

LIVING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY

What is stress?

Stress is an everyday term you may use if you feel overwhelmed with the pressures of everyday life, or you are faced with a situation that makes you feel anxious.

Stress can be difficult to measure. It may build up quickly, for example, when you are in a traffic jam. Sometimes it is ongoing such as a having a difficult or demanding job.

Stress is not always a bad thing. It is your body's natural way of preparing you to deal with physical or emotional demands - good or bad. Stress triggers the release of adrenaline into your bloodstream which increases your heart rate. More oxygen is then pumped to your heart and muscles to prepare you for 'fight or flight'. In other words, adrenaline gives you access to energy and strength to cope when faced with a 'dangerous' situation.

Ongoing stress is thought to be bad for health but this can be hard to prove. We **do** know that stress **can** make you react or behave in harmful ways such as smoking, drinking alcohol, eating badly and not making time for exercise. All of which are known risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

Recognising stress

If you have lived with a high level of stress, for a long period of time, you may not be aware of being stressed or of your inability to relax.

Tell tale signs of stress building up include:

- Feeling frustrated and irritable.
- Finding concentrating and decision making more difficult.
- Always feeling there are things you *have* to do or that there is never enough time to do everything.
- Not being able to sleep properly for things running through your mind.
- Muscles in your shoulders and neck being tensed up or having a clenched fist without realising it.

What triggers your stress?

Keeping a diary of when you feel most stressed or hassled can be a start to understanding how you personally cope with stress. This will tell you what kind of situation makes you feel a certain way.

It is also helpful to try and think about how you reacted in certain situations:

- Did you feel yourself tense up?
- Did your emotions get the better of you?
- Did you do something to calm yourself down or make yourself feel better such as having a cigarette, an alcoholic drink or eating rich fatty food?

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Reviewing your life and priorities

Recognising a pattern in the way you behave can help you to look for other ways of coping with stress that are less harmful.

- Once you recognise your stress ‘triggers’ you can consciously try to relax in these situations by stretching tense muscles, breathing slowly and putting things into perspective.
- At work, take jobs in order of importance and try to plan ahead.
- You may have to make difficult decisions about your future e.g. changing to a less stressful job.
- Use exercise, breathing and relaxation techniques to relax.
- Watch your alcohol intake. Having a drink to calm your nerves can be the beginning of heavier and problem drinking.

Recognising anxiety

Anxiety or panic attacks are usually brought on by a tiny thought that goes through your mind without you even really recognising it. A fearful or negative thought triggers a rush of adrenaline that causes real physical symptoms. As you become aware of these unpleasant symptoms, you start to feel that there is something wrong and the symptoms worsen.

By now the heart is beating fast, you may be sweating and breathless and even feeling some chest pain. This is often what it feels like to have a panic attack.

Learn how to recognise anxiety symptoms

Anxiety can effect you in many different ways: physically, emotionally and in the effect it has on your behaviour. You may often mistake your symptoms for illness. Recognising your symptoms will help you to control them and understand what is actually happening.

Possible physical symptoms:

- Headaches
- Muscle tension or pain
- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Feeling dizzy
- Bowel or bladder problems
- Breathlessness or palpitations
- Dry mouth
- Tingling in body
- Sexual problems

Possible emotional problems:

- Feeling irritable
- Feeling anxious or tense
- Feeling low
- Feeling of apathy
- Feeling low in self esteem

Possible effect on behaviour:

- Temper outbursts
- Over drinking or smoking
- Changes in eating habits
- Withdrawing from usual activities
- Becoming unreasonable
- Being forgetful or clumsy
- Rushing around

How to control your anxiety

If you have to do something that you are not looking forward to ask yourself if there is anything you can do to make it easier for yourself and try and remember that most things are never as bad as you think they are going to be.

There are some techniques that you can learn that will, with practise, help you to deal with stressful situations, or any situation that makes you feel anxious.

Learn a relaxation technique

Methods of relaxation are numerous and variable. Many involve a comfortable sitting or reclining position and concentrating on various parts of the body and then tensing and relaxing the muscles in that area.

It is very important to breathe normally and not hold your breath or take deep gasps. A quiet peaceful environment, avoiding distractions and interruptions with soft lighting is ideal. By practising the breathing and relaxing of muscles regularly means that in time you will be able to focus on how it feels to be really relaxed, more and more easily.

This can then be used as a tool whenever you need it as well as giving you the added benefits of regular use.

Learn breathing control

This is actually a very simple way of learning how to breathe normally and restore normal breathing when you are anxious. It involves gentle breathing using the lower part of your chest, with the upper chest and shoulders relaxed.

- Settle yourself in a relaxed position.
- Make sure that your back is supported.
- Rest your hands on your lower rib cage / stomach.
- Keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed.
- Feel the gentle rising and falling under your hands as you breathe in and out.
- Find a rhythm that is comfortable for you. A general guide is to count in for four and out for four.
- Concentrate on the lower part of your chest moving rather than the upper part.
- Do not try to take deep breaths.

The more you practise this the easier it becomes. You will then be able to practise it standing as well as sitting and be able to use it whenever you are anxious.

Ask for help

All of this is quite hard to take in at once. You may find it easier to learn these techniques with the help of a professional, for example, a psychologist or counsellor. Talk to your doctor if you think this would be helpful. Relaxation tapes are available from bigger bookshops and look out for local relaxation classes or contact:

Anxiety UK

Zion Community Resource Centre
339 Stretford Road, Hulme
Manchester M15 4ZY
Helpline: 08444 775 774
(Mon – Fri 9.30 am - 5.30 pm)
General information: info@anxietyuk.org.uk
Email support service: support@anxietyuk.org.uk
Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

The ANXIETY UK works to relieve and support those living with anxiety disorders by providing information, support and understanding via an extensive range of services.

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If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line
Monday - Friday 9.30am - 12.30 and 1.30pm - 4.00pm

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