



Coping with stress

This leaflet summarises:

- What stress is
- What you can do about it
- Where you can get help

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them. (HSE)

Symptoms of stress occur when these pressures exceed the individual's perceived ability to cope.

Pressure is not the same thing as stress.

Negative stress is our physical, emotional and behavioural response to an inappropriate level of pressure. We all need some pressure (**positive stress**) if we are to lead fulfilling lives – too little and we become bored and frustrated, too much and we can become exhausted and non-productive. Finding the balance between the pressures of home, work and personal life can be very difficult to deal with. The fast pace of life, changes at work and other modern stressors leave many people feeling they have lost “control” of their lives. Consequently they feel more vulnerable and insecure. People who feel helpless about dealing with the stressors in their lives are more likely to develop stress-related illnesses.

The body's natural reaction to stress is the “fight or flight” response. Our minds pick up feelings we experience in response to a threat. Numerous changes in our bodies immediately occur. They include mental, behavioural, emotional and physical responses. We may for example become more alert, angry and aggressive. These changes make us better able to deal with the threat. The body puts

itself into a state of readiness that cannot be maintained for long. Our bodies have to be able to react to threats we experience and then again return to a resting state. If our bodies are left in a heightened state of “red-alert”, this can permanently damage our health. It is not always possible to run away from the emotional pressures we feel. Instead, we need to develop appropriate, constructive ways of coping to protect our mental and physical health and improve our well-being.

You should be able to recognise your own individual warning signs. These will vary between individuals. Some common signs are:

- Worrying unnecessarily
- Feeling unable to slow down and relax
- Being unable to focus attention or concentrate
- Becoming forgetful
- Eating, drinking and smoking more
- Sleep disturbance, fatigue
- Stomach problems, indigestion
- Loss of appetite
- Tension headaches
- Palpitations
- Developing irritating health problems
- Feeling out of control

Feelings of irritation, anger and tension are early warning signs that the body is wound up.

It is important to:

- Be honest with yourself and others
- Be able to say what you want, feel or need
- Be self confident
- Understand other people's point of view.

- Be able to negotiate and reach workable compromises
- Have self respect and respect for others
- Ensure your coping resources are in balance with all the challenges you face.
- Take all your annual leave and spread it out over the year
- Take your break entitlements during your working day

There are situations in life for all of us which can be very stressful. For example:

- Death of a close relative or friend
- Relationship problems
- Loss of employment
- Confrontation or poor communication at work
- Severe financial worries
- Moving house or poor housing
- Serious health problems
- Being a parent
- Any kind of change

We can experience:

- Despair of our situation and disruption to our personal lives
- Dismay and despondency at not being able to cope with our feelings
- Distrust of others or our own judgement

Do you add to your own stress? Do you for example:

- Set yourself unrealistic objectives and goals
- Have an over-optimistic expectation of what you can achieve in the time available?
- Always have high expectations of yourself and others?
- Tend to be negative or pessimistic?

Check out these ten tips for coping with stress

1 Take time out

Escape from your problem, if only for a while. Lose yourself by doing something different, having a change of scene or developing an interest. Imaginative day-dreaming is not such a bad thing!

2 Do one thing at a time

Although it can be hard to prioritise it really is important!

Make a list and decide which is the most important thing to do. Get on with that and forget the rest for the time being. You will achieve something, and the other tasks will seem easier when you get round to them.

3 Learn to relax

Relaxation helps to turn off the state of “red alert” and reduces the negative effects of stress. The simplest form of relaxation is to sit or stand quietly and take some deep breaths in through your nose and slowly out through your mouth. Deep breathing can be very helpful in calming you down. Take a break from what you are doing, have a really good stretch and think of something that makes

you smile. Make time for yourself. Do something just for you.

Other ways of relaxing include reading, listening to music, having a warm bath with aromatherapy oils, enjoying a quiet candlelit dinner, watching something you enjoy on television, taking a walk or sitting quietly in a park or garden. Others prefer relaxation classes including yoga, meditation, Tai Chi, or Pilates. All these activities can help us learn to relax, so that we feel less tired, less tense and more in control. Make relaxation part of your daily routine – it doesn’t have to take long but do ensure that you build it in to your day.

4 Be clear about what you want

Some stress is caused because we have not sorted out what we really want out of life. It might help to stop and think about your life and what things in it are most important to you and that you feel are most worthwhile.

5 Talk over your worry

Everyone at times needs to do this. Choose a friend, relative or professional source of help you can trust. You may be able to see a solution when you put your problem into words.

6 Don’t expect too much of yourself

Try not to be too hard on yourself or others. Remember that nobody is perfect. It takes time to learn what we can do, what is realistic to expect of ourselves and what can be left to others.

7 Take some physical activity

Find an activity you enjoy doing and do it regularly each week – walking, cycling, swimming, gardening or dancing for example. You will feel better about yourself and gain a sense of achievement from your efforts.

8 Eat a healthy diet

Eating and drinking healthily supports your nervous and immune systems, keeps your blood sugar level stable and helps your body get rid of surplus fat. Eat a balanced diet, regular meals including breakfast, and eat complex carbohydrates rather than refined ones. Reduce caffeine intake, and drink alcohol in moderation. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, and try and drink at least a pint of water a day.

9 Keep things in perspective

Compare your problem with that of others, or imagine how you might feel about it in 6 months or a year. Writing down what is happening and why it has occurred, together with your thoughts and feelings, can help to clarify the situation – it can help to lighten the burden you may be experiencing.

10 Think positive

Try to anticipate what you would do in a stressful situation, and what you would do to help yourself cope with it. If you can picture yourself coping successfully then you probably will.

What else can you do?

There are times when all of us have to turn to others for help. At times, it may not be possible to turn to family, friends or colleagues. They may be too busy or perhaps the problem is too personal. You may need to seek further help from someone who can advise you about your particular problems. This may be your GP, but you can also talk to health care professionals in the Occupational Health Service or the Staff Support and Counselling Service in confidence.

There may be other specialised or practical help available depending on your situation. Please ask Occupational Health or your GP for further information. The number is as follows:

Occupational Health:

0117 342 3400

This leaflet aims to give you ideas on what you can do to help yourself. If you find yourself becoming anxious, distressed or depressed, don’t let things go too far. Seek help early.