

Practical Psychology for Everyday Life

A series of short books about managing life dilemmas

Are You a Boiling Frog?



Dr Stewart Hase and Tim Harlow



Are You a Boiling Frog?

Welcome to this first short book and e-book in the Diorablue series on 'Practical Psychology for Everyday Life'.

This series was motivated by an obvious need, in our minds at least, for easy to read explanations of why humans behave the way they do, and some simple techniques and tools to use in daily life and work.

Our aim at Diorablue is to provide accessible information and advice to people wanting to solve interpersonal problems, improve their relationships, lead more fulfilling lives, to be better coaches and leaders, and for those who might just want to know more about the psychology of everyday life.

To find out more, head to www.diorablue.com.au.

We hope that you find something useful in this short book to use in your everyday life, whether it is for yourself or to help you help others who might be boiling frogs.

Dr Stewart Hase and Tim Harlow

Drawings by Madison Mitchell



Part 1: I'm not a frog and I don't feel like I'm boiling

What this book is about

This little book isn't really about frogs, even though we talk about them a fair bit. It's about you.

And no, you probably don't feel like you're boiling and, hopefully, you're not even slightly warm. But the chances are that sometime in your life you have or will experience being a boiling frog. Perhaps it is happening now, which might be why you decided to read this book.

The important thing about being a boiling frog is that you don't know you are boiling unless you know what to look for or until it is too late.

Let's look at what we mean by boiling frogs first.

The fable of the boiling frog

There is a famous fable about the boiling frog. It says that if you place a frog in hot water it will hop out straight away. But, if you put a frog in water that is the same temperature as its body temperature and then heat the water, the frog will slowly boil to death without noticing.



In this little book, we'll be looking at the occurrence of this very common feature of everyday life, although in humans rather than frogs.

But what we'll mostly concentrate on are two important things:

- how we can prevent turning into a boiling frog before it affects our physical health, our relationships, work, play and our mental health: and
- what to do when we recognise that we are getting a bit hot.

Part 2: What do boiling frogs look like?

Examples of Boiling Frogs

Let's start out by looking at some examples of boiling frogs.

The most common example of being a boiling frog is stress. The big problem with boiling from stress is that it can lead to all sorts of physical and psychological illnesses.

The good news is that this can be prevented and cured, as we'll see later on

Example 1: The Stressful frog

Like most people, you want to be successful at work. Promotion means larger pay cheques, so working long hours is a way to the organisation's heart. All the travel means a poor diet and too much alcohol at late night meetings. Going to the gym becomes impossible and you are too tired in the morning to go jogging or bicycling: something that you used to love. You're not spending as much time at home as you should and this is causing problems with your spouse and children. When you are home, you're not much fun to be with, being tired and irritable.

You wake at 2 or 3 am and can't go back to sleep, as thoughts race through your mind and you toss and turn. Tired all the time, you are irritable and snap at people who all seem to be wasting your time. You start drinking too much alcohol.

Without you being aware of it, your blood pressure is gradually rising. It seems that you get every cold that is going around and have regular cold sores on your lips as your immune system is suppressed by the continuous stress response. It might be that you get some rather more serious disease.

A word about stress and distress while we are here

A sudden exposure to a stressor (something that creates stress) causes what is known as the flight or fight response and it is hard to ignore. People recognise the sudden increase in heart rate, the gut churning, the muscle tension and the desire to either flee or to fight (an anger response).

The interesting thing about this type of stress is that it can be very useful when we are under immediate pressure. It can even be exciting. But when pressure is maintained for any length of time then stress becomes debilitating.

The human body is able to adapt to a slow increase in external stress without even becoming aware of what is happening. Gradual exposure to stressors results in a slow increase in stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, rather than a sudden rush. Your body reacts to stress but in small increments. Your heart pumps a bit harder and faster, blood pressure goes up, tension increases and there is a heightened sense of vigilance. You start to feel a little tired and it is hard to concentrate.

Sleep may well be affected. This might mean finding it difficult to get off to sleep or waking in the middle of the night and not being able to get back to sleep. The mind seems not to be able to relax and you start thinking about work or problems that seem insurmountable. Poor sleep leads to even more fatigue.

