



## **STRESS**

### **What is stress?**

Stress can mean different things to different people. For some it can threaten to take over their lives while for others, once they are aware of its causes and effects, stress can add excitement and challenge to their lives.

Stress is often defined as a mismatch between the demands placed on us and the way we cope with these demands. It can have a positive and a negative effect.

Stress can be positive when it motivates us to get things done which are important to us. However, it can be negative when we constantly feel pressurised or traumatised by too many demands. We all have demands placed on us - they come from our work or being unemployed, from relationships, deadlines, financial problems, illness and so on. We also have to deal with major changes like moving home, changing jobs, getting married or coping with the death of a loved one. The way we cope with these demands will depend on the way we think, our personality and our previous life experiences.

### **Effects of Stress**

We can sometimes recognise the short-term effects of stress but may not be aware of how harmful the long-term effects can be. Apart from the physical symptoms like a pain in the shoulder or tummy trouble, there are also emotional signs like frustration, anxiety, a lack of interest or being overly sensitive. Our behaviour may change and we can eat too much, drink too much, be irritable with other people or become withdrawn from society. All of these can be signs of stress.



### **Short-term effects**

- Mind becomes alert - ready to act or react
- Dilated pupils
- Dry mouth
- Tension in neck and shoulders
- Faster breathing
- Faster heart rate
- Higher blood pressure
- Sweaty palms
- Feeling sick or having a 'butterfly' stomach
- Increased need to urinate
- Constipation or diarrhoea

### **Long-term effects**

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Ulcers
- Hyperventilation, asthma, palpitations
- High blood pressure
- Heart and artery disorders
- Sweating more than normal
- High blood sugar
- Nervous indigestion
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Difficulty swallowing
- Neck and back problems
- Bowel disorders
- Rashes, allergies
- Sexual difficulties

### **Coping**

People who cope best with stress seem to have these things in common.

- A sense of being in control of their lives.
- A network of friends or family to provide social support.
- Personality traits like flexibility and hopefulness.



## So what can you do?

- Work off stress - physical activity helps to produce the body's own 'happy' hormones, or antidepressants, called endorphins. These give us that feel-good factor we experience after exercise.
- Be more active every day. Walk briskly, cycle, jog, swim or enjoy any favourite activity for 30 minutes or more. Build up your 30 minutes of activity over two to three shorter sessions, if you prefer.
- Talk to someone you really trust - we often underestimate the value of talking to friends.
- Learn to accept what you cannot change.
- Get enough sleep and rest to recharge your batteries.
- Take one thing at a time.
- Agree with somebody. Life doesn't have to be a constant battleground.
- Manage your time better - develop a system that works for you, not against you. Learn to prioritise, make lists and praise yourself for getting through the various tasks.
- Plan ahead and learn to say 'no'.
- Take up a hobby. Work or family commitments do not have to take up all of your time.
- Eat a variety of foods. Eat lots of fruit and vegetables every day and cut down on fat
- Learn to relax. Try going to the cinema, listening to music or reading.

***Only you can change the way you react to stress.***



## Practical stress busters

**Humour** Serious thinking and behaviour can cause stress, whereas laughter can uncork the pressure and release built-up tension. Laughing also helps us get a better view of the problem and tends to make us feel more light-hearted.

**Treats** Whenever you are faced with a difficult challenge, plan to give yourself a treat afterwards. The possibilities are endless - a meal with a friend, a new item of clothing, a book, a relaxing bath or listening to music. Having something to look forward to will help you cope much better.

**Comfort zones** Find your own comfort zone where you can find support, strength and inner peace. This can be a person (partner, friend or colleague), a place (beach or park) or routine ritual (a long bath or a particular walk). Take some time to enjoy this comfort zone.

**Worrybox** We waste so much valuable time worrying about things. An effective way to stop this needless fretting is to make a worry box. Set aside a particular time each day for worrying about things. Write down what you are thinking about, then put it aside until your set worry period comes along. Very often, many things which harassed us yesterday will have sorted themselves out by the time our 'worry period' comes along.

**Get it out - let go** We often try to hide what is troubling us, foolishly thinking that somehow we are controlling it by doing so. The ability to let go is a powerful weapon in the fight against stress. You can talk to a friend, write, paint a picture, scream, cry or even shout it out. How you do it doesn't matter.

The important thing is to clarify the problem, get it into perspective and cut it down to size.

**Massage** Massage will ease out aches and pains, and will help your body relax and unwind. There are a variety of techniques available, including aromatherapy and reflexology.

**Breathing technique** Breathing is essential to life and breathing patterns often reflect our state of mind or emotions. We breathe between 16,000 and 20,000 times a day, so it can be a powerful tool in gaining some control over how we react to situations. The technique described below can be very useful and we need to get used to doing it so we can experience the physical and emotional benefits. Have a go and notice the difference in how you deal with potentially stressful situations.

It will take about 10 weeks of daily practice before you will be able to feel a difference.

**Abdominal breathing** Sit in a comfortable position, both feet firmly on the ground. Close your eyes, place your left hand on your abdomen and your right hand on your chest.

Breathing normally, notice which hand moves as you breathe. Slowly count from one to four as you breathe in through your nose. Pause for two counts. Then open your mouth and mentally count from one to six as you breathe out through your mouth. As you breathe in this way, try to shift most of the movement toward



your lower hand. Allow your abdomen to push your hand out as you breathe in and pull your abdomen in, letting your hand fall or move as you breathe out. After several minutes of slow rhythmic breathing, let your hands move slowly to your sides as your abdomen continues to move freely in and out with each breath. Slowly open your eyes and sit quietly. This technique is excellent for emotional calming. Practice this every day to get the best effect.

UCD Student Advisers wish to thank the **Irish Heart Foundation** for granting permission to reproduce this information.

Contact the national patient helpline number of the Irish Heart Foundation 1890 432 787 for further advice on stress, healthy eating and physical activity for students.

### **Further Reading**

Herbert, C & Wetmore, A (2002) *Overcoming Traumatic Stress: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Robinson Publishing.

Davis, M; Eshelman E & M McKay (2000) *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*. Oakland CA: Newharbringer Publications.

Looker, T & Gregson, O (1997) *Managing Stress (Teach Yourself)*. London: Teach Yourself Books.

McMahon, G (2001) *Coping with Life's Traumas*. Lithia Springs, CA: Newleaf.