

Stress and Anxiety



If you're having difficulty sleeping, if you're feeling unusually irritated with your partner, if you're drinking a little more than usual, if you're feeling isolated and lonely, if you're struggling with work deadlines; if you're experiencing any of these symptoms and many besides but aren't quite sure what the matter is, there's a good chance you're suffering from stress.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has estimated that a total of 13.5 million working days were lost in 2007/08 due to work-related stress, depression and anxiety. If the picture at work isn't very encouraging, home life isn't much better.

According to government statistics, one in three households in Britain is now occupied by only one person. The gradual erosion of community and family structures underpinning that statistic has led to a loss of social support that has left millions feeling increasingly lonely, vulnerable ... and stressed.

When stress mounts, it can turn into anxiety, which can have a debilitating impact on both long-term physical and emotional

wellbeing. At the extreme end of the spectrum lie so-called anxiety disorders, which almost always require professional help.

But the good news is that there is an awful lot that we can do to take responsibility for our levels of stress and anxiety. We can't always do something about the demands that are placed on us, but we can always do something about how we respond. If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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What exactly is stress?

In a sense, defining stress shouldn't be a problem, given how much we talk about it. Yet it can be surprisingly hard to pin down, largely because it means so many different things to so many different people.

One of the founding fathers of modern stress research, Hans Selye, tried to sum it up in 1956: "Stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." But it gets more complicated if we take into account that what will seem "exhilarating" for one person could easily feel overpowering for the next. Recent definitions have focused much more on the fact that stress is not determined just by events in the outside world, but by how each individual perceives them.

The International Stress Management Association (ISMA) describes stress as:

- ▶ The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them.
- ▶ Where those pressures are subjectively felt to have importance.
- ▶ Where those pressures exceed the person's current perceived resources and coping ability.

Put simply, we're in trouble when the stresses that we face are putting us under more pressure than we can easily deal with. And the longer it goes on, the worse it can get.

The stress you need...

But before we examine how overwhelmed we can feel by stress, it's worth remembering that a certain amount of basic stress, or pressure, is something that we really cannot do without.

If we look at the human body, the parasympathetic nervous system governs rest and relaxation, allowing our body to save energy and restore itself. External pressure or stresses, on the other hand, engage the sympathetic nervous system.

When that happens, stress hormones such as adrenaline are

released into our blood stream, our blood pressure increases, our heart beats slightly faster, our muscles contract, and we're ready for action.

This reaction has become known as the "Fight of Flight response", and it's essential to our survival. Our caveman ancestors needed it to fight off physical threats; we need it to deal with the everyday pressures of the modern world. If our bodies didn't recognize any form of stress, we'd probably never make it out of bed.

And the stress you don't

These days, stresses are not necessarily life-threatening, but in an increasingly competitive and complex world, they can and do come at us from many different directions, both as external pressures and internal worries.

The bad news is that we have not evolved to distinguish between the two. The subconscious mind, for instance, does not discern the difference between an actual stressful event and the mental preoccupation with a potentially stressful event. Both can be equally overwhelming.

We can, therefore, have many of the same physical reactions to both real and perceived stresses. In practice, this means that a threat to our lives will register in much the same way as, say, a threat to our jobs. Fear of being physically hurt can have a very similar effect to the fear of being alone.

Stress can also be strangely comforting, in that it actually gives us something to think about. All of us want to feel occupied and valuable, so it can be easy to confuse being stressed with being important, busy and useful.

But whatever the motives for our stresses, or however we perceive them, a prolonged exposure to this reaction can lead to all sorts of unhealthy physical, emotional, mental and behavioural symptoms.

Understanding anxiety

Just like stress, anxiety can be hard to define. It can feel like a free-floating sense of unease or it can be sudden and extreme. Some sources use the terms stress and anxiety interchangeably, whereas others treat anxiety as a symptom

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of stress. For the sake of simplicity, we can identify three different types.

Fear – a feeling that we experience in the face of threatening or difficult situations. Just like stress, it helps us recognise dangerous situations and motivates us to address problems, but becomes debilitating in the long term if not processed.

Panic – an unexpected surge of negative feeling and acute anxiety, characterized by an inability to think and a desire to escape the situation that you are in immediately.

Phobia – a constant, extreme or irrational fear of an animal, object, place or situation that would not normally worry the majority of people.

