



Stress reduction

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a normal human response with which most of us are familiar. Low or intermittent amounts of stress can be positive, as it enables us to achieve more and increases motivation. Higher levels of stress, however, can mean that we feel overwhelmed. Often we feel stressed when things are unpredictable or when we feel insecure, such as when a relationship is not going well. Chronic situations that demand a lot from us, such as caring for a child with a disability or looking after ageing parents can be very stressful. Sometimes stress results from having too many responsibilities and tasks, particularly if there are deadlines to be met.

Stress seems to be our bodies' way of letting us know that we are overloaded and prompting us to do something to relieve the situation.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Being stressed affects us in a number of ways.

Common physical symptoms of stress are headaches, muscle tension, stomach upsets, nausea, heart palpitations, fatigue and sweating.

Emotional signs may include tearfulness, irritability, loss of confidence, anxiety, depression, and loss of enthusiasm.

Effects on thinking may include difficulty making decisions, poor judgement, negativity, reduced concentration and impaired short term memory.

The symptoms of stress can also impact on other areas of your life. Stress can affect appetite, sleep, time management or relationships. In trying to cope with stress, many people increase their use of things like caffeine, nicotine, alcohol or other drugs.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF STRESS?

When we are stressed, our mind perceives the situation as a threat, and our body responds by preparing us to either escape from or fight the threat: known as the "fight/flight" response. Our muscles become tense, our breathing speeds up, our heart rate increases and we may start sweating. The muscle tension can cause pain and weakness in the body and tension headaches. If stress continues to be severe and long term, it has a more chronic harmful effect on the muscles and organs and can affect the immune system. This can make us more vulnerable to illness and take longer to recover.

Stress is frequently a common factor in the development of anxiety disorders and depression. When we are stressed, we have less capacity for important areas of our development such as learning, thinking about the broad issues in life and personal development and growth.

REDUCING STRESS

Because of the effects of stress, there are good reasons to take active steps to reduce stress, thereby becoming healthier and feeling more in control.

Stress can be largely externally generated by, for example, increased pressures of work coinciding with having to care for a sick child. Alternatively, stress can be internally generated by, for example, putting too much pressure on ourselves to succeed, perfectionism or obsessive worrying. Sometimes both internal and external elements contribute to our feeling stressed.

Think about what contributes most to your stress. If the stress is largely because of what you are telling yourself, or the expectations you put on yourself, then the most effective strategies to reduce stress will be to try and address this aspect of your personality.

WHAT HELPS TO REDUCE STRESS?

Internally generated stress:

- Gently start to "re-train" your mind: challenge the thought that everything has to be done perfectly, or that people will like you more if you volunteer for every job going.
- Stop "worry" thoughts by gently reminding yourself that worry does not achieve anything tangible. Distract your mind when you notice that you have started worrying by doing something physical or listen attentively to calming music.
- Learn a relaxation or meditation technique. Meditation gives you an insight into the mind and helps you to gently control where it is going!
- If you find it hard to shift your usual track of thinking, some professional counselling can be useful to teach you these techniques.

Stress related to an on-going situation that you cannot change:

- Learn a relaxation or meditation technique. You will need to provide support for yourself over a long period, and relaxation provides a state of deep rest and rejuvenation, as well as giving the mind a rest from your daily concerns.

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- Build in “me” time where you timetable an activity that you enjoy each week.
- Exercise will undo some of the physical damage caused by stress as well as providing some time for the mind to ramble. Exercise is also a good preventative for depression. Stick with a daily exercise routine, even if it is only a short walk every day. To stick with this routine can also help you feel that some things in your life are still in your control, even when everything else is going haywire.

Stress related to a current crisis situation:

The same strategies apply as per on-going situations that you cannot change.

Stress related to having too many demands on our time:

- Check whether you are adding to these by expecting too much of yourself or having to do everything to your own high standards.
- Something has got to go! Sit down at the first opportunity and make a decision about what tasks or responsibilities you will eliminate from your life.
- Be prepared for how you will say “No, sorry, not at this time” when asked to undertake extra tasks. If you find it hard to be assertive and say no when put on the spot, learn to ask for some time to think about the request.
- If the demands are all from one area in your life such as work or family, you may actually need to add another activity to add spice or interest to your life. Take up painting, pottery, marathon running, yoga, singing or whatever it is that you have always wanted to try.

Stress related to having to make a major and difficult decision in your life:

- One or two professional counselling sessions could be useful here to help with some decision making strategies.
- Talk to a trusted friend or relation. Sometimes talking out a problem can help to clarify the issues involved. If, however, you find yourself repeating the same story, then it is probably time to actually make a decision and act.
- Practise relaxation or meditation. This gives your mind a break from endlessly going over your options and will help you to make a decision.

WHAT DOESN'T HELP TO REDUCE STRESS?

Often when we're feeling stressed we lack energy and then consume too much sugar, caffeine and junk food. Overindulgence in these foods actually increases the physical symptoms of stress as well as leaving the body depleted of the valuable foods it needs to cope with stress. Alternatively, the stomach and gut can be so tensed because of stress that we don't feel hungry. It is important to eat a healthy diet when stressed, with lots of fresh food. It can be tempting to increase our use of alcohol, smoking or other drugs when stressed. A small amount of alcohol can be relaxing, but if it is relied on as your only way of reducing stress, then over time you could become dependent on the alcohol. There are better and less dangerous ways to reduce stress than using alcohol or other drugs for this purpose.

Similarly while prescribed tranquillisers such as Valium or Xanax, may reduce the symptoms of anxiety or stress, can only be safely taken for a few weeks because of the risk of dependency. If you are taking these medications, it is critical to have a discussion with your doctor before changing your dose.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

- Counselling is available through psychologists or social workers and a Medicare rebate is now available for up to 12 sessions a year if you have a GP referral. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is an effective therapy for anxiety and stress.
- Reconnexion provides specialist counselling for anxiety and depression in Melbourne. Contact www.reconnexion.org.au (Ph: 03 9886 9400).
- The Australian Psychological Society (APS) can be contacted for a list of psychologists in your local area. (Toll Free 1800 333 497). Beyondblue also publishes a list of clinical psychologists and doctors with special training on their website. www.beyondblue.org
- Your local Community Health Services may provide anxiety management or relaxation groups.
- Explore your local area for relaxation classes, meditation courses or yoga schools. These can usually be found in the Yellow Pages, the local paper or on the internet. Reconnexion conducts a 7 week meditation course four times a year. Relaxation tapes can be found in bookshops or some yoga centres.