



MANAGING STRESS



What is stress?

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is very common and is experienced by many people. There are many different factors which can help to make a person feel stressed. These can vary from person to person. However, common factors include demands from work or family, money problems, health problems and difficulties getting on with others.

Recognising stress

It is important to recognise the symptoms of stress. Common signs include:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Heart thumping or beating faster
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling wound up and tense
- Losing your temper with those around you
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Feeling tired much of the time

The impact of stress

Stress can have a negative impact upon your physical and mental health if it is not managed properly. It can disturb your sleep, affect your mood and stop you concentrating.

The impact of stress can also affect how well you get on with other people and stop you functioning effectively with others. You can't completely avoid stress since it is a natural part of everyday life, and in some circumstances a certain amount of stress can be helpful to keep you motivated. So, for example, if you have a deadline at work you might experience some level of stress which then ensures that you work towards meeting your target. However, when stress becomes overwhelming and prevents you from functioning effectively it is unhelpful. It is therefore important that you find ways to manage stress which help you to keep mentally and physically healthy.

MANAGING STRESS

Most people try to manage stress on their own. However, while some ways of coping seem to work initially, they may actually be unhelpful or harmful in the longer term. Examples of potentially damaging ways of coping include smoking, drinking too much alcohol, overeating, opting out by watching excessive amounts of television, and taking drugs.

There are many healthy ways to cope with stress, some of which are described below. Everyone is different and you may wish to try out a number of the ideas in this booklet to discover which ones work best for you. If you are aware that you are already trying to manage your stress in an unhealthy way, try to replace it with a more healthy strategy.



No Smoking

Dealing with stress in a positive way

The first step in learning to manage your stress is to become more aware of which factors trigger stress. You may already be aware of certain factors, but there may be others which are less obvious. You could keep a diary which records when you are feeling stressed. This should help you identify which situations you find most difficult and will help you think about which parts of your life you could consider changing.

The next step is to look at whether there are things you can do to deal directly with the factors in your life which make you feel stressed. This could include some of the following –

- Learning to say no to others when you know that you do not have the time or the knowledge / experience to do what they ask is a very important skill. It can feel difficult to begin with, especially if you are the type of person who likes to be helpful. However, it should get easier with practice.
- Ensure that you give yourself plenty of time to do what you need to do. It is very stressful to rush from one activity to the next, allowing extra time will help to take the pressure off.





- Find out whether there are particular people that make you feel more stressed, and if it is possible, try and reduce your interactions with them.
- Take a good look at your life and think about whether there is anything that you could change which could make things easier. This could include looking at changing your job, reducing your hours at work, or getting help in the house.



If you are overwhelmed by a situation and you are unable to see it in another way, it can be useful to talk things over with a trusted relative or friend. It is possible that they may be able to look at the situation differently and bring another point of view. Try and remember that we all need help from time to time, and sharing our difficulties with others can be extremely helpful. It can also be helpful to remind yourself that while life may feel difficult at the moment, in time the situation may improve. Comparing the difficult situation to the worst possible thing that could happen may also help you to keep it in perspective. Also, it can be useful to remind yourself that, whilst a situation may feel very difficult now, over time things can improve.



Most people will suffer some stresses which cannot easily be avoided. In these situations, it may be helpful to look at ways of helping you cope in other ways. The following are ideas which could help.

Do something physical

Exercise is a great way of relaxing and can help to counteract stress as well as improving your general physical health. Exercise can lift your mood. It can help you forget the problems of the day and provide space in a busy schedule where you can release tension. The sense of satisfaction you experience after taking exercise can help improve your mood and raise your self esteem, giving you more confidence to deal with the challenges you face.





To increase the likelihood that you will continue to exercise regularly it is a good idea to try and pick an activity you enjoy. It can also be a good idea to try and take part in an activity which brings you into contact with others. This could be a team sport such as tennis or football, an exercise class or dancing. This could increase your social life as well as helping you mentally and physically.



Relaxation exercises can also be a useful way of helping you to wind down. There are two main types of relaxation exercises. One is called *Progressive Muscle Relaxation*. This involves tensing and relaxing your muscles. With practice you will become aware of the physical signs of stress and you can quickly relax your muscles and bring about a state of mental calmness.

