

STRESS KIT

Stress: A disturbing physiological or psychological influence which produces a state of severe tension in an individual. (Macquarie Dictionary)



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STRESS KIT

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1. Introduction

Stress is one of those buzz words everyone uses at some time or another to describe a not-so-pleasant experience, an emotional state or a physical condition. There is stress at work, stress at home, stress related injuries; every part of our lives has the potential to cause us stress. It can have its good points as it encourages us to try new things and push ourselves; it can also have a negative side though. This kit is designed to help you recognise the signs of stress, understand what effects stress has on your life and how to deal with it.

2. What is Stress?

Stress is the condition that results when personal/environment transactions lead the individual to perceive a discrepancy – whether real or not – between the demands of a situation and the resources of the person's biological, psychological and social systems. In other words, the person believes that they do not have the inner resources to deal with the upsetting or difficult issues in their life.

Stress is not always a bad thing. We need a certain level of stress in our lives to motivate us and many positive events can also be stressful in some ways – such as Christmas, holidays or weddings. Nobody would deny that a wedding or Christmas can be stressful but how many of us want to avoid these events altogether for this reason? Stress does not necessarily have a negative effect on a person. For example, a certain level of tolerable stress improves performance on many tasks. Also, work can be stressful if it is not sufficiently challenging. When stress occurs, as long as we believe we have the resources to cope with it, we will cope with it.

3. Signs of Stress

Below are some signs that you may be experiencing stress.

Physical Signs

- headaches
- indigestion
- palpitations
- breathlessness
- nausea
- muscle twitches
- tiredness
- vague aches and pains
- skin irritation or rashes
- susceptibility to allergies
- excessive sweating
- clenched fist or jaws
- rapid weight gain or loss

Mental Signs

- indecision
- memory failing
- loss of concentration
- tunnel vision
- bad dreams or nightmares
- worrying
- less intuitive
- less sensitive
- persistent negative thoughts
- impaired judgement
- hasty decisions

- **Emotional signs**

- irritability
- more suspicious
- more gloomy, depressed
- more fussy
- feeling tense
- drained, no enthusiasm
- feeling under attack
- cynical, inappropriate humour
- alienated
- feeling nervous, apprehensive, anxious
- feelings of pointlessness
- loss of confidence
- less satisfaction in life
- de-motivated
- reduced self esteem
- job dissatisfaction

- **Behavioural signs**

- unsociable
- restlessness
- loss of appetite or overeating
- loss of interest in sex
- disturbed sleep or insomnia
- drinking more alcohol
- smoking more
- taking work home more
- too busy to relax
- not looking after oneself
- lying
- anti-social behaviour
- unable to unwind
- low productivity
- accident prone
- bad driving
- impaired speech
- voice tremor
- increased problems at home
- poor time management
- withdrawing from supportive relationships

4. Effects of Long-Term Stress

Where you are under excessive levels of short-term stress, then you may find that your performance goes to pieces. Afterwards, however, you will be able to treat this as a learning experience and can adopt stress management strategies to avoid the problem in the future. The effects of long-term stress going out of control can be much more severe. If you do not take action to control it, then the following can happen.

Fatigue and Exhaustion

Steps to remedy this can be as simple as going to bed earlier, or taking a good break. Alternatively re-examine your life and check whether the things you are doing lead to you meeting your personal goals. This may show you which jobs or commitments you can drop. Implementing time management strategies may also help you to work more effectively, giving you more time to relax.

Depression

High levels of long-term stress may often initiate depression, by failure associated with stress-related under-performance, or by life crises. Deep depression is a clinical illness and should be treated medically. It is important that if you are depressed that you take this seriously. Severe depressions that can cause years of unhappiness and low performance can be treated with medication, by the appropriate form of psychotherapy, or by other forms of personal action. It is important to recognise when there is a problem, and when to ask for help.

