

# *Managing the Stress of Workplace Change*

*A Rational-Emotive  
Group Training Approach*

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## **Introduction**

Organisational change and increased stress levels seem to be life partners these days. To help workers cope with the stress of change, a colleague and myself developed a Stress Management Programme using the concepts of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy. REBT is based on the assumption that emotional and behavioural reactions are largely caused by conscious and unconscious beliefs (Ellis, 1998). During organisational change, self-defeating internal self talk may cause employees to experience strong self-defeating emotions such as resentment, hostility, anxiety, depression, and the like.

REBT focuses on providing employees with strategies and tools that can lead to professional growth and development, better workplace relationships and less conflict and stress. These can be used individually or as part of a team to accept change and come to terms with the difficulties involved.

The Stress Management programme described in this article is designed to show the links between change and stress, identify common work place stressors and the physical and emotional consequences to employees, and teach REBT strategies and tools to help minimise these effects. The programme is intended for organisation employees who are not in any life threatening situation or specifically seeking treatment, so the format is different than when using REBT as a clinical/therapeutic intervention.

## **From external to internal stress**

Once upon a time only buildings were stressed. *People* could be tired, worried, anxious, nervous, uncertain, or working long hours. In more recent times, 'stress' has evolved from an engineering term to a culture construct (Columbia University, 1998). Parallel to this comes 'change'. Change once happened over a period of time, like the metamorphosis of the butterfly. Now, with organisational change, it often feels like being part of an accelerated metamorphic process with insufficient time to adjust from one stage to the next.

During major organisational change, the most important and difficult journey employees need make is the *internal* process of change (Bridges, 1995). While many of the external aspects of change happen according to schedule, the internal transition from denial and resistance to acceptance and commitment is a different story. For most, the journey seems long, uncertain, tiring and very stressful. Changing structures and developing new work processes and procedures challenges employees' beliefs as to their own identity and values. They may experience feelings of disorientation, insecurity and uncertainty in their work place. Employees tend to display a variety of emotional reactions regarding management decisions and behaviours that, in their perception, have robbed them of a known way of life and work place security, and cast uncertain shadows on their future careers.

## **What is stress?**

Stress may be considered the 'wear and tear' our bodies experience as we adjust to a continually changing organisational environment (Perloe, 1998). It is important that managers and team leaders be able to recognise its causes and its effect on performance and productivity. High levels of stress over a long period of time often results in increased absenteeism, work-related conflict and lower work performance (DeMattia & Ijzermans, 1996). It has physical and emotional effects, both positive and negative. As a positive influence it can motivate some employees to accept many of the changes and new opportunities. Other employees may experience negative reactions such as anger, distrust, withdrawal, rejection and depression, resulting in (1)

health problems such as headaches, insomnia, stomach upsets, etc.; (2) decreased motivation and risk taking; (3) increased sick leave and higher staff turnover; and (4) internal conflict as they question their loyalty to the organisation itself

