Recognising and Managing Stress

Princess Alexandra Hospital Health Service District Mental Health Service

What is stress?

We are all familiar with stress. Stress is a normal response that we experience to some extent everyday. A certain level of stress is necessary to not only function, but to reach our full potential. Too much stress, however, can be a health hazard. The first important step in stress management involves being aware of when our stress levels have become unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised, there is a range of stress management skills available to address the problem.

What are the symptoms?

A state of chronic stress is not reached overnight - it takes time! Before reaching this state we may notice many symptoms. Rather than acknowledge the signs, we may push ourselves harder, pretending that everything is fine. This continual exposure to stress decreases our ability to function in every area of our lives. The good news is we can stop stress escalating by firstly recognising the warning signs.

What are the warning signs of stress?

Physical
- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Heart palpitations
- Nausea
- Muscle aches, pains, and twitches
- Fatigue
- Clenched jaw and fists
- Increased sweating
- Increased urination
- Constipation or diarrhoea

Emotional
- Tense
- Depressed
- Anxious
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Loss of confidence
- Decreased pleasure in life
Cognitive

- Impaired judgement
- Negative thoughts
- Loss of concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty making decisions
- Bad dreams
- Negative thoughts

Behavioural

- Changes in appetite
- Problems in your relationships
- Increased nicotine or caffeine use
- Inability to unwind
- Eating and drinking faster
- Problems managing time

What causes problem stress?

There have been many explanations offered as to why we experience excessive stress. Some studies suggest that individuals inherit the tendency to feel more stress. Other studies describe stress as a response that is learned over a lifetime. Thus, people who experience high levels of stress tend to hold beliefs which make them feel threatened, hyper vigilant and out of control. These studies indicate that thinking plays an important role in our response to stress.

Irrespective of the cause, stress is an increasing part of our lives. Ignoring it will not make it go away. Once stress overload is recognised, there are skills you can acquire to address the problem.

How can you manage stress?

Does what I eat matter?

When we experience stress, our bodies use up enormous amounts of vitamins and minerals. The depletion of our body's nutrients can leave us tired, run down, irritable and less able to deal with our responsibilities.

Vitamins C and B Complex, and calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc are the hardest hit nutrients. These can be restored through a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy products, nuts, yeast, brown rice, fish, liver, eggs and kelp.

Sometimes the foods that we reach for when stressed are the foods that interfere with our body’s ability to absorb vitamins and minerals and therefore compound the amount of stress experienced. Foods to steer clear of when stressed include tea, coffee, cakes, biscuits, soft drinks, chocolate, and white bread.
Is exercise useful?

Physical exercise is invaluable in releasing tension and assists in the processing of vitamins and minerals. Any physical exercise is helpful - walking, swimming, jogging or gardening. Exercise need not be a chore - especially if it is done with friends. The most important point to remember is to do it regularly.

How can I relax?
Relaxation is a useful tool, either used alone or in conjunction with other strategies, for the reduction of stress.

The most common form of relaxation exercise involves progressive muscle relaxation. This exercise involves consciously focusing on one area of the body at a time, clenching the muscles, then relaxing them. When relaxing your muscles, imagine all the tension flowing from your body. This exercise can be performed lying down or sitting. If you can, make time to relax each day. You will be amazed by how quickly the physical tension you experience is reduced. Relaxation can also mean listening to music, patting your pet, having a nap or reading a good book. A meditation program will prepare you to manage both physical and mental stresses and will help to recharge your system. The most important thing is to set aside time for it to happen.

How can I practice ‘realistic thinking’?

Our beliefs and thoughts determine the intensity of our feelings when faced with a stressful situation. When we are experiencing extreme feelings of stress, it is often because we are having extreme thoughts. For example, extreme feelings of hopelessness and frustration can be a result of thinking: “I can’t stand it. I’m never going to get this done in time”. To begin to think realistically you can try the following:

• Think about: What is making me feel this way?
• Question: How likely it is that this will happen?
• Ask: What is the worst possible outcome of this situation?

Consider this outcome in the scheme of things - look at the big picture. By overestimating the consequences of any event we become increasingly stressed. The above simple exercise can be helpful in changing the way we think, and therefore feel, in stressful situations.

How can I organise my time?

We can reduce the amount of stress we experience by using our time and energy efficiently. A realistic list of things to do for the day is a good start. Allow ample time to get things on your list done. It is important to acknowledge that you can only do so much in a given period of time. Setting priorities and learning to slow down are essential ingredients in reducing your level of stress.
Can talking to someone help?

We often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking to and sharing our feelings with other people. This may be as simple as talking to your partner or best friend. Other people may find regular sessions with a psychiatrist, social worker or psychologist helpful.

What help is available?

• See your local GP or have an assessment conducted by a mental health professional - a GP can advise/refer you

• Counselling and therapy, in particular Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and alternative therapies

• Australian Psychological Society (APS) toll free 1800 333 497 for a referral to a psychologist who practices in your area

Mental health websites to visit

• Auseinet informs, educates, and promotes good practice in mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention, and suicide prevention across the lifespan – auseinet.flinders.edu.au
• Australian Commonwealth – www.mentalhealth.gov.au
• Australian Mental Health Consumer Network is a nationwide network that promotes access, equity, and participation for consumers of mental health services – www.amhcn.com.au
• Comic is a group of adults who are interested in the wellbeing of children of people with a mental illness – www.angelfire.com/home/comic/
• HealthInsite is a Federal Government service that provides easy access to quality health information – www.healthinsite.gov.au
• Infoxchange Australia contains links to useful websites and services relevant to mental health and psychiatric disability – www.infoxchange.net.au
• Mental Health Association – www.mentalhealth.org.au
• SANE Australia is an independent national organisation committed to improving the wellbeing of people seriously affected by mental illness – www.sane.org or 1800 688 382

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