As well as poor concentration and tiredness, your decision-making also deteriorates as does general cognitive function. Your memory may also be affected.

You may become moody and irritable, prone to emotional outbursts. Some people withdraw and don't interact with others as much as they used to. They can look preoccupied. This means that relationships can become a little frayed. Self-medicating with alcohol is common but it actually adds to the stress response overall. The good feeling alcohol creates is only transitory.

If you know enough about the symptoms of distress and listen to yourself, you can do something about it before something gives, such as physical illness, a relationship breakdown or psychological problems.

The case below is a rather different example of being a boiling frog: a relationship.

Example 2: The case of the boiling relationship

This case is a little bit different from experiences like stress. Mark and Barbara have been together for eight years. They have one daughter, aged six, who now attends school, and they both work full time. Living in a city means they spend a lot of time commuting. Barbara's mother has not been well for a couple of years and Barbara often has to spend time with her at weekends. Tiredness takes its toll and there is less time to sit and talk over a glass of wine, as they used to. Little things start to irritate and there are more arguments over silly matters. Sex becomes less frequent and perfunctory. Resentment starts to build and there are signs of disrespect. Communication becomes increasingly strained and transactional. Very gradually, the couple drift further apart, barely noticing as they are caught up in their own, personal distress. Arguments and resentment increase to the point when one of them cannot stand it any longer and says what both of them are thinking, that it is time to go their separate ways. Sometimes, that conversation is too difficult, so one of them has an affair, gets drunk and says things that are really nasty, forcing the other to make the decision.

This is the dilemma of two boiling frogs in a relationship.

If the couple are lucky, they get help early or there is a flash of insight and they change their behaviour, before it is too late.

A word about relationships too, while we are here

The example above is typical of relationships that get into trouble because of the stress that life brings and an inability to deal with it. Often, these relationships can be salvaged.

However, it is also possible to be in a relationship which is abusive, where one member is subjugated by the other. Some relationships just deteriorate due to a lack of love and were, perhaps, never meant to be.

The boiling frog metaphor applies to these cases too but with a different outcome. It applies because it is best for the person being abused or in a relationship that is not working for them to act early rather than later, when ending the relationship can be much more difficult and more damage has been done.



Example 3: The physically ill frog

Sam was an extremely fit man. After retiring from playing football, he became a referee in his local community to maintain his fitness and to stay associated with the game.

However, he didn't need to train quite as much anymore but did jog three or four times a week as well as refereeing at weekends. Sam lost quite a bit of muscle tone and developed a small paunch, but he decided that was due to not doing weights and a rigorous daily training regime required to be a player.

He got a promotion at work and this meant extra hours at the office. Sam lived on the outskirts of a large city and had a long commute. This meant there was less time for exercise, having fun or even socialising.

The weekends were usually spent doing chores around the house and catching up with work. He did, however, like to head down to the local golf club and have a few beers on a Friday and Saturday night followed by steak and chips, a pie or fish and chips. Sam's diet largely consisted of fast food, as he didn't like or have time to cook. He often didn't have breakfast, other than a coffee when he got up and one on the way to work.

Slowly, Sam started putting on more weight and noticed he got a bit out of breath when he had to walk up some stairs or rush for the tram. He put it down to being unfit and told himself that he would start an exercise program as soon as work settled down. Sam started feeling tired all the time, began to have headaches and just felt generally unwell. He experienced a few episodes of palpitations but ignored them, putting them down to his stressful work.

One day, Sam was late for his tram and had to run 50-metres to catch it. Just before he got to the tram stop, he felt an intense, dull pain under his ribs and had trouble getting his breath. Bending over, the pain gradually subsided. Later, he felt the same pain when he walked up a flight of stairs at work and was also breathless.

Sam rang his sister, who was a nurse and she advised him to see his doctor and within two days he had 2 stents inserted into 2 of the three major arteries that supply blood to his heart. Tests revealed that he had coronary artery disease, very high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.

Sam had been a slow boiling frog.

It is quite likely that you can think of a time in your life when something similar to these examples has happened to you. Others include:

- a decreasing passion for life;
- increasing anxiety;
- developing a harmful habit;
- or the gradual development of any number of physical illnesses such as diabetes or hypertension, for example.

