

## **How to Beat the Stress Test**

**By**

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This type of interview is more like an inquisition, but there are ways to stay cool, writes David Wilson.

Any interview has a cold-sweat side. However much the interviewer smiles, the procedure raises the spectre of interrogation - a spotlight shone into the eyes.

Picture, then, how it feels to undergo a "stress test" interview. The variant on the standard inquisition puts the prey, sorry, candidate under acute pressure. The interviewer goes for the jugular in a bid to find out if the candidate responds rashly and emotionally to unsettling behaviour. Stress permeates the workplace. So, the theory goes, employers must find out if potential employees can handle pressure and handle it well.

The controversial practice entails all kinds of ploys much harder to handle than sticky questions. You might, for example, face an unsmiling greeting, disagreement or criticism. Worse, the pressure may come from all angles in the hydra-headed shape of a panel. The moment the candidate manages to satisfy one interviewer, another raises an issue - bad enough but the pain may be ratcheted up further in palpable ways that have a dirty tricks feel.

For a start, the chair that you occupy may be much shorter than the interviewer's. In that case, suggests etiquette coach Jodi Smith, adjust your chair or ask to change to

another one, instead of sitting in a "subservient" position.

In a close echo of the classic spotlight technique, you may also be placed in harsh sunlight. In that case, Smith says, ask to have the blind lowered or if you may move your chair.

A tricky challenge that the candidate may face is the shadowy figure on the other side of the desk repeatedly making and taking phone calls. Keep cool. During a pause, stand and say that you can see that the interviewer is extremely busy, Smith suggests. Thank the interviewer for taking the time to be there. Add that if any other detail of your candidacy needs clarification, you will give the information. "Shake the interviewer's hand and leave," Smith says.

In her view, the duress that a stress interview inflicts is of questionable value. Preparing for every power play scenario is impossible. But consider the key overarching strategies that will help you hold your own, however the nightmare unravels.

### **Curb the cortisol**

Ensure that you are energised and calm through sound sleep, solid breakfast, exercise and relaxation practices, advises Stuart Taylor, the managing director of the stress mastery school Resilience Institute Australia. The preparation helps keep the stress hormone cortisol in check.

### **Establish a strategy**

Before the interview, clarify your goals and what you stand for, Taylor says. Be clear about what you seek to achieve in the interview and the broader context of your life. Then you are more likely to stay in control, instead of opening in "threat mode" and

awaiting a trigger. Recognise that you cannot control the interviewer's behaviour - only your own.

### **Recover in real time**

Should you feel that you are starting to panic, pause, Taylor says. Exhale long and hard, let your brain kick back in before responding. "When in doubt, breathe out."

### **Think negative**

Negative thinking may sound illogical, heretical even. But, during a stress interview, negative thinking can be productive, according to organisational psychologist Christopher Shen. In your head, advises Shen, identify negative words that describe the interviewer or panel, such as "sullen", "disparaging", "patronising", or "aggressive". Silent insults can inhibit brain regions that amplify emotions. The result can be a fall in anxiety.

### **Remember the good times**

Thinking about past successes lowers your sensitivity to any criticism voiced, Shen suggests.

### **Keep smiling**

The final advice on surviving a stress test interview comes from business consultant and author Barry Maher. The key point, Maher says, is just to never forget that the test amounts to a game or competition. "If the interviewer gets you rattled, he wins," he says. If you stay cool, no matter what ploys you have to tackle, you win. "Keep that attitude and a small, amused smile as the interviewer tries vainly to pile on the

pressure and you'll have no problem."

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