

What is stress?

Stress is something we all encounter at sometime either in our home life or at work. Stress means different things to different people. A definition of stress provided by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is, it is: "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them."

Pressure is not all bad we need it to motivate us to succeed in our day to day activities otherwise we would decline into apathy. One persons challenge however is another one's stress. In any one person the effect of pressure will be influenced by a variety of factors including support systems at home and work, personality and coping mechanisms.

Identifying my Personal Stressors

Many people are afraid of admitting to feeling stressed and struggle on until they reach the point that they can no longer cope .One of the most effective ways of managing stress is to be aware of the early warning signs, identify potential causes and look for ways to resolve them .Some of the most common causes of stress are; workplace issues, family, health concerns, unrealistic expectations and sudden traumatic events. The signs and symptoms of stress can vary from individual to individual and the following table is an example of a few of these.

Behaviour Changes may include: Sleep disturbance Change in eating habits Smoking or drinking more Avoiding friend and family Avoiding social activities Difficulty following instructions	Physical symptoms may include: Tiredness, headaches, aching muscles Indigestion and nausea Palpitations Constipation/diarrhoea Skin problems Sexual problems
Mental symptoms may include : Being more indecisive Finding it hard to concentrate Forgetful Feelings of inadequacy Prone to errors	Emotional symptoms may include; Getting irritable or angry Increased anxiety Feeling numb Being hypersensitive Feeling drained and exhausted. Tearfulness

How can I help myself?

Positive thinking - When feeling stressed it easy to focus on negative occurrences and forget any positives and to feel isolated from others. Stress management comes down to finding ways to change your thinking and managing your expectations. Ways in which you can do this is by;

- Try to spend time at the end of each focusing on the positive things in your life.
- Reflect on what you have done and what you've achieved, rather than spending time.
- Worrying about what still needs to be done.

It is hard to be perfect all the time. Good enough is also satisfactory. If mistakes occur concentrate on the learning points rather than beating yourself up over the mistakes, learn from the experience and move on.

Get together with family or friends and arrange trips and activities you enjoy doing. Keep the fun and humour in life.

Exercise - A healthy lifestyle which incorporates exercise and a balanced diet will assist in managing some of the symptoms which occur in the body when an individual is stressed. Exercise is a great way to relieve physical and mental tension. Consider these activities, walking, swimming, jogging, cycling or aerobics. For longer term health impact we should all take at least 30 minutes of physical exercise on most days of the week.

Diet - One of the main issues with stress is that it can cause unhealthy eating habits; stress makes the body crave foods that are high in fats and sugars. Certain foods and drinks may also affect how the body responds to stress and reviewing your eating habits may help manage this response. Some top tips on healthy eating are; avoid eating on the run or missing meals, reduce refined foods and processed foods, these are high in sugar, reduce caffeine intake, which includes tea, coffee and chocolates these are stimulants, avoid alcohol as this can act as a depressant and increase fresh fruit and vegetable intake.

Relaxation - For many people finding the time and the opportunity to relax can be very difficult. It is important however that we try to build in making time for ourselves as part of our daily routine. Relaxation is the natural answer to coping with stress. Make time in the day to relax it. Think of activities which you may find relaxing e.g listening to music, reading, having a warm bath, watching a funny film or a short walk. You might like to consider; relaxation tapes, aromatherapy, massage or meditation.

Managing your time - There are only 168 hours in one week do you frequently wish there were more? You may be experiencing stress because your life has become out of balance. You may be spending too much time and energy on work or on caring for others at the expense of your own health and well-being. The following strategies can help you to live a more balanced and stress-free life:

Plan your day and your week around YOU. Manage your time rather than it manages you.

Learn to prioritise. Be realistic about what you can achieve. Make a list of things you have to do on any given day. Do what is urgent/important first and realise that some things can wait until later.

Take time out .Book time in your day to unwind and reflect, it will help recharge your batteries and get things into perspective. Make sure you take your dinner breaks.

Plan and book your vacation time. Use it don't lose it.

Speak to you manager about your commitments and ask for their support in improving your work life balance. Request to go on a time management course.

Try to leave your work at work. Spend 5 minutes making a list of what still needs to be done at the end of your work day and leave it to review the next morning.

Communication with others - Talking through something that is bothering you with someone you trust can often relieve pressure. Think of individuals who care about you and with whom you can share your most personal thoughts. Open up to your managers at work or your partners at home about what is causing you stress. Talking to people is a good way to beat stress because it helps us see the problem more clearly. Different perspectives may provide solutions that hadn't previously been considered.

Other tips - Here are some other tips in managing stress in you every day life:

- Get enough sleep-this will ensure you can meet each day's challenges with energy and alertness
- Do not accept substitutes for stress reduction. Moderate or eliminate your intake of alcohol and tobacco
- If you are struggling with work talk to your line manager or human resource contact.

When to get outside help

Stress is not an illness but if it becomes excessive and prolonged making it difficult to function as normal it's worth seeing you doctor as symptoms of physical or mental ill health may develop or become aggravated. Your GP will be able to spot the physical symptoms of stress and he may also want to do some tests to exclude certain other conditions.

Sources of Support

Further support is available from your manager, HR, the employee assistance programme, active energy , your local Occupational Health Practitioner, and your general practitioner. Please see the attached PDF file for contact numbers e-mail addresses and further information on support available.