

RECOGNISING AND MANAGING STRESS

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**WayAhead
Mental Health Information Service
Level 5, 80 William St
Woolloomooloo NSW 2011**

**1300 794 991
info@wayahead.org.au
www.wayahead.org.au**

Contents

What is stress?

What are the symptoms?

What causes problem stress?

Managing stress

Where do I go for help?

**“Take rest;
a field
that has
rested
gives a
bountiful
crop.”**

Ovid

What Is Stress?

We are all familiar with stress. It is a normal response that we may experience to some extent every day. Stress is the mind's and body's way of preparing us to face a challenge. A certain level of stress is necessary to not only function, but to motivate us to reach our full potential. Too much stress, however, can be a health hazard. The first important step in stress management involves noticing when our stress levels have become unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised there is a range of stress management skills available to address the problem.

What Are The Symptoms?

A state of chronic stress is not reached overnight – it takes time! Before reaching this state we may notice many symptoms. Rather than acknowledge the signs, we may push ourselves harder, pretending that everything is fine. This continual exposure decreases our ability to function in every area of our lives. The good news is we can stop stress escalating by recognising the warning signs:

Behavioural

- Problems in relationships
- Increased nicotine, alcohol or caffeine use
- Reduced engagement with enjoyable activities
- Avoidance of stressful situations that need to be dealt with

Physical

- Headaches
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased heart rate
- Nausea and fatigue
- Muscle aches and pains
- Increased sweating
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Changes in appetite

Emotional

- Tense
- Anxious
- Irritable
- Lack of enthusiasm

Cognitive

- Negative thoughts/worrying
- Loss of concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty making decisions
- Bad dreams

What Causes Problem Stress?

There are many explanations about why we experience excessive stress. Broadly, feelings of stress come from a combination of two sources: the environment around you (stressful events) and your way of dealing with that environment (your personality.) People who feel high stress in a lot of situations tend to believe that the world is full of negatives, and that they don't have much control over the negatives in their lives. Some studies suggest that individuals inherit the tendency to feel more stress. Others describe stress as a response that is learned over a lifetime.

Irrespective of the cause, stress is an increasing part of our lives, and ignoring it will not make it go away. Once stress overload is recognised, there are skills you can acquire to address the problem.

Managing Stress

Does what I eat matter?

When we experience stress, our bodies use up enormous amounts of vitamins and minerals. The depletion of our body's nutrients can leave us tired, run down, irritable and less able to deal with our responsibilities. If you feel that way, it might be a good idea to visit your local doctor or a nutritionist.

Improving your diet would assist in improving your wellbeing.

Is exercise useful?

Physical exercise is invaluable in releasing tension and assists in the processing of vitamins and minerals. Any physical exercise is helpful – walking, swimming, jogging or gardening. Exercise need not be a chore – especially if it is done with friends. The most important point to remember is to do it regularly.

How can I relax?

Relaxation is a useful tool, either used alone or in conjunction with other strategies. The most common form of relaxation exercise involves progressive muscle relaxation. This involves consciously focusing on one area of the body at a time, clenching the muscles, and then relaxing them. When relaxing your muscles, imagine all the tension flowing from your body. This exercise can be performed lying down or sitting.

Relaxation can also mean listening to music, stroking your pet, having a nap or reading a good book.

A meditation program will also prepare you to manage both physical and mental stress and will help to recharge your system.

The most important thing is to set aside time for it to happen.

How can I practise ‘realistic thinking’?

Beliefs and thoughts determine the intensity of our feelings when faced with a stressful situation. When we are experiencing extreme feelings of stress, it is often because we are having extreme thoughts. For example, extreme feelings of hopelessness and frustration can be a result of thinking, ‘I can’t stand it. I’m never going to get this done in time.’ As we overestimate the consequences of any event we become increasingly stressed.

To begin to think realistically try the following:

- Think about what is making you feel this way
- Question how likely it is that this will happen
- Ask what is the worst possible outcome
- Consider the likelihood of the outcome in the scheme of things- look at the ‘big picture.’

This simple exercise can be helpful in changing the way we think, and therefore feel, in stressful situations

Can I re-organise my time?

We can reduce the amount of stress we experience by using our time and energy more effectively. A realistic list of things to do for the day is a good start. Allow ample time to get things on your list done. It is important to acknowledge that you can only do so much in a given period. Setting priorities and learning to slow down are essential ingredients in reducing your level of stress.

Are there real problems that I need to solve?

Often, we can identify a clear trigger for our stress, such as financial issues or relationship problems. If this is the case, structured problem solving can help. Write the problem down, and then brainstorm a list of possible solutions. Be creative – don’t worry if the solutions sound silly. Next, go through each solution in turn and write down the pros and cons of each one. This will help you to identify the best solution to your problem. Put the solution into action, and then evaluate it. If it hasn’t worked, try the next-best solution on your list.

Talk To Someone

We often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking to and sharing our feelings with other people. This may be as simple as talking to your partner or best friend. Other people may find regular sessions with a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist helpful. Don’t let misconceptions about mental illness stop you from seeking help. Manage stress

Where do I go for help?

The WayAhead Directory

is an online resource providing a comprehensive list of mental health related services in NSW.

www.WayAhead.org.au

Phone Lines

WayAhead Mental Health Information Line

1300 794 991

Contact your doctor or local GP

Australian Psychological Society

1800 333 497

Australian Counselling Association

1300 784 333

beyondblue

1300 22 4636

Useful Websites

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Australian Counselling Association

www.theaca.net.au

The Counsellors and Psychotherapists Association of NSW

www.capansw.org.au



Translating & Interpreting Service
(TIS) 131 450

Please call the Mental Health Information Line through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). Free to Australian citizens or permanent residents.

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The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

Last reviewed by Jamie Saltoon 2018

**“ I found people who
understood exactly what I
was going through ”**