The good news is that you don't have to become a boiling frog, as long as you know what to do.

Why frogs ignore the gradually warming water

One way we conserve energy or effort is that much of our behaviour occurs outside of our consciousness. We don't think about moving our legs to walk, what we are saying when speaking in a normal conversation, the mechanics of driving a car, or carrying out many routine behaviours. If we did, then we wouldn't be able to pay attention to other more important things and we would quickly become exhausted.

Instead, we prefer to use our energy for important conversations, decision-making, thinking about where we are going or what is happening around us, painting that masterpiece or writing about boiling frogs.

These automatic behaviours are best described as habits and we mostly don't bring them into our consciousness.

So, we are also prone to not being aware of small changes in the way we feel. And small incremental changes are hard to notice when we are engaged in doing 'stuff'. Only large changes in how we feel come to our attention, such as stepping off the curb and nearly being hit by a bus. The sudden surge of adrenaline is hard not to notice.

Hence, the phenomenon of the boiling frog: slow change our of our awareness.

There are lots of reasons why people ignore the water warming around them.

Sometimes, it is just an inconvenient time to change. You've just been promoted at work, a new baby means that finances are tight, the credit card took a bit of a hammering during that overseas holiday and taking time off is not an option.

Some people are very competitive, others are wanting to achieve no matter the cost, and wanting to please can make us say 'yes' when we would rather say 'no'. Being a workaholic is a more acceptable addiction, but it is still an addiction that creates special rewards in the brain.

Humans, in general, find change habits difficult without a compelling motive. So, as the weight goes up, the blood sugar rises, stress increases, frustration and anger become the norm, we upset people around us, and alcohol or drugs become a part of our daily routine, it can be just too hard to go into reverse and undo what has started. Some people, even after a heart attack or some other life-threatening experience, find it hard to adopt healthier habits and give up.

The evidence is that new year resolutions invariably fail, despite all the good intentions in the world.

Being aware that change takes real effort is an important first step, rather than thinking it is going to be easy. Change takes work, commitment and a plan.

Now let's look at a case study that will be continued through each section of the book. Also included are some questions for you to answer, if you want to check your understanding. It's not a test, more an opportunity to think about yourself and how to prevent becoming or dealing with being a boiling frog.

Case study

Maggie and Ben

Maggie and Ben both joined Visserbank during the same week in junior management roles. They were in their mid-twenties and single after having completed university and having joined the bank's graduate management program straight after completing their university studies. Initially, both were still living at home with parents but had moved to Melbourne to work in Visserbank's headquarters and they were driven to develop their careers, seeing the bank as an opportunity for promotion and increased responsibility with increased income as a result.

At that time, Visserbank was a large and growing regional bank. When they joined the bank's operation, it had settled into a steady and relatively predictable daily operation, having gone through an acquisition and merger with another small regional bank some four years prior. Maggie worked in I.T operations and was responsible for a team of around 50 staff whose role was focused on running and maintaining the banks own infrastructure. From time to time, this involved planning and managing projects to implement new systems, consolidate or retire older ones, though this was infrequent.

Ben was responsible for a team of 15 H.R specialists, who provided management support and advice to all managers across Visserbank's business units. This generally involved assisting managers with employee related matters such as retirement planning and transition, development of position descriptions, staff development planning, and performance management and assisting managers to deal with return to work transitions for staff who had experienced absence due to illness or work injury.

Both lived in the CBD close to work, so Maggie and Ben would regularly party hard with other colleagues, who were part of the alumni from their university and management programs and life

was fun, with few dependencies and commitments. They both had an abundance of discretionary income to spare, little to worry about and jobs with relative security, which were not overly demanding.

In the years that followed Ben got married and moved to the suburbs, joining the thousands of daily commuters. He and his wife scraped together the deposit for their first home and, like many, committed themselves to a mortgage. They were blessed with surprise twins though the birth was premature. One of the boys needed long term medical treatment for a range of issues resulting from the premature birth.