Depression may start when:

- you miss important deadlines
- projects fail
- you are passed over for promotion
- you feel out of control
- you are very tired
- you are feeling inadequate while getting to grips with a new, difficult job
- you are bored for a long period of time

Burnout

Burnout occurs where highly committed people lose interest and motivation. Typically it occurs in hard working, hard driven people, who become emotionally, psychologically or physically exhausted. You are at risk of burnout where:

- you find it difficult to say 'no' to additional commitments or responsibilities
- you have been under intense and sustained pressure for some time
- your high standards make it difficult to delegate to assistants
- you have been trying to achieve too much for too long
- you have been giving too much emotional support for too long without receiving adequate support yourself

Often burnout will manifest itself in a reduction in motivation, volume and quality of performance, or in dissatisfaction with or departure from the activity altogether. Burnout will normally occur slowly, over a long period of time. It may express itself physically or mentally. Symptoms of burnout are shown below:

- a feeling of lack of control over commitments
- an incorrect belief that you are accomplishing less
- a growing tendency to think negatively
- loss of a sense of purpose and energy
- increasing detachment from relationships. this may cause further conflict and stress, adding to the problem.

Breakdown

'Breakdown' is not a medically recognised term, however as it is a commonly used term, we have included it here. Where an individual has been under sustained stress for a long period of time, has suffered serious life crises, or has reached a stage of exhaustion and demoralisation, 'breakdown' may occur. This may show itself physically as a heart attack, angina or a stroke, or may show as 'nervous' or 'mental' breakdown, where the person becomes mentally ill. In the latter case symptoms may not be seen by the individual, but may be obvious to partners, friends and colleagues.

'Breakdown' sounds sudden and dramatic - in the case of physical breakdown it may be. Mental breakdown, however, may be slow in onset, and may be mild or severe. The boundary between prolonged unhappiness or exhaustion and breakdown is blurred - one definition of breakdown may be that the person finally carries out some act that makes it impossible to continue functioning normally in society.

Signs of 'nervous breakdown' may be:

- uncharacteristic, uncontrollable, irrational behaviour
- intense and excessive anxiety
- severe depression
- obsessive activity - persistent performance of an irrational activity, or of a normal activity to an irrational degree
- destructive and self-destructive behaviour:
 - sobbing
 - screaming
 - shouting
 - violence
 - self-mutilation
 - suicide
- doing destructive things:
 - giving up a good job
 - breaking up good relationships
 - shoplifting
 - becoming dependent on drugs

5. Biological Implications of Long Term Stress

Heart

Stress causes more adrenaline to be supplied to the blood. This leads to an increase in heart rate, pump volume, blood pressure and blood distribution. In the long term, the heart can become overworked if there is a mismatch between blood supply and demand. If muscles are not conditioned to meet the extra blood supply then changes in blood pressure can damage arteries, leading to a greater likelihood of stroke.

Digestion

Digestion is put on standby until the emergency is over. Acid can build up in the stomach and products of digestion remain in the bowel, possibly contributing to irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, ulcers, incontinence and cancer of the bowel.

Muscle and Bone

Muscles tense and the body braces itself for action or impact, increasing the chances of muscle cramps, headache, back pain and irregularities in posture.

Nervous System and the Brain

The brain and nervous system respond to stress first by trying to assimilate it and then by trying to accommodate it. This has important implications for the whole body, including the immune system where susceptibility to illness and psychosomatic symptoms can become common.

Behaviour

Reaction time speeds up or down, giving the impression of aggressive or withdrawn behaviour. Thinking becomes more focused and quicker at the expense of deeper, more sensitive considerations. Reason gives way to instinctive behaviour. Life patterns change, causing further difficulties as inappropriate responding takes its course.

Many people carry on in the face of adversity, but personal problems, illness, infirmity and disease are accelerated when an imbalance in these (and other) systems is prolonged by unrelenting stress.

6. Causes of Stress

There are many causes of stress in our daily lives. Our expectations of others are a major cause of stress. Below is an outline of some common causes of stress.

Emotional Distress

Our moods and emotions are intimately tied to our levels of stress. If we have overly high or unrealistic expectations of other people, then we will continually feel let down and annoyed, hence our stress levels will rise.

Relationship Conflicts

Whenever we form a relationship with another person, we have expectations about how both we and that person should think, feel and behave. When these expectations are violated, stress can occur.