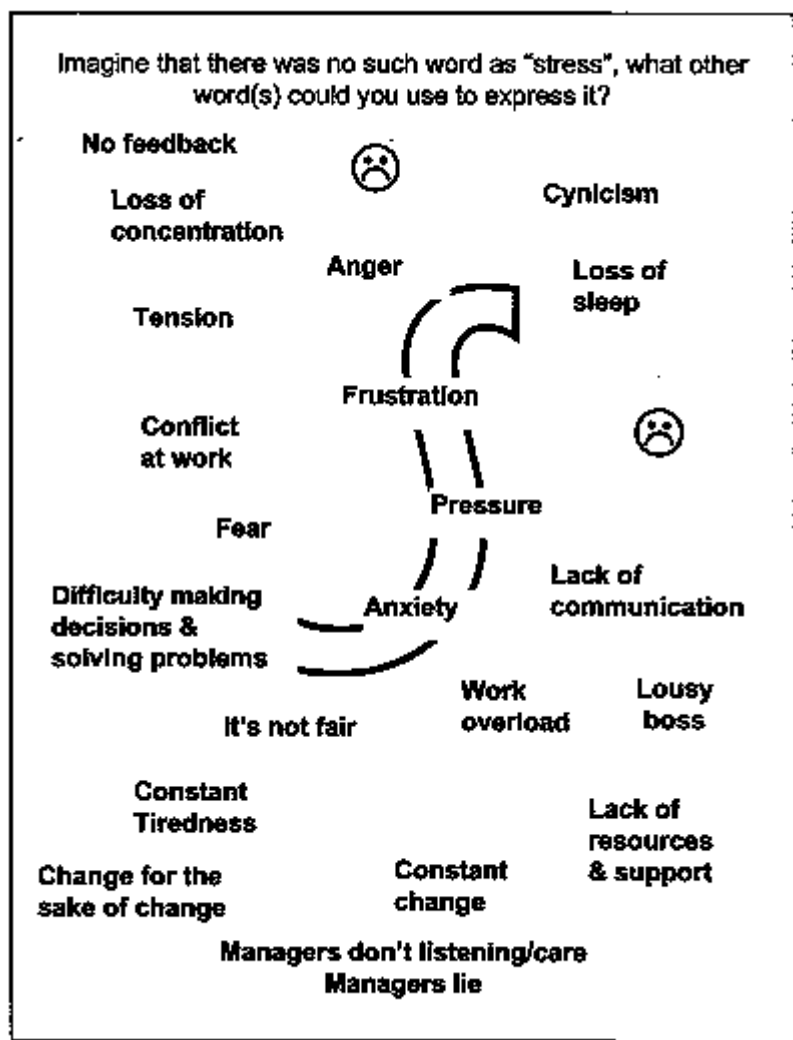
## Development of the programme

In most organisations events happen that employees disagree with, yet remain out of their control to stop or change. Some form of organisational change will always be present, resulting in increased work load, deadlines, conflicts, uncertainty and frustration. In developing the programme our goal was not to eliminate stress (there is no magical 'cure'), but to offer tools to manage it and methods to help minimise its effects.

Our goal was to help employees begin to understand the links between their own ways of thinking in response to change and their increased stress levels. While the programme content included aspects relating to relaxation, diet, exercise and strategies for minimising the effects of stress, this article will focus on the REBT aspect of the programme.

## Getting started: Helping participants understand stress

Stress is a word commonly used in today's work-force. However 'stress' is a fairly abstract term in that it has no material existence. To give the word more focus and a concrete substance, I developed the 'BIG S' exercise. This also highlights how 'stress' means different things to different people. Most stress consists of a collection of strong emotions and the negative self talk that adds fuel to keep them alive, as shown on the sheet below.



This exercise helps participants sort out the work place stressors, what they are telling themselves about them, and the physical and emotional effects they experience. Following is a selection of the most common responses:

## Causes

### *Workplace stressors*

- Ongoing change
- Work overload
- Deadline pressure
- Lack of support & resources
- Lack of recognition
- Lack of feedback
- Unclear goals & objectives
- High rate of staff sick leave
- Conflicting demands
- Unclear job responsibility
- Management & team conflicts
- Ambiguous communication

### *Thinking / Internal self-talk*

- It's not fair/right
- Managers don't care or listen
- Management lies to us
- This should never have happened
- Too much change for the sake of change
- Out of my control, powerless

## Effects

### *Physical*

- Loss of concentration
- Difficulty in making decisions & solving problems
- Headaches
- Muscle tension & soreness
- Loss of sleep
- Stomach & digestive upsets
- Increased blood pressure
- Various rashes
- Increased heart rate
- Changes in eating habits

### *Emotional*

- Anger
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Tension
- Frustration
- Tiredness
- Cynicism
- Resentment
- Aggression
- Guilt
- Internal conflict

(Reproduced with permission from the course participants)

## Exploring the question of control

Within organisational change, people will experience things they cannot control. Some employees have to make some difficult or painful changes where desirable choices seem non-existent. Unfortunately, people may direct their attention to the things they cannot control, resulting in reduced awareness of available choices and feelings of being trapped. This results in higher stress levels and decreased work place effectiveness. Working with employees to identify what they could and could not control about the changes they were experiencing lead to realisations like the following:

