

COPING WITH STRESS

Stress is a response to change, threat or long-term frustration. Some stress is actually good for you, helping to mobilise your mind and body to be at your best.

However, too much stress, especially prolonged, increases the risk of a number of diseases, including heart disease, asthma and duodenal ulcers. It can also put pressure on relationships at work and at home.

Age is no barrier to stress. It can affect a child starting school, a student facing exams, an adult who loses a job or starts a new one, parents coping with family difficulties, and seniors nearing retirement.

While it may not be possible nor worthwhile to get rid of stress completely, there are approaches and new living habits you can develop to help manage stress.

The warning signs of stress can be:

- Impatient, argumentative behaviour
- Excessive worrying
- Over-eating or under-eating
- Restless behaviour, disturbed sleep
- Apathy, withdrawal
- Constant headache or backache
- Excessive drinking, chain-smoking or use of drugs.

IF YOU FEEL STRESSED ...

You should resist ...

- Taking on too many commitments
- Having an unbalanced lifestyle between work and play
- Always being too busy
- Putting off holidays and breaks.

TRY TO DEVELOP NEW LIVING HABITS

Balance family, work and personal responsibilities so that important aspects of your life are not crowded out. No matter how busy you are, put aside some time each week for doing something you really enjoy.

Don't let little things become big issues. Talk things over before they start getting you down.

Keep a diary or journal of your thoughts and feelings.

Don't let yourself be persuaded into taking on more than you wish to handle.

Talk over the things that concern you with your partner or a close friend and let him/her know how you feel.

Organise finances and household tasks so they are shared and you feel on top of things.

Take part in a regular activity or exercise, and encourage others close to you to do the same.

Eat a balanced diet.

Live the year one day at a time, and make time to be with friends or members of your family, either singly or together.

Break difficult jobs into stages and look at each stage separately.

Learn relaxation techniques if you feel these might help.

THINK IN HELPFUL WAYS

Consider how you usually think when you are faced with a difficult situation. Do you expect the worst to happen? View everyday setbacks as disastrous? Expect too much of yourself? Look at the negative side of the situation? Believe that your value as a person depends on how well you do?

Try to:

- Hope for the best – don't expect the worst
- Not let minor difficulties take your focus away from what is important to you
- Have realistic expectations of yourself and others
- Look at the positive side of the situation.

REPLACE WORRYING WITH AN ACTION PLAN

- Remember that you are a worthwhile person whatever happens.

If you spend too much time worrying, think of what you can do to change the situation you are worrying about. Follow these steps, called the problem-solving technique:

STEP 1.

Write down a problem that triggers your stress – at home, at work, with your relationships, etc. Be specific – for example, don't just write 'Marriage'; a better description is 'Too many arguments over money and doing the housework'.

STEP 2.

Write down all the things you could do to solve the problem, and ask other people what they would do. Develop as big a list as possible – often the best solution is not the first to come to mind.

STEP 3.

Choose the option you think has the best chance of succeeding in the long term as well as the short term.

STEP 4.

Work out how you can put the chosen solution into practice. Relaxation can help reduce the physical and mental tension that can build up from stress.

There are a number of relaxation techniques you can try. Many people find meditation and yoga helpful.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

However, there are simple methods you can try at home.

Relaxation breathing

Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes if you wish. Concentrate on your breathing – in through the nose, out through the mouth. Imagine the air you breathe spreading energy – giving oxygen to every muscle in your body.

As you breathe out, say the word, 'relax'. Concentrate on the 'floating' feelings in your legs and arms.

Progressive muscular relaxation

This method involves consciously relaxing the large muscles of your body. The theory is, a relaxed body means a relaxed mind. There are several different versions. Try this one for about 20 minutes daily:

- Sit or lie in a relaxed position with eyes closed. Breathe naturally
- Clench fists hard, so arms feel tense. Ease the tension slowly as you breathe out, like slackening taut elastic. Say 'relax' to yourself
- Do the same in turn with lower legs, thighs, trunk, stomach, back and head
- After doing this a few times move to the next phase: don't tense first, just relax. Let each part of you in turn feel heavy and relaxed. Associate each 'out' breath with the word 'relax'
- Add a little imagination: imagine a peaceful scene (a quiet place in the bush, perhaps) and imagine yourself there, at peace. Stay in this imaginary place for a while – imagine each detail in turn.

EXERCISE

Many people find physical activity or exercise is the best way to manage stress. It has the added advantage of improving general health.

You do not need to exercise vigorously to gain benefits. Any physical activity, such as walking or mowing the lawn, can help.

If you wish to take up more strenuous activity, and you are not used to exercise or are more than 40 years old, have a medical check-up first and discuss exercise plans with your family doctor.

Contact the National Heart Foundation for more information on exercise and physical activity.

OTHER RESOURCES TO HELP YOU

Public Health Division has produced several other resources which may help you manage stress:

- *'Do-It-Yourself Guide to a Good Night's Sleep'* which contains a relaxation tape and booklet to improve your sleep
- Self-help guides for healthy eating, quitting smoking, and reducing alcohol intake.

The *'Do-It-Yourself Guide to a Good Night's Sleep'* is available from pharmacies for \$9.95. The other materials are available free from the Public Health Division of the Health Department of WA, telephone (08) 9222 2045, fax (08) 9222 2088.

For contact telephone numbers of a wide range of help agencies – including counselling, family support and health – see the Community Help Reference page of the Telephone Directory White Pages.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

- [Managing Anxiety](#)
- [What You Can Do to Lower Stress](#)