Job Related Stress

Much job related stress comes from our lack of expertise in handling our emotions and from our general difficulties forming healthy, positive relationships. In addition, we also possess specific work related expectations, such as those about our bosses, managers, co-workers, employees, customers etc.

Public Speaking

Much of the stress we experience when speaking in front of others comes from our desire to have everyone in the audience like us and approve of what we say. This is essentially impossible, and successful public speakers have learnt to dismiss these expectations and replace them with more realistic ones.

Raising Children

Parents often get stressed when they have strong expectations of how their children should think, feel and behave. Children often won't follow these guidelines exactly, so hopefully parents can instil appropriate values, virtues and morals into them. Don't hope that all your expectations will come true, some will, but most not. Also, a child's development is connected with teachers and other relatives. Keep in mind that usually they all have your child's best's interests at heart, but may express it differently from yourself.

Travel

Travelling can be a great way to reduce stress; however the reality is that things do not change just because we're looking for a little time out. Traffic jams, lost luggage and bad weather can often cause unneeded stress.

Injustice

When we perceive that we have been wronged or treated unfairly, this causes many emotions, such as anger, helplessness, resentment, disappointment, loss of self-esteem etc, all of which may add up to stress, depression and strain on personal relationships.

7. Mental Techniques to Manage Stress

There are many ways in which to manage stress. Below are some techniques, try some, not all will be suitable or possible for everyone, so see what works for you. Remember what works for one person may not work for another.

Rehearsal

By running through a stressful event such as an interview or a speech several times in advance you can polish your performance and build confidence.

Planning

By analysing the likely causes of stress, you will be able to plan your responses to likely forms of stress. These might be actions to alleviate the situation or may be stress management techniques that you will use. It is important that you formally plan for this - it is little use just worrying in an undisciplined way - this will be counter-productive.

Avoidance

Where a situation is likely to be unpleasant, and will not yield any benefit to you, it may be one you can just avoid. You should be certain in your own mind, however, that this is the case.

Reduce the Importance of the Event

If the event seems big, put it in its place along the path to your goals. Compare it in your mind with bigger events you might know of or might have attended. If there is a financial reward, remind yourself that there may be other opportunities for reward later. This will not be the only chance you have. Focus on the quality of your performance. Focusing on the rewards will only damage your concentration and raise stress. If members of your family are watching, remind yourself that they love you anyway. If friends are real friends, they will continue to like you whether you win or lose. If people who are important to your goals are watching then remind yourself that you may well have other chances to impress them. If you focus on the correct performance of your tasks, then the importance of the event will dwindle into the background.

Counter Uncertainty

Uncertainty can cause high levels of stress. The most effective way of countering this is to ask for the information you need. This might be information on your organisation's performance. It may involve asking what your employer wants from you in the future, so that you can set the appropriate career development goals. If you are unsure of how you are doing, ask for a performance review. Where instructions are inconsistent or conflicting, ask for clarification.

Use Imagery

We are all aware of how particular environments can be very relaxing, while others can be intensely stressful. The principle behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you can use your imagination to recreate a place or scene that is very relaxing. The more intensely you use your imagination to recreate the place or situation, the stronger and more realistic the experience will be.

Use Thought Awareness

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts for a time, perhaps when under stress, and become aware of what is going through your head. It is best not to suppress any thoughts - just let them run their course while you observe them. Once you are

aware of your thoughts, write them down and review them rationally. See whether the thoughts have any basis in reality. Often you find that when you properly challenge negative thoughts they are obviously wrong. Often they persist only because they escape notice. You may find it useful to counter negative thoughts with positive affirmations. You can use affirmations to build confidence and change negative behaviour patterns into positive ones. You can base affirmations on clear, rational assessments of fact, and use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence.

Reframing

Try thinking about the issues that cause you stress in a different way. Are you overestimating the importance of the issue or underestimating your own abilities? Are you thinking in rigid and absolute terms that are unrealistic?