### *What we cannot control*

Decisions made by government  
Some decisions made by top management  
Other people  
Consequences of our behaviour or actions

### *What we can control*

How we behave or act  
Our thoughts  
Our contribution and performance at work  
Our choices  
What we say to others, positive or negative input

## Introducing the ABC model

Identifying that people have control over their thoughts opened the door to introducing the ABCDEF framework that is well-known and used within REBT. We introduced the different thinking errors and evaluative styles by presenting the following example:

1. A colleague walks into the room, opens a window and leaves without acknowledging you. (**A** = Activating event).
2. How would you feel and respond? (**C** = Consequence)
3. What are some of the thoughts that would go through your mind? (**B** = Beliefs)

Most thought that **A** (the event) caused **C** (the consequence): their anger, upset, resentment, anxiety, etc. We challenged this statement by pointing out that some participants felt only surprise or concern (through simply telling themselves that their colleague didn't see them or may have had other things on their mind).

### *Discussing the nature of self-defeating thinking*

Next we discussed the interpretations and evaluations (**B**) people make in response to the trigger (**A**).

#### INTERPRETATIONS

<i>Black &amp; white thinking</i>	Seeing things in extremes with no middle ground: good or bad; success or failure; right or wrong.
<i>Overgeneralising</i>	Everything's going wrong; I told you it would never work; The whole thing will fail and it will all be a mess.
<i>Filtering</i>	Seeing all that is wrong with oneself, others and the world - but ignoring any positives.
<i>Mind-reading</i>	Making guesses about what other people are thinking.
<i>Fortune-telling</i>	Treating beliefs about the future as if they were actual realities rather than mere predictions.
<i>Emotional reasoning</i>	Believing that one's negative emotions reflect the way things really are.
<i>Personalisation</i>	Seeing oneself as the cause of some negative event without any evidence.

#### EVALUATIONS

<i>Awfulising</i>	Exaggerating the badness of an event or circumstance; seeing something as terrible, awful, the worst thing that can happen.
<i>Discomfort-intolerance</i>	Believing that a circumstance is unbearable because it is 'too' uncomfortable.
<i>Demands</i>	Using shoulds/should-nots, musts/must-nots to demand things of self or others - 'I must ...'; 'She should ...'; 'They should not ...'.
<i>People-labelling</i>	Labelling oneself or others in a global/total sense - 'What an idiot'; 'Bitch'; 'I'm useless'; 'He's rude'; 'She's no good'.

We asked participants to choose one of the work place stressors they were experiencing and identify the emotional and behavioural reactions behind the stressor. Participants then wrote down what they were telling themselves about the event. Some wrote things like the following:

<b>A = Event</b>	<b>B = Internal self talk</b>	<b>C = Consequences</b>
Change X	This should never have happened	Anger & resentment
	It's terrible	Uncertainty & fear
	Managers don't care	Disorientation & loss
	It's not fair	Internal conflict re loyalty to the organisation
	It's not right	Withdrawal
	I hate this place	Increased sick leave
	It's a crappy organisation	Increased physical symptoms

This exercise helped to increase awareness of the power of internal self talk and how 'stress' is compounded by dysfunctional attitudes and emotions. A number of participants supported the changes and their table looked different:

<b><i>A = Event</i></b>	<b><i>B = Internal self talk</i></b>	<b><i>C = Consequences</i></b>
Change X	This will bring us all together	Uncertainty
	Better use of resources	Excitement
	Not easy but I can learn	Feelings of loss
	Better for patients	Challenged
	Some things are out of my control, others things are not	Acceptance
	Glad to have a job	Changed
		Learning new work practices
		role

As participants began to move through the ABC process with some of the other workplace issues it became possible to uncover a number of old unhelpful beliefs that maintained self-defeating reactions.

After facilitating the programme over a couple of months, it became evident that many employees had several common barriers to dealing with self-defeating self-talk and emotions. The first was in the ***demands*** they made on themselves and others (especially managers) within the organisation, and the second was their belief that ***life should somehow be fair***.

