



MANAGING STRESS FOR NEW INTERPRETERS

**Best Practice From Practitioners, Agencies and
Interpreter Associations**

**Paul Belmonte
Shaurna Dickson**

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Working as a language interpreter brings its own unique challenges and practitioners must learn coping strategies to deal with the stresses and anxieties that are a daily part of our job.

This can be a particular challenge for newer interpreters who are meeting many challenging situations for the first time. They may not yet have the skills and strategies required to deal successfully with so many unfamiliar occurrences. This can lead to an interpreter doubting their level of skills, unhealthy levels of stress and in the worst cases, to no longer feeling able to work in the field.

For these reasons, we were happy to present our workshop *Managing Stress for New Interpreters* at the 2009 conference of the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters in Tallinn, Estonia. Our topic fitted in well with the conference theme of *Sound mind in sound hands*. Sharing the results of our research led to some lively discussions and we felt it would be valuable to share some of the conclusions that were reached.

Everyone involved in interpreting shares a common aim: for interpreters to be confident, competent and happy. For a new interpreter to reach this stage quickly is of benefit to everyone. Clients receive a better service. Agencies and managers have a member of staff who is less likely to be ill and who is easier to manage. And of course, interpreters themselves enjoy their work so much more when they feel secure in their own skills.



Stress – what is it?

Feelings of stress are the body's response to what it perceives to be a dangerous or threatening situation. Physiological responses such as increased heart rate and the flow of adrenaline are designed to prepare us for "fight or flight" situations. These

responses can be helpful to us in challenging situations as they can keep us sharp and heighten ability in the short term.

Problems arise, however, when feelings of stress continue over a longer period or where there is “a mismatch between our perceived demands and our perceived ability to cope.”¹ When the body is exposed to levels of stress beyond its ability to cope over a prolonged period of time, it can cause a wide range of health difficulties. Symptoms include high blood pressure, headaches, backache, tight neck and shoulders, frequent colds, fatigue or jaw pain. It can also lead to forgetfulness, problems with concentration, indecisiveness, irritability, anger, depression or panic attacks. It has been estimated that “at least three quarters of those who visit their doctor have a stress-related complaint.”²

Stress can have additional implications for sign language interpreters. Because we use our hands, arms, shoulder and bodies to such a great extent in our work, we have additional risks of upper limb disorders and repetitive strain injuries.

It is evident that everyone involved in the interpreting process has an interest in managing work-related stress.

What causes stress in new interpreters?

We contacted a number of apprentice or trainee interpreters to ask them the main causes of stress in their work. Some replied to a written questionnaire and others were interviewed by telephone or in person. The main things that cause stress were arranged into themes and the top three causes of anxiety were found to be as follows (along with some quotes from respondents):

¹ Looker & Gregson (1997) p. 25

² *Ibid* p. 3

1. Feeling inadequate

- “looking incompetent”
- “having to have things repeated and still not getting it”
- “what if I can’t cope?”
- “feeling out of my depth”
- “aaargh, what if I can’t do it?”

Of course, all interpreters feel inadequate at times, but it is worth remembering that for new interpreters, this can be an every day feeling!

We cannot assume that a new interpreter is aware of their own proficiency to do the job at a basic level. While they need to be aware of areas in which they can improve, it can do much harm if we neglect to offer merited praise and reassurance.

2. Doing things for the first time

- “Meeting the Deaf person for the first time ... will I understand them? will they LIKE me?”
- “finding a new location”
- The first time in a certain type of assignment, e.g. a wedding.

It is easy to imagine (or remember!) the anxiety of receiving a certain assignment for the first time. For example, we may have been asked to interpret for Carolina in the Cardiology department of the hospital. We’ve never met Carolina and are not sure how she signs. We’ve never before been to that hospital; which bus goes there? Should we drive? Will we be able to park? We think cardiology has something to do with the heart, but have no idea what to expect from the appointment.

The same appointment one year later feels very different. We’re looking forward to seeing Carolina again, we can’t wait to hear about her holiday and wonder if her new medication is working well for her. It’s a nice day, so we decide to take the bus. The relief of stress in these situations can often only come with experience and the passage of time.

3. *The people we work with*

- Coping with people being unaware of how to use an interpreter
- “Deaf people telling us we’re rubbish”
- “my boss is demanding”
- “will my co-worker be judging me? I wonder if they remember what it’s like to be a trainee?”

It takes time to develop the coping strategies to deal with difficult people. It is particularly disappointing when the people who cause anxiety are the very ones who we might hope would be supportive of a less experienced interpreter.

Participants involved in the workshop also shared some of the things they felt cause stress for newer interpreters. Some of the points mentioned were:

- Processing from sign language > voice
- Platform interpreting especially when there are a lot of Deaf people in the audience!
- One-to-one situations with a camera present

How to cope

Stress is the body’s way of dealing with a perceived threat, so dealing with the threat can be a first step in controlling the stress. It can be helpful to take a realistic look at the situation, see what is causing the stress and think about how it can be reduced.