Maggie remained single and regularly flew interstate back home to visit her aging parents, and older brother Ian and his family with whom she was close. Ian and his family lived close to their parent's rural farm, where he performed much of the physical work and was close by to help with his parents.

Over time, Maggie's mother's health deteriorated quickly, and Ian was injured badly trying to rescue his father who was killed tragically in a farm accident.

By their early thirties, life seemed tougher for both Maggie and Ben. With family and financial demands always at front of mind they were thankful that work was relatively predictable, but this was about to change.

Questions

Like Maggie and Ben, what life events have you experienced in the past that have been stressful?

Which life events continue to cause you stress and refuse to go away (work, health, interpersonal, family)?

Part 3: Avoiding being a boiling frog

Developing resistance

While there is no guarantee, because sometimes illnesses and stress can be caused by things outside our control, we can become resistant to an increase in temperature.

Resistance generally involves living healthily.

This might mean:

- reducing sugar intake,
- cutting back on fat and meat,
- eating fresh fruit and vegetables rather than processed food,
- eating fish regularly,
- exercising,
- engaging in pleasant activities,
- sleeping well,
- having fun,
- resting,
- having good relationships with others, and
- working wisely.



There is a lot of evidence that all of the above create resistance to disease.

Strangely, though, people find it really difficult to change habits even if they are damaging them, for the reasons we have already discussed.

It takes around 3-months to successfully change a habit. You need to be motivated and persistent.

(See one of our other mini books on 'Bad Habits to Good Habits: The Mystery of Habit Change')

In the meantime, here are some hints at how to change a habit.

1. *Identify the habits you want to change.*
2. *Look at what you are getting out of the habit you want to change. What is the payoff for you? What will be the payoff of the new behaviour?*
3. *Rely on your own common sense. When you are tired you tend to have a few too many drinks while watching a movie on TV. Next day, you feel even more tired. Your common sense will tell you that it would be better to go for a walk in the fresh air, have a game of golf or go shoot some netball baskets and rejuvenate yourself.*
4. *Choose something to replace the unhealthy habit.*
5. *Remove triggers. Work out what situations cause you to engage in the habit you want to change. If you know that you eat cake or biscuits with coffee, then you need to be particularly aware of this link when trying to lose weight. Don't go inside the pub if you are trying to avoid drinking. Take bottled water to a party to demonstrate your commitment to change.*
6. *Visualize yourself changing. The best time to visualise yourself as a non-smoker, losing weight, not drinking, exercising or saying no to a treat at morning tea, is just before dropping off to sleep. But you can visualise anytime.*
7. *Monitor your negative self-talk. When you think negatively, beat yourself up or denigrate yourself, say STOP in your mind, tell yourself that this is not a truth but an interpretation that has no substance. Examine the thought and think about where it came from, how useful it is, and its relevance. Take a breath in through your nose and then breathe out slowly.*
8. *Take small steps towards your goal. Think, 'one day at a time' and try not to think too*
9. *far into the future-the latter can make you feel that the task is too hard. One day is manageable.*
10. *Recognise that you will stumble or at least have doubts. That is normal when making a change in behaviour. It takes 3 months or so to change a behaviour or habit. Persistence is the key.*

Remember: look after your mind and your body and you'll find that you become more resilient to changes in water temperature.



Case Study

Maggie and Ben

What advice could you give Maggie and Ben about how to develop resilience to the stress they are facing?

What could you do in your life to become more resilient to stress in the future?

Part 4: Lowering the water temperature in time

Clever frogs

Some, rather clever, frogs have the knack of recognising when the water is starting to warm up by even the minutest amount.

Self-monitoring

People who can do this are practicing what psychologists call 'self-monitoring'. Others might call this self-awareness or mindfulness. This is the capacity to be in touch with how you are feeling, both physically and mentally, so that you notice when there is a change happening.

Being in touch with how you are feeling and recognising changes in yourself and your behaviour is a great skill. However, it is a skill that can be learned and psychologists spend a lot of time teaching people how to do it so that they can then use their awareness to change their behaviour.

