

## Stress

Today's demands and pressures guarantee that all human beings will experience stress. Stress is simply a by-product of life. The encouraging part of this picture is that we can learn how to control or manage "excess" stress.

### What is Stress

Stress is our emotional and physical response to changes, events, and situations. People experience stress in different ways and for different reasons. The reaction is based on our perception of an event or situation. Many different situations or life events can cause stress. Even those events which we see as enjoyable, such as holidays, moving home, parenthood, Christmas etc. Stress is something that is part of normal life, in that it is experienced by everyone from time-to-time. It is not dangerous, in fact short term stress can be helpful, motivating and enables optimal performance. However, ongoing, excessive, unmanaged stress can impact our ability to function properly, and we may begin to suffer from harmful effects. Although, stress isn't a psychiatric diagnosis, it can cause mental health problems, and make existing problems worse, so it is important to recognise and adapt.

The key is to develop an awareness of how you interpret, and react to, circumstances. This awareness will help you develop coping techniques for managing stress, enabling you to handle it more effectively.

### Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Stress can come from a huge range of sources (stressors) but can be categorised into four basic areas:

- **Environmental** (e.g., weather, pollution, noise, season changes)
- **Social** (e.g., work related issues, study pressures, daily responsibilities and decisions, family demands, others' expectations of you, life changes)
- **Physiological** (e.g., coping with illness, injuries, poor nutrition, sleep disturbances)
- **Cognitive** (thoughts e.g., need to be "perfect", interpretation of others' reactions, expectations we place on ourselves)

Some people do not even notice that they are stressed until symptoms begin to occur, which can be experienced in four ways:

- **Physical:** appetite change, headaches, tightness in jaw, neck, shoulders, chest, stomach aches including diarrhoea, pounding heart, chest pains, memory loss or poor concentration, teeth grinding, sleep problems, hypertension, etc.
- **Emotional:** frustration, depression, mood swings, quick to anger, irritability, defensiveness etc.
- **Social/Behavioural:** withdrawing from others, increased irritation with others, etc.
- **Mental/Cognitive:** difficulty solving problems, difficulty making decisions, difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, negative attitude, denial: believe nothing is wrong, regularly criticise and complain, withdrawal: Avoid situations, catastrophise, overly suspicious, etc.

These symptoms reduce quality of life, and people suffering from stress may notice that work performance or relationships suffer more as a result.

The onset of unhealthy stress is similar to blowing air into a balloon. If you blow and blow more air into the balloon without any controlled outlet, eventually the balloon explodes in an unpredictable and destructive fashion. However, if you blow air in, stopping periodically to let some air out, and blow more air in, you can repeat the process indefinitely without any negative consequences. Managing stress is a similar process. Learning to recognise the physical and psychological warning signs and to intervene with healthy coping skills is an important life skill.

## Managing Stress

As noted earlier, you can learn to manage stress. The first step is understanding yourself better - how you react in different situations, what causes you stress, and how you behave when you feel stressed.

Once you've done that, take the following steps:

**Set priorities.** Make a To-Do list. Decide what is really important to get done today, and what can wait. This helps you to know that you are working on your most immediate priorities, and you don't have the stress of trying to remember what you should be doing.

**Practice facing stressful moments.** Think about the event or situation you expect to face and rehearse your reactions. Find ways to practice dealing with the challenge. If you know that speaking in front of a group frightens you, practice doing it, perhaps with a trusted friend or fellow student. If the pressure of taking tests causes you to freeze up, buy some practice tests at the school bookstore or online and work with them when there are no time pressures.

**Examine expectations.** Try to set realistic goals. It's good to push yourself to achieve, but make sure your expectations are realistic. Watch out for perfectionism. Be satisfied with doing the best you can. Allow people the freedom to make mistakes, and remember that mistakes can be a good teacher.

**Live a healthy lifestyle.** Get plenty of exercise. Eat healthy foods. Allow time for rest and relaxation. Find a relaxation technique that works for you - yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises. Look for the humour in life, and enjoy yourself. Learn to accept change as a part of life. Nothing stays the same.

**Develop a support system.** You wouldn't let someone you care about suffer, and guess what, your friends and relatives feel the same, so talk to them when needed.

**Believe in yourself and love yourself.** Period.

## More Information and Support

We sometimes underestimate the impact of stressors in our life. We can handle a lot without falling apart, but at the end of the day we are only human. So, it may be time to consider seeking assistance if any of the signs or symptoms of stress identified are occurring on a regular basis and appropriate strategies fail to bring necessary relief.

Speak with your GP, they may refer you to a local mental health provider (like Motivated Minds) or to an IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) service, social prescribing, or offer you medication.

### Disclaimer

This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your personal situation.