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can help us deal with difficult situations such as confrontations and tests. It actually helps us cope. But if it becomes excessive and chronic, it can develop into a disabling disorder. Major types of anxiety disorders include:

General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) - chronic anxiety, exaggerated worry and tension

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) - characterized by recurrent, unwanted thoughts and/or repetitive behaviors such as hand washing



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – can follow exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.

If you feel that you might be suffering from any of these disorders, it is vital that you call the CiC Confidential Care

Adviceline. A trained and experienced therapist will talk over your symptoms with you and help you think about the best way forward (see below).

Warning signs

Some symptoms of stress, like panic attacks and extreme tension, are easy to spot. There are, however, a whole range of cumulative symptoms that can creep up on or us without our really realising what's going on. They can be:

Physical : fatigue, headaches, back pain, insomnia, indigestion, cramps, constipation, diarrhoea, sweatiness, sleeping too much

Mental: forgetfulness, poor concentration, boredom, paranoia, perfectionism

Emotional: irritability, depression, mood swings, apathy, increased sensitivity to criticism

Relational: loneliness, withdrawal, intolerance, relationship problems

Behavioural: substance abuse, eating problems, overwork, procrastination

Spiritual: sense of emptiness, loss of beliefs and sense of meaning, cynicism.

Learning to spot the warning signs is the first step to dealing effectively with stress. People who are unaware of what is happening to them are much more likely to resort unthinkingly to negative coping strategies, such as heavy drinking, overeating, overspending and overwork.

While these behaviours may provide some initial relief, they actually run us down even further, pushing us into a descending spiral of ever more ineffective attempts to cope with ever intensifying levels of stress.

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Once you've recognised the symptoms, it is also crucial to remember that they are perfectly normal responses to life's pressures. This will stop you from falling into the trap of thinking something is "wrong" with you for feeling this way and put you quickly into a position to do something constructive about it.

Constructive coping strategies

Believe it or not, we are actually very well equipped to deal with stressful events. Researchers have found that even when it comes to intensely traumatic experiences, the majority of people have the resources to come to terms with what has happened.

Nevertheless, prolonged exposure to stress without adequate rest or relaxation can eventually have devastating results, such as burnout. There are, however, many ways in which we can take responsibility for our levels of stress and anxiety.

We can be a lot more resilient than we realize!

Be honest with yourself. Acknowledge that you are entitled to your reactions, whatever they may be. You also need to identify your own limits. No one else will!

Get support. Research has shown that social support is by far and away the most effective weapon against stress.

People can isolate when they're stressed in an attempt to preserve energy. Don't do it, it's vital not to lose touch with friends or other members of any social or religious groups that you belong to.

Give support. Getting involved with helping others can lift your spirits and restore a sense of meaning and purpose. Take care of your body. Get plenty of sleep, eat a balanced diet and schedule time for exercise. Physical activity improves the flow of blood to the brain, helping you think more clearly. Even a half-hour walk a day will do the trick. Exercise is also another great way to release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers and feel-good hormones. There is also evidence that fit people are better able to handle the long-term effects of stress.

Don't forget to breathe. We tend to fall into shallow breathing when we're stressed, which causes muscle tension, fatigue,

and even more stress. Deep abdominal breathing is a wonderful way to relieve anxiety.

Manage your time. Set realistic goals for what you have to do and when. The tasks ahead will become a lot less frightening if you've planned ahead. Writing a "to-do" list for the next day just before you go to bed, you'll sleep a lot better!

Manage your money. Keeping track of your expenditure, sticking to a realistic budget, or drawing up a workable debt repayment plan if necessary will take a lot of the worry out of holiday finances. (CiC can put you in touch with expert debt consultants.)

Make time for yourself. Take up a hobby, listen to some music, or just read a book. Any of these activities will give you space to restore your sense of self and recover from the pressures around you. Be creative and experiment with what works for you. Thinking about what you loved to do as a child can be a helpful guide.

Start accepting change. Family ties, friendships and work relationships are constantly shifting. Interests that were once shared can develop in different directions. If you can accept these changes, both in yourself and in others, your relationships will deepen and expand into a source of renewed joy and pleasure instead of stress. And remember, no one is perfect.

Seek professional help if you need it. If you feel that despite all your efforts stress is getting the better of you, there are lots of people who can help.

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