Physical Relaxation Techniques

These are useful where stress is caused by physical processes in your body: perhaps where muscles are tense, or where you are experiencing the effects of adrenaline. (see 8. below)

Hypnosis

Hypnosis has a bad reputation due to people who misuse and misrepresent it, for example some stage entertainers. Hypnosis is merely a state of mind which can be induced to facilitate counselling, in which:

- you are very relaxed
- you are paying complete attention to the suggestions you want to implant
- you do not criticise the suggestions made, and accept them at face value.

Meditation

The idea of meditation is to focus your thoughts on one relaxing thing for a sustained period of time. This rests your mind by diverting it from thinking about the problems that have caused stress. It gives your body time to relax and recuperate and clear away toxins that may have built up through stress and mental or physical activity.

Self Help

Many people find relaxation tapes, books and classes to be useful techniques in managing stress.

8. Physical Techniques to Manage Stress

Exercise

Taking frequent effective exercise is probably one of the best physical stress-reduction techniques available. Exercise not only improves your health and reduces stress caused by being unfit; it also relaxes tense muscles and helps you to sleep.

Muscular Relaxation

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) is a purely physical technique for relaxing your body when muscles are tense. The idea behind PMR is that you tense up a group of muscles so that they are as tightly contracted as possible. Hold them in a state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then relax the muscles to their previous state. Finally you consciously relax them again as much as you can. You can apply PMR to any or all of the muscle groups in your body depending on whether you want to relax just a single area or your whole body.

Breathing Control

Deep breathing is a very effective method of relaxation. It is a core component of everything from the 'take ten deep breaths' approach to calming someone down, right through to yoga relaxation and Zen meditation. It works well in conjunction with other relaxation techniques such as Progressive Muscular Relaxation, relaxation imagery and meditation to reduce stress.

Biofeedback

Strictly speaking, biofeedback systems are tools to aid relaxation as opposed to stress management techniques.

Biofeedback systems use electronic sensors to measure stress, and then feed the results of this measurement back to you. This feedback may take the form of movement of a pen on a graph plotter, or may be by the pitch of sound coming through earphones.

9. Reducing Long Term Stress

Time Management

Time Management is a set of related practical skills that help you to use your time in the most effective and productive way possible. Time management helps you to reduce work stress by being more in control of your time and by being more productive. This ensures that you have time to relax outside work. The central shift of attitude within time management is to concentrate on results, not on activity. To this end it embraces a range of skills that help you to:

- assess the value of your time, and how effectively you are using it
- focus on your priorities so that you know which tasks should be done, which ones can be delegated, and which ones can be dropped
- plan projects so that they are done properly, with adequate resources
- use the time you have more effectively
- create more time
- manage and avoid distractions
- increase your productivity and personal effectiveness

Attitude

Attitude is fundamental to long-term stress management. Where your attitude is negative or hostile, you will create problems out of opportunities and cause stress by alienating and irritating other people. Where you have a positive attitude, you can maintain a sense of perspective and draw the positive elements out of each situation.

- keep things in perspective – work your way through a problem bit by bit, try not to see it as huge and overwhelming
- take control of the situation – plan the task ahead, set yourself goals, anticipate problems
- learn to welcome change
- learn to work with other people effectively – being cynical and negative won't help, take on the task with a positive attitude and watch how others respond.

Slow Down

A good way of reducing long-term stress is to take up an un-rushable sport or hobby in your own time. If you spend all your working day competing or stressed, then it can be pleasant to be completely non-competitive for some of your non-work time.

Be Healthy

A surprising amount of the stress we may experience on a daily basis is caused by the chemicals we consume. By eating or drinking certain things we can actually put our bodies under chemical stress. If you eat a good, well-balanced diet then you should be able to minimise this sort of chemical stress. Your body will be receiving all the nutrients it requires to function effectively. As with exercise, there is a lot of bad advice on diet available. Get reliable information on diet from your doctor rather than from shops, friends or magazines.

10. Eliminate Stress from Your Environment

If your living and working environments are badly organised then they can be a major source of stress. If your environment is well organised and pleasant, then it can help to reduce stress. While the points listed may each contribute only in a small way to creating a more pleasant environment, taken together they can have a significant effect in reducing stress.