'Should' and 'fair' to most people means that what exists ***must*** 'not be' or 'cannot be' - in contrast to ***preferring*** that reality be different than it is. Holding internal demands that can never be met - for example, believing that life must always be fair - served to maintain self-defeating dialogue and stuck emotions.

This is reflected in how people use the 'S' word:

- This change *should* never have happened.
- I *should* understand the new process by now.
- I *must* get it right the first time.
- It's *not fair* that this is happening.
- It's *not right*.
- I *should* not be treated like this.
- Managers *should* always act with integrity.
- Managers *should* always tell the truth.

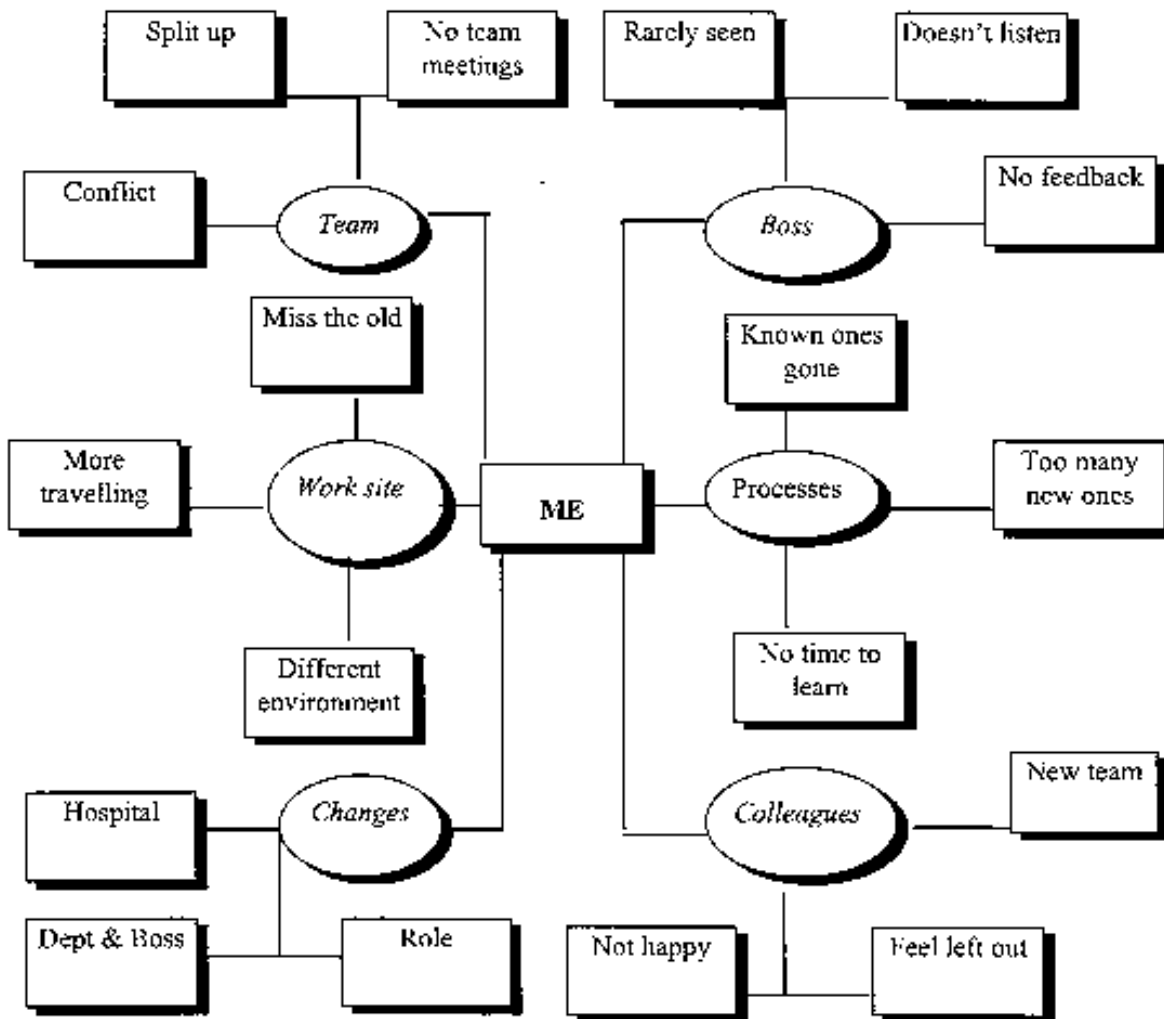
Another common self-defeating belief was that ***life must somehow always feel comfortable***. For example:

