



FACT SHEET

Stress Management

Definition

Stress is a physical and psychological reaction to change. Whether we become stressed depends on how we perceive and react to what is happening within and around us. Stressors may be internal eg worry, anger, fears or external e.g. traffic jams, noise, time pressures.

Physical Response to Stress

The stress response is the body's natural reaction to either real or imaginary threats. This involves an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, muscle tension, sweating, arousal of the mind, release of stress hormones, reduction in the immune system. We all need a certain amount of stress to keep us going but when the stress is excessive and continues over a prolonged period we become more prone to illness. Negative lifestyle patterns such as poor nutrition, over eating, excess alcohol, worry etc will worsen the situation, reduce tolerance to stress and increase stress levels.

Symptoms of Stress

People vary in the symptoms of stress they experience. Symptoms include increase in heart rate, breathing rapidly, stomach upsets, bowel and bladder changes, headaches, eye tension, pain in the shoulders and back, fatigue, depression, anxiety, apathy, short temper, irritability, loss of memory and concentration and insomnia.

Sources of Stress

There are many sources of stress including:

- threats to bodily harm
- housing issues
- financial difficulties
- relationship and family breakdown
- isolation
- illness and death
- addictions
- uncertainty
- violence/aggression (verbal and physical)
- multiple demands
- frustrating situations
- lack of support
- bottling up feelings and thoughts
- holding onto anger, fears, worries
- negative or irrational thinking
- noise
- over crowding
- boredom



FACT SHEET

Stress Management

Coping with Stress

By applying positive ways to cope with stress we increase our stress tolerance and ability to cope. It is important to attend to our whole person body, soul and mind as neglect in one area will impact on us.

Positive coping strategies include:

- eating healthy food
- no excessive eating, drinking, gambling and no smoking
- regular exercise
- prayer/spiritual time
- meditation and/or relaxation exercises
- doing things you enjoy, such as reading, singing, gardening etc
- viewing stress as a challenge rather than a threat
- take time out, rest in nature
- be positive, patient, appreciative and forgiving
- being organised and planning your day
- having a good sense of humour
- concentrating on the here and now and do not worry (worry is useless)
- follow the three Cs – keep *cool*, *calm* and in *control*
- talk to a relative, friend or a counsellor
- For carers, respite ie. time away from caring for the person helps you to recharge and enables you to keep going while the situation enables you to do so

Relaxation Response

The relaxation response counteracts the stress response to produce a quiet body and a calm mind. Regular relaxation practice can assist to avoid over stress. Taking time out throughout the day can prevent stress build up otherwise problems can arise from being highly stressed e.g. overreactions, accidents, headaches. Applying negative ways of coping with the stress e.g. over eating, aggression, increasing alcohol consumption will worsen the situation and increase the stress level.

Relaxation Exercises

There are some simple exercises that can be done at home. For best results choose a quiet place and a comfortable sitting position. Start with breathing exercises – deep slow breaths in through the nose, out through the mouth. Then allow your muscles to relax by first tensing the muscle then releasing the tension progressively working from your feet to your head. Alternatively you can relax the muscles without tensing them first, just allowing them to relax. When this has been completed with your eyes closed focus your mind on a peaceful scene e.g. a beach, lake or a rainforest and concentrate on being in this peaceful scene feeling totally relaxed, at peace free from fears and worries.

There are some good relaxation tapes you can use that are effective in enhancing a relaxed state and improving sleep patterns.



FACT SHEET

Stress Management

Physical Exercise

Research has shown the many benefits of regular exercise e.g. walking. Exercise assists circulation, blood pressure, heart function, weight loss and helps to prevent onset of many illnesses. Exercise is effective in reducing depression, anger and stress. Carers especially need to take time out to care for themselves otherwise they run the risk of burnout and illness.

Thought Stop Exercise

This simple exercise is effective in curbing thoughts that can otherwise create inner stress. Thoughts generate feelings and behaviour. By stopping thoughts that are negative and cause us to worry or become angry, afraid or depressed we begin to take better control of ourselves.

The exercise when negative thoughts arise:

1. Think of the word **stop**
2. Visualise a **stop** sign
3. Say **stop** in your mind and mean what you say.
4. Think of something peaceful e.g. beach, rainforest.

Time Management

Mismanagement of time can contribute to a number of unwelcomed consequences that contributes to a person feeling stressed eg rushing, switching from one task to another resulting in delay, missing appointments/deadlines, being overwhelmed by demands or time pressures, fatigue and loss of motivation, and worry over getting things done.

Some strategies to manage time more efficiently include:

- list the tasks and categorise according to priority
- plan your day/week
- break up difficult tasks into smaller parts
- cross out completed activities from the list
- don't leave things to the last minute
- allow yourself a little extra time to get to places etc so that unexpected occurrences don't affect you as much
- Reward yourself when you have completed some tasks

In managing stress be determined to make the effort to persevere with applying positive coping strategies and good outcomes will follow. Positive changes adapted to our daily life enhances our wellbeing and increases our capacity to care for others.