It is important to develop new habits that distract or remove oneself from whatever is causing anxiety; this can help to manage stress on a more permanent basis. Useful habits can include:

- *Humour*. This produces helpful chemicals which aid relaxation and can also distract from stressful thoughts.

- *Exercise.* Even a quick walk in the fresh air can make a difference. Leave the building! Gentle stretching to warm up the body and limbs before an assignment can also relieve tension.
- *Keep hydrated.* Adequate amounts to drink through the day can stop us from feeling tired and lethargic but also lead to more visits to the toilet, which gives extra exercise and an excuse to leave stressful situations for a time.

The trainee interpreters who responded to our questions also shared some of the ways in which they cope:

- “Learn and move on”
- Don’t be afraid to slow things down
- Know your limitations
- Deep breathing /yoga
- Treats!

Other coping strategies can be summarised in three words: Plan, Expect and Communicate.

Plan

Careful planning of the diary and an awareness of the location of assignments can go a long way to alleviating stress.

The example was given of an interpreter (or their agency) being asked to attend an assignment at 12.30pm in a factory. They are already booked until 12.00 at the hospital across town, which is a 25 minute drive away, so the booking is accepted. The interpreter spends the whole morning looking at her watch and hoping the hospital appointment finishes on time. It does, but the interpreter is still feeling stressed and has to leave in a hurry, which upsets the Deaf client. Our interpreter hasn’t had time to eat any lunch and gets more and more tense as she drives across

town. Although she arrives at the factory on time, there is nowhere to park her car. So she rushes into her afternoon appointment 10 minutes late, which upsets the clients there, and of course her feelings of panic and the tension in her arms and shoulders means she does a poor piece of work. She leaves the factory with two more unhappy clients and feeling deskilled and demotivated. After a day like that, she wakes up the next morning with a cold and because of the previous day's events, does not feel motivated to go to work that day. Her appointments have to be cancelled, leaving yet more unhappy clients and the agency with a whole day's lost income.

The interpreter (or their agency) was able to squeeze in an extra appointment on that day, but was it worth it?

This was a hypothetical situation, but everyone in the workshop recognised most of the elements as having been based on real life. If whoever accepts bookings plans properly and factors in things like lunch time and travel, it is not too difficult to avoid a large amount of the stress we face. How much better if the factory had been told that an interpreter could be provided, but not until 1.30!

Expect

Managing our own expectations and those of others can also help us to cope with feelings of stress.

As a newer interpreter, we have to accept that some assignments will just not go well. That is normal. We can also take some reasonably simple steps to manage the expectations of others. Some of our respondents spoke of how difficult it can be to pluck up the courage to ask for a break in a longer assignment. A few minutes can be taken before the interpreting starts to explain that there will be a break after twenty or thirty minutes, or maybe in some situations, that the interpreter may switch from simultaneous into consecutive interpreting. If everyone involved is prepared for what may happen, it can be much easier to cope with when these situations arise.

Communicate

Communication is possibly one of the most effective and important way of alleviating anxiety. New interpreters can make time to communicate with their manager, a mentor or possibly a counsellor. Those who are employed by an agency or other body will hopefully have regular supervision sessions with a line manager. However, even those who work on a freelance basis should make the time to talk to a trusted fellow professional. Time booked into the interpreting diary on a regular basis is invaluable and should not be neglected. “Regular meeting ... provides a good way for interpreters to build up their self esteem, which ultimately is the best defense against the negative effects of enduring stressful situations.”³

We also asked the delegates in the conference workshop to share their tactics for coping with feelings of stress. They suggested:

- Run in the forest
- Having regular assignments plus the occasional new assignment
- Friends and family
- Knowing it takes time to learn
- Gaining background knowledge
- Just “taking my time”
- Think before accepting jobs
- Preparation – meet before the assignment
- Work with a colleague you know
- Morning sport!

³ Stewart, Schein & Cartwright (2004) p. 65



How others can help

We should never underestimate the difference the rest of us can make in supporting interpreters with less experience. As colleagues, managers or those involved with interpreter associations, we can have a huge

impact on the feelings and confidence of the people we work with.

Interpreter Associations

We contacted a number of Interpreter Associations and asked them what they have in place to support newer members. Our aim was not to find gaps in provision or to criticise any organisation, but to find and highlight good practice wherever it occurs.

One strategy used in a number of countries was the provision of mentors. The mentor will work with the trainee on an individual basis, looking at their work and helping to improve their skills. These discussions can also provide vital support as confidence issues are explored. As a representative of one interpreter association told us, "We hope that they share their enthusiasm with each other and lend a hand when needed." It was also noted that "the mentor gets as much from the relationship as the mentee."

In another country, students have the opportunity to spend time with working interpreters. As well as sharing skills and experience, students form professional relationships at an early stage, which will be of support to them as they progress in their career.

One association provides a telephone counselling service, whereby all members, including trainees, can call in complete confidence to discuss any kind of issues, whether work related or personal.

Another country provides an on-line buddy programme, where members with varying experience can discuss ethics, professional conduct, semantics and other issues.