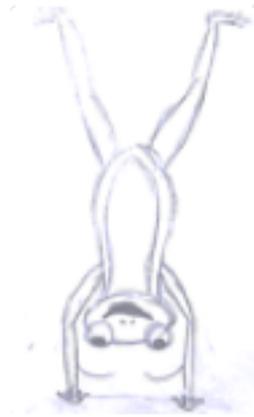
This technique is often taught to people who have problems controlling their anger, anxiety and other negative feelings. However, it is also valuable in avoiding being a boiled frog in all its various disguises whether psychological or physical.

The problem is that being in a state of self-awareness all day long can be hard work. After all, we only have a certain amount of energy to burn in a day, as you will know if you have to concentrate hard on a task for a long period of time.

However, practice makes it easier. You could also put aside a small part of your day to reflect on how you are feeling and then take action if necessary.

Others will sometimes give us feedback about how we look or are behaving and we might choose to give some thought to what we are being told, rather than simply dismiss it or treat the feedback as criticism.

And then to action: hopping onto a Lilly pad.



There are two levels of action.

1. The first is what to do when you start to notice that the water temperature is rising.
2. The second is what to do when it is getting really hot and you are feeling not so well.

We'll start with number 1, what to do when you become aware that the water temperature is rising:

- You might want to talk to a professional, depending on what the problem might be and how much it is affecting you.
- The intervention will depend on the problem. It might be changing a habit that is hurting you. Look at your lifestyle, your stressors and decide to make changes.
- Again, you might need professional help in doing this.

Let's look at a simple technique to bring acute stress under control.

Controlling Stress

1. The key to managing stress, any negative feeling or thought is self-monitoring yourself. That is, being aware of how you are feeling and thinking at any one time.
2. Identify the stressful or negative thought or feeling immediately it occurs.
3. Grab the thought or feeling and throw it out of your mind. Tell yourself that it is a part of the old script and is no longer wanted. Say STOP (to yourself, not out loud) if you need to. Then replace the thought with something more positive, an affirmation or a pleasant idea.
4. Then abdominally breathe, slowly-see below.
5. Congratulate yourself.
6. Be persistent because the negative thought or feeling may return.
7. After a while this will become automatic and you won't even have to think about it. It is essentially a reversal of habit which takes about 3 months, according to research.

How to abdominally breathe.

Find a small round stone and put it in the freezer for about an hour.

Go somewhere quiet (bedroom) and lie down with belly button exposed. Place rock on belly button. Close eyes and practice pushing the rock up in the air with your tummy as you breathe. This promotes diaphragmatic breathing. So, don't breathe with your chest muscles-keep them still.

Breathe in with your nose and out through your mouth in 6-second cycles (about 10 per minute). You can time yourself on a watch or clock until you get the interval about right.

Keep this going for 10 mins after which you will be able to breathe diaphragmatically and slowly. Do the following while in a relaxed state: as you breathe out say the word 'relax' in your mind for a few minutes.

Throw away rock.

Next time you are in a stressful situation or coming up to one, start breathing with your diaphragm, slowly through your nose and, as you breathe out say the word relax in your mind.

Learn a relaxation technique, meditate or take up Yoga.

It is impossible to be stressed and relaxed at the same time. So, learning how to relax will enable you to reduce your stress levels and get control of your feelings. Three ways to do this are relaxation techniques, meditating or Yoga. You only need to do one of these, not all three.

The best and most practical relaxation technique is Progressive Muscle Relaxation, which is often the preferred method used by psychologists.

Case Study

Maggie and Ben

Ben felt tired all the time. Public transport had become unreliable and the commute had become a drain. He felt quite helpless being unable to fix his son's health and seeing him feeling poorly often. The endless stream of doctors and specialists' appointments was so frustrating. His wife was feeling it too. Tiredness and lethargy fueled increasing arguments at home about silly things.

Maggie almost never went out with friends anymore. She'd fly home every Friday straight after work since her Father was killed and catch the red eye flight back to Melbourne every Monday to get at much time with her brother and mother as she could. The farm was too much for the family now and it was uncertain how Ian's rehabilitation would end up.

Visserbank's board and executive teams had developed a strategy to diversify the business into other financial services as a means to accelerate growth and generate increased profits and shareholder return. Several companies were assessed as takeover targets and after months of planning and negotiation the company announced the intended acquisition of FinSec Holdings a diversified insurance and financial planning group.

