

Understanding & Managing Stress



What is stress?

Stress is often described as a feeling of being overloaded, tense and worried. We all experience stress at times as it is the bodies way of protecting us. We all need a dose of manageable stress as it can help to motivate us to complete a task, or perform well. It is important to know however that stress can also be harmful if we don't learn to manage it. Too much stress can interfere with our normal ability to function.



What are the signs of stress?

When we are presented with a stressful situation, our bodies respond by activating the nervous system and releasing hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. These hormones create physical changes in the body which help us to react quickly and to effectively manage the situation. This is often referred to as the 'fight or flight' response. The changes we may experience include increased heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, metabolism and muscle tension. Additionally, our pupils dilate and we perspire more.

These physical changes help us try to meet the challenges of the stressful situation and it is important that we learn to recognise these changes or symptoms. If the stress is not managed and the symptoms remain ongoing they can create additional physical or psychological symptoms.

These symptoms can include:

- Aches and pains. Ex: Headaches
- Sleep disturbance, insomnia
- Fatigue
- Anger, irritability
- Poor concentration
- Upset stomach, indigestion, diarrhoea
- Anxiety - (see anxiety tip sheet)
- Depression (see depression tip sheet)
- Feelings of overwhelm and lack of control
- Feeling moody and/or tearful
- Low self-esteem / lack of confidence
- High blood pressure
- Weakened immune system
- Heart disease



Types of Stress

Acute stress

Sometimes stress can be brief, and specific to the demands and pressures of a particular situation, such as a deadline, a performance or facing up to a difficult challenge or traumatic event. This type of stress often gets called acute stress.

Episodic acute stress

Reoccurring acute stress may otherwise be known as episodic acute stress. Repetitive episodes of stress may be a result of various consecutive challenges. Those moments when life seems to deliver one challenge after another. Episodic acute stress may be a result of a combination of real life challenges and a subconscious tendency to function at a heightened level of stress. Are you familiar with or do you know of someone who tends to continually worry, are often in a rush and impatient? These behaviours and tendencies may be indicative of episodic acute stress.

Chronic stress

Chronic stress evolves when demands, pressures and worries seem to be ongoing with the perception of them never ending. Chronic stress has an unfortunate negative impact to our health and happiness. Some may be used to operating at a heightened stress response and be unaware of many of their symptoms as it becomes their norm. Regardless, chronic stress will continue to wear you down and can have a negative effect on your relationships and health.

When to seek professional help?

If you feel that your stress levels are preventing you from enjoying a healthy life it may be time to seek help from a mental health professional. A psychologist or other mental health professional will be able to help you identify behaviours and situations that are contributing to your stress. They will also be able to help you with making practical changes to reduce your stress. Quite often stress is very much within our control once we are aware and able to implement a few simple strategies.



Tips on Managing Everyday Stress

Learning to effectively handle stress in a healthy manner is important. Fortunately, there are some easy to implement techniques that help. Firstly we need to be able to recognise and change the behaviours that contribute to our stress. Secondly, we need to make use of some strategies to reduce stress once it has occurred. The following tips can help you look after your mind and body, and reduce stress and the impact it has on your health.

Get to know your body

Start to take notice of how your body responds to stressful situations. Symptoms vary for all of us however some common symptoms include headaches, teeth grinding, and feeling short tempered or irritable. What are your warning signs?

Identify your triggers

We often have triggers that will increase our stress levels. Once we are aware of our triggers we can consciously work on anticipating and managing them. It can be helpful to work on managing your stress prior to facing an anticipated trigger. Triggers may include late nights, deadlines, seeing particular people or attending certain events. Sometimes we are able to remove the trigger, such as aiming for an early bed time. Other times we can work on talking ourselves through how we will manage if we feel our stress heightening when faced with a person or event we find confronting.

Develop a routine

Scheduling your day and week can help with creating a routine and promoting a sense of control and calm. It can be helpful to schedule times for:

- Exercise
- Meals
- Bedtime
- Chores



Live a healthy lifestyle

- Eat a healthy well balanced diet
- Exercise regularly
- Partake in activities you find calming or uplifting, such as listening to music, walking or dancing.
- Avoid the use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope.

Be mindful of your "self-talk"

We all talk to ourselves. These are otherwise known as the thoughts in our head. When we are stressed this self-talk tends to ruminate like a broken record, further adding to our stress. Examples of common unhelpful self-talk include: 'I can't cope', 'I'm too busy', 'I'm so tired', or 'It's not fair'. Although some of these thoughts may hold some truth to them it is not helpful to focus on them.

Try these tips instead:

- Observe when you are using unhelpful self-talk, and re-frame your thoughts to something constructive. For example, 'I'm coping well given what's on my plate', or **'Calm down', or 'Breathe'**.
- Put things into perspective. When we are stressed, it's easy to see our circumstances as worse than they really are. Try self-talk such as 'This is not the end of the world' or 'In the overall scheme of things, this doesn't matter so much'.

Spend more time with "your people"

'Your people' are those who care and support you. Spending time with our loved ones can help us with ongoing management of our stress.

- Spend more time with people who uplift and motivate you rather than those who make demands.
- Work on sharing your vulnerabilities, thoughts and feelings rather than suppressing them which will only help them strengthen.



Relax and breathe!

Make time to practice relaxation. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust. The following options are examples of relaxation techniques to help reduce your stress:

- Progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or yoga.
- Make time to participate in an activity you enjoy. Gardening, listening to music, reading or knitting to name a few.
- Mindful diaphragmatic breathing

To talk to a trained counsellor you can contact us on **1300 903920**.
(Country code +61 if overseas) or by emailing admin@awarepsychology.com