- We *should* not have to feel this uncertain, insecure, etc.
- I *cannot stand* the uncertainty.
- It *feels awful*.

Some people thought that if they resisted the changes long enough, the organisation - and life in general - would magically go back to what used to be, despite evidence to the contrary.

## Stress Mapping

Next we introduced the process of 'Stress Mapping' (Ellis, A. et al, 1997). This helped participants prioritise their work place stressors and start to regain focus on the main issues they needed to resolve in a more productive way. Following is an example.



Participants received the following instructions:

- Mapping is a visual way of representing the current sources of stress.
- The central box represents yourself.
- The other boxes represent work related issues that are currently stressors you would like to resolve.
- Complete the boxes, then on a scale of 1 to 10 rate the amount of stress each area may trigger for you.
- Problem solve ways to deal with the area causing the highest score. This can also help some of the other areas start to feel more manageable.

In the example shown above, the participant realised that if she resolved the issue of relocation changes first, then many other work place issues would be more manageable.

(Reproduced with permission from the course participant)

## Completing the ABC model

Now that participants had a clearer understanding of how different emotions and responses are linked to different thoughts, and had identified their top workplace stressors, we introduced the last part of the ABC framework:

**D** = *Disputing* the unhelpful beliefs.

**E** = Identifying a new *Effect*: more helpful beliefs and responses.

**F** = *Further action* planning to achieve **E**.

To aid this I developed the **ACTION Form**. We offered participants a wide range of forms and, for reasons unknown, this particular form seemed to work best for group participants in our organisation:

## The Action Form

Write down an 'ABC' analysis of the stress/problem situation

### **A** (Activating event):

*I have to share an office*

### **C** (Consequences: unhelpful feelings & behaviours):

**Emotional:** *Anger & resentment*

**Behavioural:** *Crying, slamming doors, not speaking to colleagues*

### **T** (Thoughts, self-defeating self-talk about the activating event):

*I hate this place; This isn't right or fair; I deserve my own office; This should not be allowed to happen; I can't stand this; It's management's fault; They just don't care.*

### **I** (Internal belief that supports the self-defeating thoughts above):

*Being a professional means having your own office. Management should acknowledge my professionalism. It's awful to be treated unfairly. People who behave badly obviously don't care about others and must be condemned and punished.*

### **O** (Options, what I want & other ways I could respond):

**What I want:** *To enjoy my work again*

**Other ways I could respond:**

- \* *Be more understanding about office space*
- \* *Take responsibility for making sharing an office work*
- \* *Get to know my colleague better*

### **N** (New, more effective self talk, beliefs, and behaviours):

To change the old self-talk, ask yourself the following questions:

- \* *Is there any hard evidence to say that this belief is true? Is it consistent with reality?*
- \* *Is my belief logical? How does it follow that just because I want something, I must have it?*
- \* *Is it useful to hold this belief? How will telling myself this help me achieve what I want?*

**New self-talk & beliefs:** *My manager did her best. I would prefer to have my own office, but that's not possible at the moment - and there is no law that says I 'should' have one. I can learn to share - and even enjoy it.*

**New behaviour:** *Greet my colleague each day. Take responsibility and organise my part of the office in consultation with her.*

### **S** (Start by taking the following actions):

- \* *Greet my office colleague each day (and apologise for not speaking to her up till now)*
- \* *Acknowledge my manager's effort and thank her (I could be sharing with 3 others!)*
- \* *Sort out my belongings, start filing.*

After facilitating participants through the **E** (this is represented by the **O & N** on the ACTION form) we worked through developing:

- A new and more generative belief.
- Different patterns of self-talk
- New behaviours they want to demonstrate.

