become obsessively concerned with detail; paralysis of analysis
- ▶ Angry and critical at people and/or things
- ▶ Over focused on gratifying the senses

Some solutions

- ▶ Use your Thinking function to understand what is happening to you, and know that you can make it by taking one step at a time
- ▶ Remember that real life does not always fit one's inner image and that visions can be unrealistic and/or take time to realize

INFP

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Withdraw, become preoccupied; begin noticing difficulty sleeping and increased eating
- ▶ Become hypersensitive to imagined slights
- ▶ Avoid or put off actions that might create discomfort or conflict

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Become extremely critical of others
- ▶ May find self or others to be terribly incompetent
- ▶ Exaggerated and impulsive directing or organizing of environment or others

Some solutions

- ▶ Find an exciting new idea or project to pursue
- ▶ Begin to own your power and your need to compete and achieve

INTP

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Withdrawal and quietness; increased irritability
- ▶ Excessive thinking and cogitating with emphasis on logic; paralysis of analysis
- ▶ Intellectually combative and increasingly insensitive to emotional climate

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Emotional outbursts
- ▶ Feelings of not being liked or appreciated
- ▶ Forgetfulness, disorganization, confusion

Some solutions

- ▶ Find an entirely new model or idea that gives you perspective on your behavior; find quiet time and space for yourself
- ▶ Remember that real life doesn't always make sense and that people (including you) are intellectual and emotional beings

ESTP

Moderate stress reaction

- Increased talkativeness, sense of pressure, and irritability
- Increased frankness; insensitivity to people's feelings
- Rapid switching among activities; increased pleasure seeking

More extreme stress reaction

- Fears of disaster and doom; deep significance given to minor events
- Feelings of confusion and self-doubt; worry and withdrawal
- Over-interpreting the behavior of others as mean-spirited

Some solutions

- Use Thinking function to realistically assess the likelihood of negative events and to prioritize your next steps to constructively relieve your worry
- Recognize that some things in the world cannot be touched or rationally understood but may still be significant

ESFP

Moderate stress reaction

- Increased talkativeness; feeling confused and/or scattered
- Begin noticing physical symptoms of stress; appetite disturbances
- Excessive fun-seeking behaviors, and avoidance of issues that might create conflict

More extreme stress reaction

- Increased pessimism and negativity; fears about the future
- Feelings of confusion and self-doubt; worry and withdrawal
- Over-interpreting the behavior of others as mean-spirited

Some solutions

- Use Feeling function to decide what's really important to you and to choose actions that will relieve your worry in healthy ways
- Recognize that some things in the world cannot be touched, seen, or predicted based on the known—but may still be significant

ESTJ

Moderate stress reaction

- Excessive criticism; categorical negative judgments about people and events
- Increasing difficulty listening to input from others
- Irritability and intolerance of deviations from the rules

More extreme stress reaction

- Strong emotional outbursts; feelings of vulnerability
- Excessive sensitivity to feeling alone, left out, unappreciated
- Withdrawal; hiding tension and feelings

Some solutions

- Take time to fully recognize your feelings and reactions; talk with trusted others
- Remember that life isn't always sensible or logical, and recognize the importance and role of relationships and feeling in one's work and personal life

ESFJ

Moderate stress reaction

- Over attentive to others' feelings; trying to make things "right" with others or trying to fix others' perceived difficulties
- Inflexibility and increasing difficulty seeing or trying new approaches
- Begin noticing physical symptoms of stress; appetite disturbances

More extreme stress reaction

- Extreme criticism, even condemnation, of others based on small events
- Black-and-white thinking, difficulty thinking clearly, confusion
- Withdrawal, criticism of self, feeling inadequate

Some solutions

- Take time to yourself; work on a concrete project that requires a step-by-step approach
- Remember that harmony and agreement are not always possible with people and that it is important to "unhook" from the lives/needs of others

ENFP

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Excessive flow of exciting new ideas without evaluation
- ▶ Increasing disorganization, impatience, and forgetfulness
- ▶ Over-involvement in numerous activities; stretched thin

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Become obsessive, picky, and compulsive
- ▶ Withdrawal and isolation with depression
- ▶ Excessive and exaggerated worry about bodily sensations

Some solutions

- ▶ Take time to slow down and meditate; remember what is important to you, seek support and pass some details on to others
- ▶ Recognize the need to take care of your physical self; appreciate that the realization of ideas takes time and requires focus and choices on your part

ENTP

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Excessive flow of exciting new ideas without evaluation
- ▶ Increased impatience, irritability, frankness, insensitivity, and debating
- ▶ Over-involvement in numerous activities; stretched thin

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Become obsessive, picky, and compulsive
- ▶ Withdrawal, immobility, depression
- ▶ Excessive and exaggerated worry about bodily sensations

Some solutions

- ▶ Take time to slow down and meditate; use your Thinking function to analyze what is happening; pass some details to others
- ▶ Recognize the need to take care of your physical self; appreciate that the realization of ideas takes time and requires focus and choices on your part

ENFJ

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Over attentive to others' feelings—trying to make things “right” with others or trying to fix others' perceived difficulties
- ▶ Inflexibility and increasing difficulty seeing/trying new approaches
- ▶ Begin noticing physical symptoms of stress; appetite disturbances

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Extreme criticism, even condemnation, of others based on small events
- ▶ Black-and-white thinking, confusion, needing assurance of the “one” right answer
- ▶ Withdrawal, criticism of self, lack of concern for your impact on others

Some solutions

- ▶ Take time to yourself; possibly find a new project worth planning
- ▶ Remember that harmony and agreement are not always possible with people and that it is important to “unhook” from the lives/needs of others

ENTJ

Moderate stress reaction

- ▶ Excessive criticism; categorical negative judgments about people and events
- ▶ Increased irritability, sense of pressure and anxiety, impatience, and insensitivity
- ▶ Increasing tunnel vision and difficulty listening to input from others

More extreme stress reaction

- ▶ Feeling out of control; distress at possibly losing control
- ▶ Strong emotional outbursts; feelings of vulnerability; withdrawal
- ▶ Excessive sensitivity to feeling alone, left out, unappreciated

Some solutions

- ▶ Take time to fully recognize your feelings and reactions; talk with trusted others
- ▶ Remember that life isn't always sensible or logical and recognize the importance and role of relationships and feeling in one's work and personal life

Resources

- Quenk, N. L. 2001. *Was that really me? How everyday stress brings out our hidden personality*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing. Provides very good insight into the nature and expressions of the inferior (least-preferred) function.
- Shelton, J. L. 1996. Health, stress, and coping. In A. L. Hammer, ed. *MBTI applications: A decade of research on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (pp. 197–215). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. Gives an excellent summary of research on type, stress and coping.
- Fitzgerald, C. R. and L. K. Kirby, eds. 1997. *Developing leaders: Research and applications psychological type and leadership development: Integrating reality and vision, mind and heart*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing. Includes a valuable discussion of how the principles of type development and an understanding of the inferior function can be integrated into leadership development.

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