The bank CEO announced plans for market analysts and shareholders and committed to delivering specific increased profits and reduced operating cost figures within a two-year period as a result of the merger through strategy of consolidation.

The bank's share value soared though a failure to deliver on the commitments would result in a certain devaluation and a change in senior management.

Uncertainty fueled office chatter, particularly around the merger, aggressive timeframes and stretching cost savings announced by the CEO. A month passed by before managers across the two companies were assembled to start to work out how each of their areas would contribute to savings.

Maggie and Ben met their peers within Visserbank during this time. It was plain to everyone that any company wouldn't need two managers for every function in the merged entity that would result.

With increasing regularity, the grapevine reported the announcement of senior managers who were deciding to retire early or pursue opportunities outside Visserbank. Eventually an email arrived in Bens in-box announcing his manager was to leave the bank and he and Emma his peer from FinSec Holdings would now both report to Carol, the senior manager at FinSec holdings.

Maggie was now actively working with Brian her peer at Finsec to review the IT operation of both companies and look for ways to simplify, consolidate and importantly reduce costs. They'd been given the target of identifying areas for cost reduction by 45% within two years and calculating the costs of doing so within four weeks. Nothing was off limits in terms including changing data centres and reducing headcount. Both operations were running fairly efficiently, this was not a straightforward task and the target seemed almost impossible.

Both Maggie and Ben were feeling pressure to work longer and longer hours. Ben was thinking more and more about the security of his job and the implications for paying the mortgage and medical bills for his son. Maggie was struggling to find ways to meet find the target savings and her mother's health was a constant worry, collectively the anxiety caused was increasing with seemingly no way to achieve the targets and no way to help her mother.

Questions

What are the danger signs for Maggie and Ben that the water is starting to get warm?

What should they now do?

Let's now talk about what you should do when the water is becoming really hot and you are becoming unwell.



Case Study

Maggie and Ben

Ben decides to reduce his commitments. He is on the local football management committee that takes up a lot of time and is quite stressful and he calls the chairwoman to hand in his resignation. His symptoms are quite severe now, so he makes an appointment to see his GP who treats his high blood pressure and refers him to a psychologist for help regarding sleep management and stress reduction.

Maggie advertises and finds a local housekeeper to reduce having to find time for cleaning and cooking so that she can relax and get out to exercise. She takes a week off work and attends a 4-day workshop on anxiety management, meditation and mindfulness. Whilst she is anxious about being perceived negatively, Maggie considers ways to reduce pressure at work and decides that she will talk to her manager about her impossible workload.

What changes could you make to your life to reduce the heat?

The first priority should be to get professional help. Your GP could be the first port of call and who may refer you to a psychologist. Many organisations have EAPs (Employee Assistance Programs) or similar that you can access.

Taking control of the things that are creating the stress will be essential.

It's time for big changes.

Part 5: Things that get in the way of hopping onto the Lilly Pad

When changing habits, it is important to be self-monitoring for around 3-months before we can be reasonably confident that we have defeated a habit that we want to change.

Humans do not find change easy, even when there is an obvious reason to change. Even when people are suffering from quite severe anxiety or stress, Stewart has found in his clinical work that getting them to learn new skills like relaxation and mindfulness can sometimes be difficult.

Motivation to change is a very complex phenomenon. Some of the things that get in the way of changing a behaviour to either stop becoming or dealing with being a boiling frog are:

- Recognising that the change is important.
- The habitual nature of behaviour.
- Understanding the skill or technique really will make a difference.
- Having confidence in undertaking the skill.
- Remembering to undertake the change or skill.
- Fitting in practice or the change into a busy schedule.
- Listening to unhelpful, unqualified advice.
- Low self-discipline.
- Denial of being a boiling frog.
- Depression, anxiety and other mental health problems.

When planning change, it is important to try and analyse what factors might get in your way and take steps to overcome them even before starting out.

When there is a problem with change, professional help can assist in overcoming barriers.

Part 6-Bye



We hope you have found this booklet useful. If you'd like to talk to someone further about being a boiling frog or other issues please contact Stewart, our psychologist, at:

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