We also introduced some disputing strategies that participants could use to check out the validity and usefulness of their existing beliefs.

To help participants learn ways to challenge (dispute) their thinking errors my colleague and I demonstrated the technique. Then, in small groups, participants shared the number one issue identified in their stress mapping exercise with their colleagues who then challenged the thinking errors. After a while hoots of laughter were heard as participants started to use humour and exaggerate some of their disputing responses.

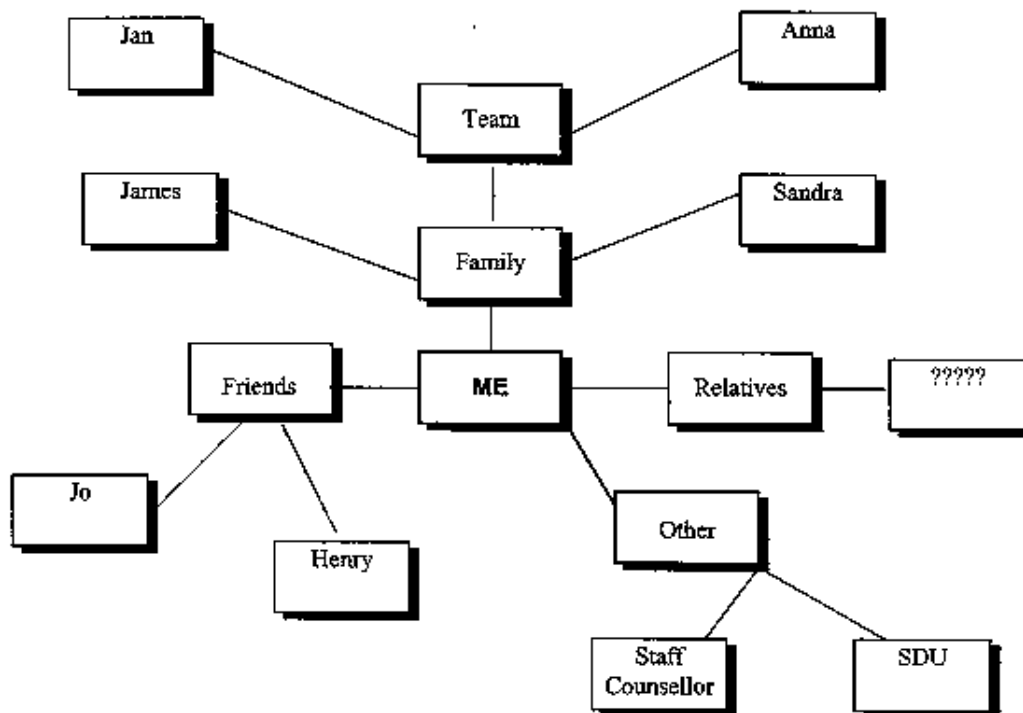
## Support network mapping

This programme showed participants strategies for learning new cognitive and behavioural skills that will, in time, produce new and healthier emotional states. As previously stated, during major change the most important and difficult journey employees make is the *internal* process of change. Action planning and practice are crucial elements of REBT because beliefs and ways of thinking are the product of long term learning and will not change without sustained hard work.

Fundamental learning is likely to be uncomfortable. In changing, people are giving up part of themselves and letting go of ideas and practices they have long used to make sense of the world and of themselves. When practicing new behaviours, people experience feelings of insecurity and uncertainty.

In order for employees to have a feeling of safety in trying new thinking and behavioural skills we introduced the process of 'Support Network Mapping':

### Mapping Your Support Network



(This example reproduced with permission from the course participant)

Participants were given the following instructions:

- Mapping is a generative tool for representing your organisational and personal support networks.
- These relationships may help to support you as you practice new thinking and behavioural skills. They can also help brainstorm generative options for solving problems.
- Use the map above to give a visual representation of your support network.

