

Managing Stress in your Life

What is stress?

We become stressed when we experience difficulties meeting life's demands. This can lead to feelings of being overloaded, tense and worried. Stress can be very useful at times as it helps us lift our level of performance to meet the demands that maybe place on us by others from time to time. Such demands might include having to get a project finished on time, doing a presentation or talk to a group of people or getting a lot of tasks completed in a short period of time.

When we experience this type of short term stress our body releases hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. These hormones increase our heart rate, breathing and blood pressure which help us respond to the demands we might be facing. This reaction is often called the fight flight response. What this means is that when we are faced with an immediate threat, such as public speaking, our body reacts automatically to respond to the threat by either confronting it (Fight) or avoiding or running away from it (Flight). Once the threat has past (we finish the talk) our breathing, heart rate and blood pressure returns to normal.

Of course what one person perceives as a threat may not be seen as a threat by someone else. As we become more skilled and develop more confidence in coping with such situations and demands, the less stress we are likely to experience. However if we experience constant stress over long periods of time our performance and health can start to deteriorate.

What are the signs of Stress?

When we experience stress over long periods of time our ability to cope with day to day situations becomes less and less. Some of the changes or symptoms that can occur in those who experience stress for long periods of time are:

- Tension headaches
- Disturbed sleep
- Upset stomach, indigestion, diarrhoea
- Unable to relax
- Touchy, easily upset

- Nervy, jumpy, fidgety
- Irritability, outbursts of anger,
- Intolerant of interruptions or delay
- Fatigue
- Feeling overwhelmed and out of control
- Moody, tearful
- Difficulty concentrating, poor memory
- Demand for more precise instructions
- Lack of confidence and low self-esteem
- Increased smoking or alcohol consumption
- Deteriorating relationships with colleagues

Long term stress can also have a negative effect on our health causing weight gain, high blood pressure, diabetes, a weakened immune system and heart disease.

How common is stress?

In a recent study conducted by the Australian Psychological society it was found that stress amongst Australians is on the rise with nearly a quarter of respondents surveyed reporting moderate to severe levels of stress. One in five Australians reported that stress was having a strong to very strong impact on their mental health and almost half Australians reported using alcohol to help manage stress.

What causes of stress?

Financial issues were the leading cause of stress for Australians with 50% indicating that this was a major cause of stress for them. Family issues, health issues and trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle were a concern for just under half of Australians, while workplace and relationship issues were also identified as a major source of stress.

Managing stress (Looking after yourself)

There are a number of things we can do to manage stress in our lives. I'm going to cover my favourite top five strategies for reducing stress.

1. What can I get rid of?

Many people try to pack too much in to their day or take on more responsibilities than they are capable of delivering well on. Don't be frightened to say no to the requests of others if you are feeling overloaded. Take a moment and reflect on what you are currently trying to pack into a day or week and ask yourself;

- Is there anything I can let go of?
- Is there anyone I can ask to help me?
- What is the worst thing that will happen if I don't get everything done in time and how bad will that really be?

2. Practice Good Time management

We experience less stress when we manage our time well. This means getting your priorities right and understanding the difference between what is urgent, important and trivial or time wasting. Setting priorities starts with setting your own goals. These are things that are important and need to be done. However, often we find ourselves taking on task that relate to other people's goals that maybe important for them but not for us. Learning to say no can be very useful in ensuring that you focus on the important tasks first. Before you agree to take on a task consider the following

- Use your schedule and explain why you are unable to attend to the request
- Be honest but firm
- Provide options
- Know why before saying yes
- Don't feel obligated

3. Lower your expectations

For many people, a major source of stress is their own expectations. It is normal to have expectations about how we would like things to be. At the same time our expectations can sometimes be unrealistic based on the circumstances or situation we find ourselves in. For example, is it reasonable to expect that you get to a meeting on time if you are caught in traffic? Is it reasonable to expect that you should never be inconvenienced by others? Or that everything should always go smoothly and according to your plans? Obviously not, but when we have a lot going on in our lives we often get frustrated when we experience delays and interruptions that are a normal part of life.

When you feel yourself getting frustrated and stressed because things are not going the way you would like them to, here are a couple of useful things you can do to manage your stress and stay in control.

Breath! When we get stressed we take shorter breaths and our body tenses. Taking regular steady breaths can help reduce the stress in your body very quickly. Try this

exercise. Breathe in and out through your nose. As you breathe in say ...”In 2-3”, and as you breathe out say “Relax 2-3”. As you say relax to yourself, feel your body fall into a relaxed state letting all the tension go. Repeat this for one minute.

Use coping statements: Changing your internal dialogue from “*This is terrible!*” or “*I can’t handle this*”, to something more constructive can be very helpful when you are feeling stress. The following are useful coping statements

- Where is it written that people should operate in my time frame?
- What’s the worst thing that will happen here if it is not done in time and how bad will it really be?
- Interruptions are a normal part of life
- This is not the worst thing that could happen to me so just relax and let it go
- Getting tense and upset is not going to make this happen any faster, I’m just going to breath and relax

4. Problem Solving

When we are feeling stressed or overwhelmed about a particular situation it is useful to step back and reflect on the different approaches you can use to solve the problem. Because it is hard to think clearly when we experiencing stress about a particular situation, talking to a close friend or seeking advice from a professional can help you explore a range of options. Consider the following steps when problem solving

- Identify the cause of the problem that needs to be addressed and not the symptoms.
- Identify your ideal but realistic outcome. What will things look like when the problem is solved?
- List as many creative solutions that you can come up with and consider the pros and cons
- Make a decision and act on it. Avoid procrastinating

5. Looking after your general health

When we are feeling fit and well we are better able to cope with the challenges of daily life. If you are currently experiencing stress or simple wish to avoid feeling stressed, consider the following health tips.

- Get plenty of regular exercise. Exercise reduces stress and increases your natural immune system
- Avoid or reduce your intake of caffeinated drinks such as coffee and energy drinks. Too much caffeine can set off a stress response as it stimulates the adrenal glands causing highs and lows throughout the day.
- Avoid sugary foods. They can give you a quick burst of energy, but often leave you feeling flat and lethargic.
- If you are still smoking, stop it! Nicotine actually increases anxiety and stress.
- Develop good sleeping habits
- Schedule regular social catch up. Having a good network of friends is good for your mental health.
- Schedule in activities that you find enjoyable and relaxing