- ban smoking and open up windows and doors to allow fresh air to circulate through your home. use an ioniser, this helps to freshen the air by eliminating positive ions created by e.g. electric motors powering computer fans, use dehumidifiers where humidity is a problem
- introduce plants where the air is too dry. evaporation of water from the plant pots or from the plants themselves will help to raise humidity. plants also raise the amount of oxygen in the air and reduce stuffiness
- make sure there is a designated place for everything, this makes it much easier to stay tidy and find things quickly and avoid the stress of misplacing things
- if you use a computer for long periods of time, ensure the monitor and keyboard are comfortably positioned and take regular breaks of 5 minutes in each hour, to rest your eyes and stretch your muscles

11. A to Z of Stress Management

Always take time for yourself, at least 30 minutes per day

Be aware of your own stress meter: know when to step back and cool down

Concentrate on controlling your own situation, without controlling everybody else

Daily exercise will burn off the stress chemicals

Eat lots of fresh fruit, vegies, bread and water; give your body the best to perform at its best

Forgive others, don't hold grudges and be tolerant – not everyone is as capable as you

Gain perspective on things, how important is the issue?

Hugs and kisses and laughter, have fun and don't be afraid to share your feelings with others

Identify stressors and plan to deal with them better next time

Judge your own performance realistically; don't set goals out of your own reach

Keep a positive attitude, your outlook will influence outcomes and the way others treat you

Limit alcohol, drugs and other stimulants, they affect your perception and behaviour

Manage money well, seek advice and save at least 10% of what you earn

No is a word you need to learn to use without feeling guilty

Outdoor activities by yourself or with friends and family can be a great way to relax

Play your favourite music rather than watching TV

Quit smoking, it is stressing your body daily, not to mention killing you too

Relationships - nurture and enjoy them, learn to listen more and talk less

Sleep well, with a firm mattress and supportive pillow, don't overheat yourself and allow plenty of ventilation

Treat yourself once a week with a massage, dinner out, the movies, moderation is the key

Understand things from the other person's point of view

Verify information from the source before exploding

Worry less; it really does not get things completed better or quicker

Xanadu - regularly retreat to your favourite space regularly, make holidays are part of your yearly plan and budget

Yearly goal setting, plan what you want to achieve based on your priorities in your career, relationships etc

Zest for life, each day is a gift, smile and be thankful that you are a part of the bigger picture

12. Where to Get Help

We often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking to and sharing our feelings with other people. This may be as simple as talking to your partner or best friend. Other people may find regular sessions with a psychiatrist, social worker or psychologist

helpful. If your organisation has a problem with stressed workers, then perhaps a Stress Management Consultant should be enlisted. Generally though, the following services are available:

- your local GP
- local community health centre (see 'community health centres in white pages')
- psychologist, contact the Australian Psychological Society referral service on 1800 333 497
- psychiatrist, via referral from your GP
- telephone counselling (eg. Lifeline 131 114, Salvo Careline 02 9331 6000)
- counsellor, contact the Australian Counselling Association on 1300 784 333
- Mental Health Information Service: 1300 794 991 for services in your area

13. Further Reading

'Eliminate Stress from Your Life Forever: A Simple Program for Better Living'
by William Atkinson, AMACOM, 2004, ISBN: 0814472338

'Stress Management for Busy People, Busy People' by Carol Turkington,
McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997, ISBN: 0070655359

'Stress Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Wellness' by Edward A. Charlesworth and
Ronald G Nathan, Ballantine Books, 2004, ISBN: 0345468910

14. References

www.psychwww.com/mtsite/smpage.html - Mind Tools

www.stresstips.com - Directory of Stress Management Resources



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MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION SERVICE

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- **Largest information data base of government and non-government mental health services in NSW**
- **Extensive range of mental health publications & videos**
- **Mutual support & self help groups**
- **Referral for a wide range of mental health services**
- **Library & Resource Centre
(open to the public 9.30am - 4.30pm Monday-Friday, closed
Wednesday 9.00am –12.00 pm)**

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