

Stress

Stress is a part of modern day life and occurs in all areas of our daily lives, at home, at work and socially. Although we cannot eliminate stress, we can learn how to recognise and cope with it more effectively. It can have a major effect on ability, performance, confidence, energy levels and quality of life. Stress cannot be avoided but it can be managed.

What is stress?

Stress is the pressure encountered in living our daily lives. We all experience stress at some stage as we try to adjust to our continually changing environment. We all need a certain amount of stress in our lives to help us respond to the various challenges of every day life. Positive stress can be viewed as an exciting or challenging situation which the person thrives on. Stress is not always harmful but it can pose a threat to our physical and mental well being when it is allowed to build up unchecked.

Our response to stress

We all respond differently to different situations. Two people may have differing perspectives of the same event - what is distressing for one person, may be a joy to another. Just as our perspectives differ also we are likely to differ in our responses to it. Stress may be regarded as a physical and/or emotional response to the demands being made on us. Our response, which will vary from individual to individual, is determined by our ability to cope with such pressures.

What causes stress?

Certain events in life are stressful and are always likely to cause anxiety.

These can include:

- Bereavement, separation, divorce
- Major illness or accident
- Life style change – financial gain or loss
- Work change – tension, unemployment, promotion
- Financial problems – debts, loss or reduction of income
- Family relationships
- Retirement – enforced leisure, reduced income
- Expectation we place on ourselves – to succeed, achieve
- Expectations of others
- Our physical environment
- Life events.

What are some of the symptoms of unmanaged stress?

Prolonged stress can cause physical and/or emotional problems such as:

- Anxiety
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Tense muscles, soreness in neck, shoulders and back
- Headache
- Upset stomach, ulcers
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Lack of interest and ability to concentrate
- Abuse of alcohol, tobacco, drugs
- Depression
- Increased irritability.

How can I cope with stress?

If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you need to reduce the stress in your life through:

Self Awareness

- Identify areas of your life in which stress occurs. Don't ignore it.
- Observe how your body responds to stress.
- Recognise what you can change by avoiding, eliminating or reducing your exposure to stress.
- Know and accept your strengths and weaknesses.
- Strive to change the source of stress and/or your reaction to it.

Physical Fitness

- Consider your physical well being – get a regular check up with your GP.
- Exercise regularly.
- Add balance to your life – take 'time out' for yourself.
- Get enough sleep.

Diet

- Eat a well balanced nutritious diet. High consumption of sugar, salt and alcohol may increase stress.
- maintain a healthy weight.

Stimulants

- Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, drugs, alcohol and other stimulants.

Relax

- Learn and practice deep breathing and relaxation techniques.

What can I do to help myself?

Discuss problems with friends

Pursue attainable goals

Accept failure and disappointment

If stress becomes a problem you may need to consult your General Practitioner.

Stress is one of a series of information fact-sheets developed by Mental Health Ireland, with support from Comhairle.

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