

Stress Management



A little bit of stress motivates us in a positive way but too much stress, or continual stress over a long period, is debilitating and can lead to *mental difficulties* such as forgetfulness, lack of concentration, irritability, anxiety (e.g. panic attacks) and depression; and *physical problems* such as irritable bowel syndrome, migraines, decreased sex-drive, dizziness, heart palpitations, nausea, and general aches and pains. Always visit your G.P. to find out if your symptoms are stress related or due to a particular illness.

The causes of stress can be very different for each individual. What one person finds stressful another person might find enjoyable. Therefore it's very important to become aware of what *your own personal stressors* are. What we find stressful can also change over time as we ourselves change in terms of confidence levels and life experience.

People have different stress responses and these responses can vary over time. Our nervous systems generally react to stress in three different ways: "fight", "flight", and "freeze":

"Fight" (Overwhelmed): Some people feel angry, agitated, active, confrontational and impulsive. If you have this response then use techniques which calm and soothe you such as slowed breathing and muscle relaxation.

"Flight" (Underwhelmed): Some people react to stress by emotionally turning away from it – they feel shut-down, spaced-out, withdrawn but restless, showing little energy or emotion. If you have this response it can be useful to engage in stimulating activities such as strenuous exercise that energise your nervous system.

"Frozen" (Paralysed): Some people have had frightening, traumatic and overwhelming experiences that wire their nervous systems to "freeze" when challenged by stress. They feel very tense, distressed and still. They find it extremely difficult to get going or to accomplish anything. This stress response is usually linked to some kind of trauma and may require professional intervention.

What is your personal stress response? Does this response change for you at different times?

Some ideas on how to care for yourself and minimise stress:

Diet: Ironically we tend to eat and drink all the wrong things when we are feeling stressed. Try to cut down on alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine, sugar and salt. Hangovers are bad news – withdrawal from alcohol can cause anxiety (general anxiety and panic attacks), depression (alcohol is a depressant), exhaustion, irritability and impaired concentration. With the money you save on these you can buy fresh fruit and vegetables, cereals, grains, nuts, fish, meat, and dairy products – this will make you feel calmer, energised and you will have more stamina.

Exercise: Stress causes dramatic physiochemical changes in our bodies. This is known as the “fight or flight” syndrome and it causes increased levels of different hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, to be created in our bodies. The cavemen used to respond to danger by killing a tiger or running very quickly away from it. This aerobic physical activity had the effect of bringing the body and mind back into balance. If we don’t practice regular aerobic exercise our bodies stay in a constant state of tension and chemical imbalance which is damaging to us and contributes to many mental and physical illnesses. Therefore it is helpful to get at least three half hour sessions of any aerobic activity (the kind that makes you out of breath) each week. This could be jogging, cycling, swimming, football etc.

Sleep: Try to get plenty of sleep and rest. Too much stress tends to disrupt our sleeping patterns. When stressed, some people find it very hard to get a good night’s sleep whilst others tend to sleep more than they normally would, but both tend to wake up feeling exhausted. Getting regular aerobic exercise, eating well, and relaxing before bed-time will help you to get a better quality of sleep.

Ask for help and support: Talking to someone you trust about your worries can really help you to feel less isolated. Asking for practical support can take some of the pressure off. Remember most people will actually feel good about helping you out. You could talk to your friends and/or family. You could talk to one of the doctors or student counsellors in DCU. You don’t have to try to cope all on your own.

Quiet time and relaxation: What do you like to do for quiet time? You could go for a walk, have a long bath, meditate, go to a place of worship (church, mosque, synagogue etc.), sit in front of a fire, read a book, listen to music, watch TV, listen to a relaxation CD, have a nap, call a friend for a chat. Sometimes it’s really important to just STOP and take a “mental health day”. Give yourself a break. You might think “Oh no, I can’t possibly stop now because I have way too much study/work to do!” But the irony of it is if you do stop and recharge then you will be refreshed and will find it much easier to concentrate and get your work done.

Think Positive: When we are stressed we can tend to think negatively about ourselves, others, and life in general. Try to become aware of the type of thoughts you are having each day. Writing these thoughts down during the day can help us to identify negative thoughts such as “This is too much – I can’t cope” or “Life is always such a struggle”. Once we become aware of these self-defeating thoughts we can start to replace them with positive thoughts such as “I can do this – by breaking it down into manageable pieces” or “One day at a time” or “My friends will support me”.

Just say “NO”: If you are a “people pleaser” or a perfectionist or if you feel guilty when you say “NO” to a request, then you probably need to practise saying “NO”. Trying to be perfect and trying to keep everyone else happy is the perfect recipe for feeling exhausted, resentful, overwhelmed and stressed. Read about “assertiveness” and practice your assertiveness skills. Let yourself make mistakes, it’s the only way we learn.

Breathing: When we are stressed, tense, or anxious we tend to tense our muscles and breathe very shallowly. This, in turn, makes us feel more stressed because we are not getting enough oxygen into our bodies. Try to practise breathing slowly and deeply so that your belly expands as your lungs fill and push your diaphragm muscles downwards. Breathe in through your nose, hold the breath for 3-5 seconds, and then slowly breathe out through your mouth.

Humour: Humour is a great stress-buster. Have a good belly-laugh with your friends, watch funny DVD’s, read funny books, go to a comedy club. Laughing is a wonderful tonic for stress. Laugh as much and as often as you can!

Reference: “Understanding Stress” by Professor Greg Wilkinson. Published by “Family Doctor Books”: available in your local pharmacy.