Workshop participants also suggested the following:

- Have on-line team forums
- Social time
- Having Deaf input – having a trustworthy person to offer advice and support

Agencies

Deaf Action works with deaf people across Scotland and has a well established interpreting agency. As such, we have developed a great depth of knowledge and experience in training and developing the skills of new interpreters. Anyone joining the communication support team is encouraged to meet Deaf people at every opportunity. These relaxed, informal conversations can do a great deal to build the language skills and confidence of someone new to the profession. Deaf clients also enjoy the opportunity to meet new staff and build a rapport with them. New interpreters also spend their first month shadowing other members of the team, watching them work and being given the opportunity to do a small amount of work when appropriate with the support of their colleagues.

The agency manager holds regular supervision sessions with staff and is always available to talk through any difficult situations which may have arisen. We also schedule away days where interpreters and administrative staff can discuss strategy and enjoy some relaxed, social time as a team.

We also contacted a number of other interpreter agencies and asked what they do to support new staff. Some provide each new member of staff with an allocated buddy, someone who is a good match to that individual's personality and experience. Having someone assigned as a personal buddy helps the trainee to appreciate they are not being a nuisance in asking for support.

In other places, peer discussion groups are set up to talk about dilemmas, share experiences and offer assistance.

Whoever supports a trainee interpreter in the workplace, it can be useful to discuss the setting of specific goals and to give honest and positive feedback on how those goals have been achieved.

Training sessions are also valuable. As well as increasing an interpreter's knowledge and skills, they also contribute to a feeling of being encouraged and valued. One agency even mentioned that they had provided training in stress management, which is sure to be helpful!

Some agencies also mentioned the need to carefully monitor the amount of time spent interpreting. Some set a maximum number of interpreting hours of between 20 and 25 hours per week.⁴ This helps to combat fatigue, but also allows staff to have at least some time in the office each week to prepare for assignments, reflect on work carried out and share support time with colleagues.

It is equally important to take care with the types of jobs allocated to trainees. As one agency manager told us, "Confidence can be fragile, so trainees are not forced to take on jobs they're not ready for." Newer interpreters can also have the opportunity to observe more complex assignments before being asked to carry them out themselves.

We also asked those present at the workshop to add any other recommendations for agencies who employ new interpreters. We noted:

- Having "case study" discussions with trainee and experienced staff. These can be monthly and within work time
- Deaf mentors
- Regular meetings between Deaf and hearing to exchange vocabulary
- Weekly mentoring

⁴ as recommended in Frishberg (1990) p. 78

Mentoring and supervision

One of the most important ways of supporting new interpreters is through regular, one to one discussions with a line manager or mentor. Discussions can also take place after an assignment between a trainee interpreter and a more experienced co-worker. These sessions can do much to help a trainee to quickly move towards confidence, competence and happiness at work.

It should be said though, that at times these discussions may not be as helpful as they might be. To illustrate, the participants in the workshop were asked to work in pairs. One person from each pair was asked to act the part of a trainee interpreter who had just completed a difficult job with a more experienced team interpreter. The trainee was asked to express their feelings at having done a poor piece of work.

The other person in the pair was given one printed response from a possible three. Some were told to mention a list of things the trainee had done badly in the assignment. Others were told to list a number of things which had made the assignment difficult. They were told to be careful to say nothing positive to the discouraged trainee. The third possible response was to deny that anything at all had gone wrong and tell the trainee that their work had been entirely wonderful.

It was clear from the atmosphere in the room that these discussions were not going well, so as a group, we discussed how everyone felt. We noted down some of their feedback:

- Negative comments make you feel like you want to give up
- Confuses – feedback not that helpful
- It is nice to get positive feedback but when you know it is not completely truthful then you lose faith in it
- Solid feedback is needed to help in that situation
- Know that you are a trainee, know your limitations as a trainee and use your co-worker in the best way

- Positive feedback is good and when the qualified interpreter tells of their own experiences then it is very helpful
- When you are in a similar situation again, review from the last time and see if things have changed
- Co-worker has to take responsibility as well if a job goes badly

The participants then worked as pairs one more time to try to make the experience more positive and helpful. It was agreed that these sessions should be balanced; honest about what hadn't worked well but at the same time positive about the trainee's skills and with clear goals set to aid improvement.

Aims and objectives

Whether we are a new interpreter, a more experienced practitioner, a manager, someone involved in an interpreter association or a service user, we all share a common aim: for new interpreters to quickly become confident, competent and happy. All of us have an important role to play in making sure this happens and all of us benefit when it does.



We closed the workshop with a number of quotes from trainee interpreters who are evidently coping well with the stresses and anxieties that can come with entering our profession:

- “I am supported by a fantastic team”
- “I know the assignment will be over in an hour... I’ve been in labour for eighteen hours, so I know I can do this!”
- “I have the most supportive employers I’ve ever had in my life ... My workplace is friendly, supportive, comfortable and safe.”
- “What makes me worry? Everything. How do I cope? Lots and lots of wine!”

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