Stress and you

How to cope with stresses and strains of daily life

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workplace health

Bringing health to life

It seems impossible to avoid being stressed these days but it is possible to learn how to recognise the signs and symptoms and to manage them effectively.

Anyone can become stressed for a number of reasons – increased workload, redundancy, divorce, death of a loved one, financial worries, the list is endless.

In the short term some pressure may be beneficial, making us more alert and helping us perform better in certain situations.

But excessive, prolonged or overwhelming pressure can lead to debilitating illnesses such as heart disease or strokes and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

Recognising signs and symptoms of stress

Physical symptoms may include:

- **Feeling tired all the time**
- **Aches/pains/frequent headaches/ stomach problems**
- **Nausea/panic attacks/palpitations**
- **Changes in eating/sleeping habits**
- **Skin conditions – eczema/rashes/ allergies**
- **Colds/flu/infections**

Emotional symptoms may include:

- **Moods swings – feeling angry/ low/frustrated/tearful/irritable/ overwhelmed**
- **Feeling a loss of control or lack of motivation**
- **Loss of sex drive**
- **Worrying excessively about issues such as home, family, work or money**
- **Inability to concentrate**
- **Loss of confidence**

Identify the causes of your stress

Many of us know we are stressed but we fail to work out what is causing it. Look at your daily activities to see what is stressing you out. Keep a log for a couple of days to identify your major stressors. Once you know your stressors, you can take steps to reduce them.

Lifestyle coping strategies

Looking after yourself doesn't require a total lifestyle overhaul. Even small changes can lift your mood, increase your energy and make you feel like you're back in the driving seat.

Take things one step at a time and, as you make more positive lifestyle choices, you'll soon notice a reduction in your stress levels, both at home and at work. However, if you continue to feel stressed, see your GP.

Positive lifetsyle choices

Move more: exercise is a powerful stress reliever. Any aerobic exercise that raises your heart rate and makes you sweat eg walking, jogging, cycling, swimming, is a hugely effective way to lift your mood, increase energy, sharpen focus and relax the mind and body. Aim for 30 minutes most days.

Eat well and often: low blood sugar can make you feel anxious and irritable while eating too much can make you lethargic. Eat small nutritious meals frequently to help your body maintain an even blood sugar, keep energy levels up and avoid mood swings.

Drink in moderation: alcohol temporarily reduces anxiety and worry but too much can cause anxiety as it wears off. Drinking to relieve stress may eventually lead to alcohol abuse and dependence.

Quit nicotine: smoking when you feel stressed or overwhelmed may seem calming but nicotine is a powerful stimulant leading to higher levels of anxiety. Smoking also increases the risk of serious illness such as cancer and heart disease.

Avoid street drugs: drugs such as cannabis or ecstasy may be taken to alleviate stress symptoms, but the body gets used to repeated use of a drug and higher and higher doses are needed to maintain the same effect.

Get enough sleep: stress and worry can cause insomnia but lack of sleep can leave you vulnerable to even more stress. Aim for 6 – 8 hours. Create a nightly ritual (eg prepare for bed in the same way every night), to get your brain ready for sleep, turn off electronic screens and make your bedroom as dark and quiet as possible.

Learn to relax: try relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, meditation or yoga. Stroking a pet, listening to music or having a bath can also help you relax.

Talk it out: discussing your problems with someone who is supportive and empathetic can help. They won't necessarily 'fix' your problems but when we connect with others, it has a positive effect on our emotions and helps reduce stress levels. If you have a specific problem, such as debt or relationship issues, seek professional help.

Practise mindfulness: this can be done anywhere and has been proven to reduce stress. It works by focusing your awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations.

Accept that nothing stays the same: change is inevitable and happening all the time but it's how you react to change that can affect how you feel. If something happens that is within your power to change it, do so. But if the situation is beyond your control, you need to accept this and move on. Spending time and energy worrying over issues which you have no control over will only lead to more stress.

Coping strategies for work related stress

Workplace stress is one of the biggest causes of employee absence but there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your stress levels at work.

Resist perfectionism: no project, situation or decision is ever perfect, so trying to attain perfection will create unnecessary stress. By setting unrealistic goals or trying to do too much, you're setting yourself up to fall short. Just aim to do your best.

Get organised: if you're always running late, set your clock or watch fast to give yourself extra time. If your desk is a mess, file and declutter; knowing where everything is saves time and cuts stress. Make 'to do' lists and cross off items as you accomplish them. Plan your day and stick to the schedule – you'll feel less overwhelmed.

Stop procrastinating: procrastination is a bedfellow of stress so don't put off starting projects. If a large project seems too daunting, break it down into small manageable steps rather than tackling it all at once.

Don't over commit yourself: avoid scheduling things back to back or trying to fit too much into one day. We often underestimate how long things will take. If you've got too much on your plate, drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them completely.

Prioritise tasks: Make a list of what you have to do and tackle them in order of importance. Do the high priority ones first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more pleasant.

Stop negative thinking: if you see the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative thinking colleagues – and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does!

Take time out: when stress is mounting at work, take a quick break and move away from the stressful situation. Stroll outside the workplace if possible, or spend a few minutes meditating in a quiet area. Physical movement or finding a quiet place to regain your balance can quickly reduce stress.

Don't try to control the uncontrollable: many things at work are beyond our control – particularly other people's behaviour. Rather than stressing over them, focus on things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.

Develop a support network at work: discuss any work related issues (as early as possible) with your line manager, HR or union representative or occupational health advisor. Under UK law, employers have a 'duty of care' to protect the health, safety and welfare of all employees.

Get a work/life balance: working long hours, increased workloads and lack of recognition from your employer can be damaging to your mental wellbeing. Feeling unhappy about the amount of time you spend at work and neglecting other aspects of your life may increase your vulnerability to stress and, if not addressed, may lead to more severe mental health issues. Renew your lifestyle regularly and prioritise the things that are important to you.

For more information about work related stress, visit the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) website at **www.hse.gov.uk/stress**

10 simple stress busting tips

1. **Meet a friend for a drink or chat on Skype or Facebook**

2. **Listen to music, read a book or go to the theatre or cinema**

3. **Watch a funny film or TV sitcom or your favourite comedian**

4. **Walk a dog (or just walk) to get some fresh air**

5. **Take a catnap**

6. **Pray or meditate daily**

7. **Do a good deed for someone else**

8. **Play with a pet**

9. **Spend time with loved ones**

10. **Count your blessings!**

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