

# Are You a Stress Magnet?

By Janet L. Szumal, Ph.D.

According to research conducted by Cooke, Rousseau, and Lafferty, our personal orientations and thinking styles can contribute to—or detract from—our levels of stress and, in turn, the symptoms of strain that we experience. Based on data collected using the [Stress Processing Report](#) (SPR) and the [Life Styles Inventory](#) (LSI), those who experience more symptoms of strain (such as depression, nervousness, sleeplessness, anger, headaches, difficulty in clearly thinking or expressing one's thoughts, forgetfulness, overeating, loss of appetite, tense neck and jaw, grinding teeth, shortness of breath, chest pains, back pains, medical problems, etc.) are also more likely to have:

- A negative self-image (e.g., self blaming, pessimistic view of the future, negative view of the past)
- An external locus of control (i.e., a belief that events are controlled by others rather than by self)
- A negative interpersonal orientation (e.g., generally distrustful of others, feel excluded when around others, negative expectations with respect to social interactions)
- An undirected and unrealistic orientation toward goals
- A pressured orientation toward time
- [Passive/Defensive](#) thinking and behavioral styles (i.e., Approval, Conventional, Dependent, and Avoidance styles)
- [Aggressive/Defensive](#) thinking and behavioral (i.e., Oppositional, Power, Competitive, and Perfectionistic styles)

So, what can you do to reduce your stress and strain? Based on the research findings described above and Behavioral Self Management approaches to change, people can take action to reduce their stress and strain by managing the antecedents and the consequences associated with healthy personal orientations and styles. Specifically,

1. **Take inventory of your current orientations and styles.** The first step in any change process is to take stock of the current situation. The [Stress Processing Report](#) and the [Life Styles Inventory](#) measure patterns in thinking and behavior that are related to stress, symptoms of strain, overall health and well being, as well as to personal and interpersonal effectiveness. In addition, because the types of orientations and styles measured by these inventories are changeable, they are appropriate tools for personal and professional development.
2. **Identify the healthy orientations and styles that you want adopt.** A positive self-image and interpersonal orientation, an internal locus of control, a self-directed and realistic orientation toward goals, a relaxed orientation towards time, and [Constructive](#) thinking styles (i.e., Achievement, Self-Actualizing, Humanistic-Encouraging, and Affiliative) are all associated with better health, overall well-being, and lower levels of stress. After reviewing your current orientations and styles, establish some specific goals around those orientations and styles that you'd to change and improve.

3. **Remove obstacles to healthy thinking and behaviors.** At least some factors in your environment (e.g., people, tasks, expectations, appraisal and reward systems) are likely reinforcing or encouraging your current thinking and behavioral styles. Identify those factors or “cues” that seem to trigger unhealthy thinking and behaviors and then work to reduce or completely remove them. For example, eliminate unrealistic expectations or deadlines and reduce or eliminate interactions with people who are negative or untrustworthy.
4. **Actively seek and create opportunities to develop healthy thinking and behaviors.** Participate in activities that will likely boost your sense of competence, self-control, and purpose. For instance, attend classes, seminars, or workshops or volunteer for an assignment that will provide opportunities and encouragement to develop healthier thinking and behavioral styles. In addition, create cues that will help to reinforce and remind you of the healthy orientations and styles that you are trying to develop.
5. **Monitor your progress.** Keeping track of your progress is important to maintaining your motivation to change. By monitoring your personal orientations and thinking styles over time (e.g., through inventory post-tests and feedback from others), you’ll be able to gauge your improvement as well as determine the effectiveness of your strategies for change.

For additional information, see:

R. A. Cooke, and D. M. Rousseau. (1983). Relationship of life events and personal orientations to symptoms of strain. [\*Journal of Applied Psychology\*](#), 68, 446-458.

R. A. Cooke, D. M. Rousseau, and J. C. Lafferty. (1988). Personal orientations and their relation to psychological and physiological symptoms of strain. [\*Psychological Reports\*](#), 62, 223-238.

J. C. Lafferty. (1989). [\*Life Styles Inventory\*](#). Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics.

Human Synergistics. (1994). [\*Stress Processing Report\*](#). Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics.