

What is Stress?

Stress is a normal part of everyday life. Stress generally arises when the demands we face exceed our capacity to cope. Small increases in demand are often handled well, but when demand overwhelms our coping skills - we feel it in the form of stress.

THOUGHTS-FEELINGS-BEHAVIOURS

Positive thoughts contribute to feelings of wellbeing and advantageous behaviours and habits. However, unchallenged negative thinking often causes negative emotions such as anger, sadness, depression and disconnectedness leading to maladaptive behaviours (sometime self-destructive) and a downward spiral of low self-esteem and mental wellbeing. The ability to recognise negative stress and how we manage it determines its effect on our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Positive effects of stress (Eustress)

Stress is valuable in many daily circumstances including playing sport, public speaking, exams, sticking to a deadline and efficiency at home and work. Many people need challenges in their lives and would be unhappy without them.

Examples of positive effects of eustress include:

- Completing a task or set work project
- A promotion or praise you deserve
- Exhilaration of a sport or outdoor activity
- Starting a new relationship

Negative effects of stress

If the effects of stress are not controlled, the effects become detrimental and start to show in 3 ways:

- Health – asthma, weight gain, heart disease, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, headaches, sleeplessness
- Energy and performance levels – reduced concentration, forgetfulness, fatigue/tiredness
- Behaviour – crying, anxiety, poor eating and drinking habits, irritability, mistakes, less flexibility

Understand Your Stress

- Acute stress is experienced in response to an immediate perceived threat, either physical. Emotional or psychological. The threat can be real or imagined; it is the perception of threat that triggers the response. During an acute stress response, the autonomic nervous system is activated and the body experiences increased levels of cortisol, adrenalin and other hormones that produce an increased heart rate, quickened breathing rate, and higher blood pressure.
- Chronic stress results from a state of ongoing physiological arousal. This occurs when the body experiences stressors with such frequency or intensity that the autonomic nervous system does not have an adequate chance to activate the relaxation response on a regular basis. This means that the body remains in a constant state of physiological arousal, which affects virtually every system in the body, either directly or indirectly.

Why you need to practice stress management everyday

- Stress can be cumulative. Dealing with it swiftly and correctly is vital. The longer you take to address it, the worse it gets
- Stress can cause chemical and hormonal imbalances in the body, that can affect every organ and can significantly reduce energy levels
- Stress can impact on emotions, which then affects your responses to situations
- Stress management techniques should be mastered before you are in a crisis

What is Stress?

Devise your stress management strategy

There are many ways to manage stress – change your thinking, change the way you act, avoid the issue, delay or plan to do something, or address your symptoms (physical or psychological).

Within this framework, the 9 Rs offer you nine strategies:

Responsibility-taking – you are the only one who can make a difference to how you respond to and manage stress in your life. Deliberately decide to manage stress with specific strategies that work for you.

Recognise – you need to know how your body responds to stress. What changes occur? For example, does your breathing change, your chest feel tight, your pulse race?

Respond – to your body reactions. Do not deny stress reactions! Having recognised your body reactions, manage these before thinking things through or making decisions. Use deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, etc. Take a little time out, get up and walk around and settle, before moving on to thinking. Talk to your boss about your concerns, get a financial adviser to assist you with your personal finances or do a course in communication skills – take action.

Rationalise – think through your options for five minutes. Focus on three main points, make brief notes, and then put them away. Relax, then think through one point, before briefly relaxing again. Repeat these steps to work your way

through the points methodically. Don't catastrophise issues. Base your responses around reason and logic.

Reframe – put things in a more positive context, eg “I overwork” not “I am overworked” (remember - it's your decision and you need to take ownership). “There is a great demand of my skills and expertise – I am a highly productive and valuable member of my team” sounds better than “the company has unrealistic expectations of my contribution”.

Reorganise and Refocus – change your approach. Learn from what has worked in the past. Chat with friends and trusted colleagues and get their views. Don't unthinkingly repeat unsuccessful patterns of response. Note what works for you or others and incorporate that into your stress management response.

Relax – incorporate relaxation into your day. Your body is giving you a message. Ignoring this long term costs you physically, psychologically and behaviourally.

Recreate – recreation may include activities such as exercise, hobbies or team sport. Regularly incorporate relaxation, exercise, successful stress management techniques and support from friends and colleagues into your lifestyle.

Resilience – Engage in each of the 8 Rs above and you will be sure to build your resilience, enabling you to more effectively manage stressful situations and bounce back from adversity.

10 tips for good stress control

1. Maintain regular sleep patterns.
2. Eat regularly. Don't skip meals.
3. Focus on the positive things that work for you and link with positive people.
4. Reduce caffeine, nicotine and alcohol intake if possible. Keep water by your desk.
5. Take a break from stressful situations. Do something different at lunchtime - try reading, meeting friends or going for a walk.
6. Try to deal with one task at a time. Do not delay tasks you don't like doing. You will feel better as soon as they are completed.
7. Remember that your thoughts are not necessarily facts.
8. If you feel your stress levels rising, use your stress management skills (deep breathing, walk around).
9. Exercise, engage in recreation activities and take holidays - regularly.
10. Try to wind down before getting into bed by taking a warm bath, listening to some music or reading a book.