Some people who have had physical health problems may find it difficult to tense and relax their muscles and it may be better for them to use a different kind of relaxation called *Guided Imagery*. In this type of relaxation, the goal is to imagine yourself in a peaceful setting. With practice, you will find it easier to quickly imagine yourself into this place. Both types of relaxation exercise are widely available on CD and can be purchased in shops and via websites.

If you have not exercised for some time it is sensible to check with your doctor that it is safe for you to begin exercising.

Manage your time better

If you have many demands on your time and energies it can be useful to write a list of the things which need to be finished and then try and deal first with those which are most important. If possible, you could think of asking others to do certain tasks for you. If you find it difficult to make decisions about which tasks are most important you could discuss it with a trusted friend or colleague.

When you have a busy life it can be hard to find time for yourself. However, if you can do this regularly you may feel less stressed and be more effective when you resume your other



activities. People will vary in terms of how they relax. However, possible ideas include having a warm bath, watching a good film, listening to music or reading a book.



Think differently

It can help to be more aware of your thinking habits, especially any negative ones. Some people may be at risk of suffering stress as a result of the way they think about themselves, how they think of others and the way they look at the world around them. Some thinking styles which can be particularly unhelpful are described below, together with alternative ways of thinking that may be better.

Negative ways of thinking can result in you feeling more stressed at work and at home. By becoming more aware of how you think, you can begin to question some of your automatic thoughts and behaviour.



ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING – This means seeing things in a very narrow way. People who have this style of thinking often make sense of the world by putting people and situations into one of two totally opposite groups – e.g. *you are either with us or against us... either you give me everything or give me nothing.* So things are seen as good or bad, right or wrong ~ **INSTEAD ~ try and think** that most situations have some positive and some negative aspects to them. Things are rarely as clear-cut as this style of thinking would suggest. Better ways of thinking are – *it could be a bit of both and that's fine... even if I don't get everything, that'll do for the time being.*

MAGNIFYING THE NEGATIVE – This occurs when something unpleasant about a situation or a person is made much more important and much worse than it is – e.g. *this situation/person is absolutely awful* ~ **INSTEAD ~ you might think** – *this is not as important or as terrible as it seems. In a few months time, I'll look back at this as being not so bad.*

MINIMISING THE POSITIVE – This is when something good about a person or situation is played down – e.g. *he/she/it may be good but still not perfect* ~ **INSTEAD ~ try and think** – *that's really good and I'm pleased about it.*





SELECTIVE EVIDENCE – This is when you only take into account one part of the picture and ignore other parts – e.g. only thinking about the mistakes you or others have made in the past, and not the times you/others got it right ~ **INSTEAD** ~ you could try to put events in context and look at the broader picture.

MIND-READING – This means guessing that people are thinking bad things about you, or are trying to cause you stress, when there is no real reason to think this – e.g. *they must think I am stupid... they do this on purpose to upset me* ~ **INSTEAD** ~ **think along the lines of** – *I can't really tell how they think...I can't be sure why they did this, maybe there was a good reason I'm not aware of.*

OVER-GENERALISATION – This relates to drawing conclusions from one negative instance and then applying it to other situations. People often use the words 'very' and 'always' to over-generalise about an event or person e.g. *he/she is always late* ~ **INSTEAD** ~ *he/she was late on that occasion, but in general he/she has kept to time.*

PESSIMISTIC PREDICTION – This is when you think you will be unable to cope with the consequences of an event and automatically think that the future looks bleak – e.g. *I don't know how I am going to cope, everything will end up as a disaster* ~ **INSTEAD** ~ *I've handled similar/worse situations in the past, everything will work out OK in the long-run.*

BEING A PERFECTIONIST – If you often use the words *should* or *must* or *ought*, it is possible that you have firm ideas about how you and others are expected to behave. It may also be a sign that you have too high expectations of yourself or others. This can result in a feeling that nothing you or others do is good enough, resulting in you pushing yourself and those around you harder and harder to reach goals which may not be realistic.



Finally...

We hope that this booklet will give you some ideas which will help you feel more in control of your life. Some of them may be more helpful than others, give yourself time to try them out to see what best works with you.

However, if after trying to use these strategies you feel things are still getting on top of you, it may be worth going to see your GP.

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