

## Stress

Stress is a process, not a diagnosis. We experience stress when there is an imbalance between the demands being made on us and our resources to cope with those demands. The level and extent of stress a person may feel depends a great deal on their attitude to a particular situation. An event that may be extremely stressful for one person can be a mere hiccup in another person's life.

You may feel under pressure to do something and fear you may fail. The more important the outcome, the more stressed you feel. You can feel stressed by external situations (too much work, children misbehaving) and by internal triggers (the way you think about external situations).

Stress is not always a bad thing. Some people thrive on stress and even need it to get things done. When the term 'stress' is used in a clinical sense, it refers to a situation that causes discomfort and distress for a person and can lead to other mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.

Stress may also contribute to physical illness such as cardiovascular disease. When stress turns into a serious illness, it is important to get professional help as soon as possible. Untreated anxiety disorders can lead to serious depression.

### Effects of stress

Stress affects us in many ways, including:

- Emotionally – anxiety, depression, tension, anger
- The way we think – poor concentration, forgetfulness, indecisiveness, apathy, hopelessness
- Behaviourally – increased drinking and smoking, insomnia, accident proneness, weight problems, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, nervousness, gambling.

### Your response to stress

Your attitude, personality and approach to life will influence how you respond to stress. Factors that play a part include:

- How you think about a problem
- How anxious you feel generally
- How severely the problem affects you
- Whether you have experienced anything like this before
- Whether you can control what is happening
- How long the event affects you
- How important the outcome is to you
- The different ways a person copes with difficult situations
- Your life experiences and life history
- Your self-esteem
- Whether you have people around who can provide support.

### Stress as a health problem

As a health problem, stress occurs when a person feels that the demands made on them exceed their ability to cope. Factors contributing to a person feeling stressed might include:

- Environment (work, home, school)
- Lifestyle
- Emotional and personal problems.

## **Stress and physical illness**

When we feel under stress, our body kicks into high gear to deal with the threat. Our heartbeat, breathing rate and blood pressure all go up. The longer we feel stressed, the greater the demand on our body.

The more often we are placed under stress, the more often we have to use energy to cope. There is growing evidence that stress may contribute to physical illness such as cardiovascular disease (although this link remains controversial and research is ongoing), high blood pressure, proneness to infection and chronic fatigue.

Whatever the cause, physical diseases need appropriate medical management before any attempt is made at stress management. Discuss with your doctor how stress management may be used to support treatment of your physical symptoms.

## **Stress and anxiety**

Untreated stress can turn into a mental illness such as an anxiety disorder or depression.

Almost everyone experiences some anxiety. This is normal. However, an anxiety disorder is different from everyday anxiety – it is more severe, can persist and may interfere with a person's daily life.

Common anxiety disorders include:

- Panic disorder
- Specific phobias – such as fear of flying or of spiders
- Agoraphobia – fear of public places or of being away from home
- Social anxiety disorder – fear of the scrutiny and judgement of others
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – following a real and very distressing event such as a disaster, accident, war, torture, violent death or assault.

Other, less common, anxiety disorders include:

- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Acute stress disorder
- Generalised anxiety disorder – the person is constantly worried, often about irrational things, and cannot be reassured.

Anxiety is a very treatable condition. There are many different psychological and medication options. Treatments need to be individually decided on and regularly reviewed to make sure they are effective and to minimise side effects of medications. Separately and in combination, psychotherapy and medication therapy generally produce good results.

## **Untreated anxiety disorders and depression**

Untreated anxiety disorders can lead to serious depression. Depressive illness is common – about 17 per cent of Australians will suffer from depression at some time in their life.

Depression is about twice as common in women as in men. The most common time in life for people to suffer from depression is in their 40s. However, it can develop at any age. Depression is often associated with an increased incidence of suicide. The annual suicide rate for people with depression is three or four times higher than that of other psychiatric disorders.

## **Stress at work**

Stress in the workplace is common and is caused by many different factors, including excessive hours, conflicts with others and feelings of isolation. The amount of stress a person experiences is often determined by whether or not they can accept that some things in life will simply never be sorted out to their satisfaction. For example, a person may feel stressed by the way they are treated by their employer or by the behaviour of a work colleague.

Sometimes, this stress can be resolved by dealing with the particular behaviour. In many organisations, there are processes to deal with workplace problems like harassment, victimisation or unfair treatment. In many cases, the problem can be resolved if the behaviour is changed.

However, some problems will never be fully resolved and you may have to accept them. For example, if someone who you think is poorly qualified is given a job you felt entitled to, you may continue to feel stressed, unless you are able to let go of that grievance and move on.

## Management of stress

The old adage 'prevention is better than cure' is certainly true for stress management. It will help if you:

- Exercise regularly – regular exercise is a great way to manage stress. You should do some form of exercise that causes you to feel puffed afterwards – a leisurely stroll to the bus stop is not enough! Have at least 20 minutes of exercise three times a week
- Avoid conflict – avoid situations that make you feel stressed such as unnecessary arguments and conflict (although ignoring a problem is not always the best way to reduce stress). Assertiveness is fine but becoming distressed is not
- Relax – give yourself some time to relax each day and try to spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself
- Eat well – a nutritious diet is important. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and avoid sweet and fatty foods
- Sleep – a good sleep routine is essential. If you have difficulty falling asleep, do something calm and relaxing before you go to bed like listening to music or reading
- Enjoy your life – it's important to make time to have some fun and to get a balance in your life.

To deal with stress more effectively, it helps to investigate your stresses and how you react to them. Try to:

- Understand what situations make you feel stressed
- Understand what situations you can and can't control
- Prepare for stressful events in advance, by thinking about the future
- Keep yourself healthy with good nutrition, exercise and regular relaxation
- Try to do happy things every day.

## Getting help for stress

You should see your doctor or community health centre if:

- You feel stressed often
- Particular things stress you and you feel they are beyond your control
- You feel your reactions to stress are extreme or worry you
- You feel anxious or depressed about stress.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychologist or counsellor
- Community mental health service
- Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria) Tel. (03) 9826 1422 (Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm)

- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Suicide Helpline Tel. 1300 651 251
- Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria: OCD and Anxiety Helpline Tel. (03) 9830 0533 or 1300 ANXIETY (269 438)

## Things to remember

- Stress is when you feel under pressure to do something and think you will fail.
- A balanced lifestyle and coping strategies can help you manage stress.
- Issues that cause stress cannot always be resolved but changing your expectations of a problem may help.
- Untreated stress can lead to serious illness.
- It's important to get help if you feel you can't cope.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Mental Health Foundation of Australia

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