

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Space to Breathe Therapy | Complementary guide and printable worksheets

Understanding why stress feels different

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that stress depends partly on the ongoing relationship between the demands of a situation and how a person appraises their capacity to respond. Two people may encounter the same deadline yet experience it differently because their circumstances, histories, supports and resources differ. Neither response is a personal failing.

The four connected processes

Situation: Something happens, changes or is anticipated.

Primary appraisal: The person assesses whether it matters and whether it represents harm, threat, challenge or potential benefit.

Secondary appraisal: The person considers coping options, available support, time, knowledge and influence.

Coping and reappraisal: The person responds and may reassess as new information and resources become available.

Three practical examples

Deadline: A deadline can feel threatening when expectations are unclear. Agreeing priorities and receiving realistic timeframes can change what is possible.

Social interaction: A difficult conversation may feel more manageable with preparation, communication adjustments or a trusted colleague.

Unexpected change: Advance notice, written instructions and choice about transitions can reduce uncertainty. These supports may be especially important for some neurodivergent people.

Coping is not just positive thinking

Problem-focused coping aims to change manageable aspects of a situation. Emotion-focused coping supports feelings and regulation. Both can be useful, and neither replaces necessary changes to unsafe or inaccessible environments. Rest, reasonable adjustments, support and fair expectations are resources, not rewards.

Worksheet 1 · Mapping my stress response

Situation: _____

What did I initially think it meant? _____

What demands are real? _____

What resources are available or missing? _____

What might I need someone else to change? _____

Worksheet 2 · Coping choices

One practical change I can make: _____

One support or adjustment I can request: _____

One way to care for my emotions: _____

What is not my responsibility to fix alone? _____

Worksheet 3 · Reappraisal and follow-up

New information I have learned: _____

Has my interpretation changed? _____

What helped or did not help? _____

My next small step: _____

When I will review this: _____

A note about individual needs

Stress responses are influenced by disability, health, trauma, workload, discrimination, sensory conditions and access to support. If stress is persistent or affecting safety, functioning or health, seek appropriate professional and organisational support. This resource is educational, not a diagnostic tool.

Reference: Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. Springer.