[Adapted from *Managing People In Changing Times* (Burns, 1998)].

## Reality checking

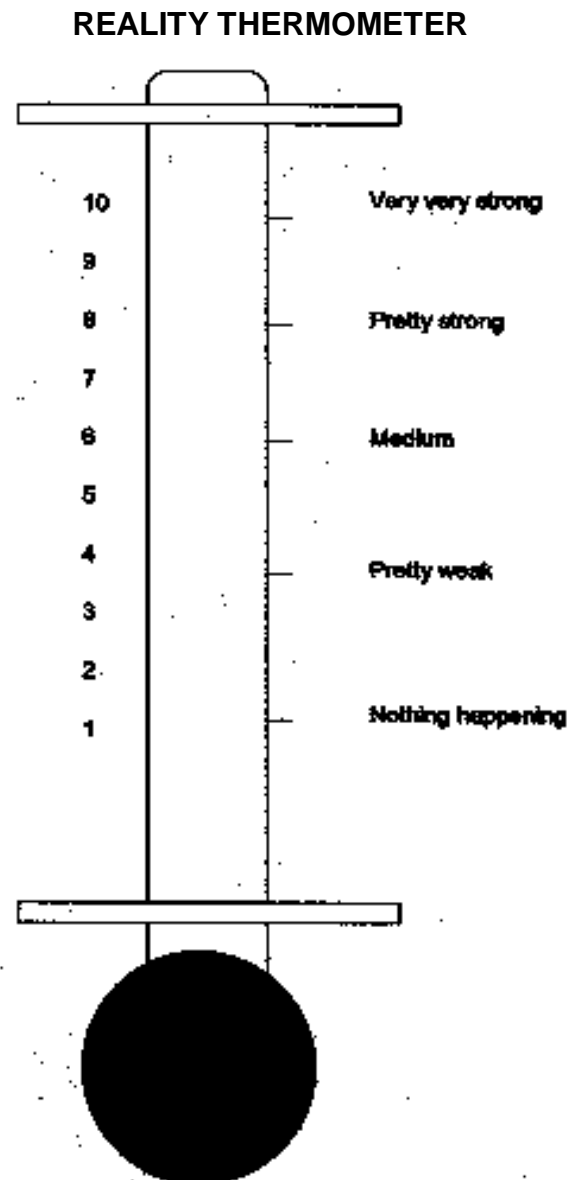
Developing attitudes for successful self-management means learning to screen the input from situations, events and other people and process it appropriately. People can learn to sort, toss, keep or redirect incoming information by learning to be alert to their own emotional responses and inner dialogue.



To give participants a quick and easy strategy to aid reality checking in the work place, we demonstrated the 'Reality Thermometer'. Using this, especially when engaging in 'awfulising' or 'I-can't-stand-it' responses, helps to keep situations, events and others' behaviour in focus. It also releases some of the emotional tension.



Many found this strategy useful and easy to do with pen and paper, or visually in their mind, when they were reacting to events in their work place.



## In conclusion

Each time this programme has been presented, participants have responded differently to the content. Overall, most people have rarely considered that even during organisational change, when choices *seem* non-existent, they do in fact still have options. Certainly few understood the links between their own cognitions and their increased stress levels. Hopefully, through participating in the programme's content and exercises, course participants have become more aware of these links. Feedback has certainly indicated the usefulness of the course material.

Human beings are highly complicated creatures, and changing typical ways of thinking is not an easy task. When people state that they want to enjoy work, be productive, and be a valued team member, I usually ask the question 'what are you prepared to give up in order to achieve this?' Usually there is silence for quite a long time as participants internally consider the question and their answers - which will remain theirs only.

At some point we are all faced with this question when seeking to lead a more balanced life and minimise the effects of work place stress. When, collectively as an organisational community, people from employees to top management are willing to give away old, self-defeating beliefs and habits, the scene is set for a healthier, more productive organisational culture. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy can provide many of the tools needed to achieve this.

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