



## What is Stress?

Here are the thoughts of some people who are experiencing stress.

- ❖ *“I just don’t get a task finished any more before I move on to the next thing. I keep forgetting where I’m up to, I have 20 things on the go at once and I’m not getting anywhere with any of them...”*
- ❖ *“I keep meaning to get a little time for myself but I never manage to. Someone always asks me to help out and I never have the heart to say no, but I end up feeling really tired and irritable ...”*
- ❖ *“It just seems to be one crisis after the next in my life. I’ve got a constant headache and stomach problems, I keep expecting something else to go wrong, I’m at the end of my tether ...”*

Stress is the word that many people use when they are describing how the demands of their life seem to becoming too great for them to cope with. This ability to cope varies from person to person and what one person finds stressful may not be a problem for another. Whilst many of us suffer with stress at times in our day to day lives, long term stress is known to be bad for our health and many of us would like to find ways to gain some control over it.

### What are the signs of stress?

The signs of stress vary from person to person but here are some of the most common ones.

#### Physical signs

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

#### Emotions

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

#### Effects on what you do

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

If you have some of these signs it may be that you are experiencing stress. These are some of the short term signs but long term health risks from stress are serious and include heart disease, high blood pressure, severe depression, stroke, migraine, severe anxiety, asthma, low resistance to infection, bowel problems, stomach problems especially ulcers, fatigue and sleep problems.

### **Can life events cause stress?**

Some things that happen in life can be stressful particularly life changes. If you have had one or more of the following life events occurring over the last year you will probably be more likely to be stressed and should take care to avoid further stressors, and try to take 'extra care' of yourself.

- Death of partner
- Death of close family member
- Getting married
- Health problems
- New employment
- Serious debt
- Problems at work
- Disagreement with friends
- Changes in leisure activities
- Family gathering for holidays / Christmas
- Jail term
- Divorce or relationship breakdown
- Death of a close friend
- Loss of employment
- Pregnancy
- Major changes at work
- High financial commitments
- Changes in living conditions
- Minor legal problems
- Changes in church / spiritual habits
- Problems with neighbours / noise

### **Is there a type of person who is more likely to experience stress?**

Studies have shown that some people are more likely to experience stress than others. These people are known as 'type A' personalities. They tend to be more competitive and impatient and have tight time schedules compared to 'type B' personalities who are more relaxed and 'laid back' in their style. If you would like to know which type you are ticking the following to help you decide:

#### Type A

- Must get things finished
- You are competitive
- Very busy at full speed
- Do everything fast
- Want everything perfect
- Not satisfied with work / life
- If working will often take work home
- Try to do more than one thing at a time
- Never late for appointments
- Always in a hurry
- Don't like to wait
- Hold feelings in
- Pressurised speech
- Few social activities
- Can't listen to conversations, interrupt, finish sentences

#### Type B

- Don't mind leaving things unfinished
- You are calm and unhurried about appointments
- You are not competitive
- Never in a hurry
- Do things slowly
- Can wait calmly

- Do one thing at a time
- Don't mind things not being quite perfect
- Quite satisfied with work / life
- Employment time limited to working to work hours
- Express feelings
- Slow and deliberate speech
- Many social activities and interests
- Can listen and let the other person finish speaking

- ❖ If most of your ticks are on **A** side then you will be more prone to stress.
- ❖ If mainly **Bs** then you are less likely to suffer from stress!
- ❖ If both **As** and **Bs** then you are a little prone to stress.

Those people who are more prone to stress may have to try harder to use some of the stress management approaches suggested here to tackle their natural tendency to stress.

### **How can I help myself to cope with stress?**

Studies have told us that the first step in tackling stress is to become aware that it is a problem for you. The next stage is to **make a plan** to take control of the causes and effects of stress. Here are some practical ways to take control of stress.

**Holiday** - Try to plan at least one each year with a change in activities and surrounding.

**Open up** – if your relationship is part of the problem. Communication is very important.

**Work** – is that the problem? What are your options? Could you retrain? What aspects are stressful? Could you delegate? Could you get more support?

**Try to concentrate on the present.** Don't dwell on the past or future worries.

**Own up to yourself that you are feeling stressed** – half the battle is admitting it!

**Be realistic about what you can achieve.** Don't take too much on.

**Eat a balanced diet.** Eat slowly and sit down allowing at least half an hour for each meal.

**Action plans** – try to write down the problems in your life that may be causing stress, and as many possible solutions that you can. Make a plan to deal with each problem.

**Time management** – plan your time, doing one thing at a time and building in breaks. Don't make too many changes at once in your life.

**Set priorities** – if you could only do one thing, what would it be?

**Talk things over with a friend or family member or someone else you can trust and share your feelings with.**

**Relaxation or leisure time each day is important.** Try new ways to relax such as aromatherapy, reflexology or yoga. Relaxation exercises are described more fully below.

**Exercise regularly** – at least 20 minutes two or three times a week. This is excellent for stress control. Walking is good – appreciate the countryside.

**Say no and don't feel guilty.**

**Seek professional help if you have tried these things and still your stress is a problem.**

## Can I learn to be more relaxed?

Relaxation is a skill like any other, which needs to be learned, and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension.

### Deep muscle relaxation

It is helpful to read the instructions first and eventually to learn them by heart.

- ❖ Start by selecting a quiet, warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin, then lie down and get comfortable. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing for few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly – in-two-three and out-two-three. Say the word "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups; teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax.
- ❖ Start with your hands. Clench one fist tightly, and think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.
- ❖ Study the tension for a few seconds then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling; this is the relaxation beginning to develop.
- ❖ Do the same with the other hand.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they are relaxed. Don't try to relax but just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they are relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:

- ❖ **Hands** – clench fists, and then relax.
- ❖ **Arms** – bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.
- ❖ **Neck** – press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- ❖ **Face** – there are several muscles here, but it's enough to think about your forehead and jaw, firstly lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax, now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.
- ❖ **Shoulders** – shrug your shoulders up – then relax them.
- ❖ **Chest** – take a deep breath, hold it in for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.
- ❖ **Stomach** – tense your stomach muscles as tightly as you can and relax.
- ❖ **Buttocks** – Squeeze your buttocks together and relax.
- ❖ **Legs** – straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face and then relax.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

## **Making the Best of Relaxation**

To make best use of relaxation you need to:-

- ❖ Practice daily.
- ❖ Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- ❖ Learn to relax without having to tense your muscles first.
- ❖ Use parts of relaxation to help in difficult situations, eg breathing slowly.
- ❖ Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.
- ❖ Practise in public situations (on the bus, in queue etc).

## **What further help is available?**

Sometimes a good source of help is to talk to family or close friends, but there are also other ways you may get help.

- ❖ Your family doctor is probably the best person to discuss your difficulties within the first instance. This is particularly important if your problem is not going away or is getting worse.
- ❖ You may be offered counselling or if your problem seems to be becoming more severe you may be referred to a mental health worker.
- ❖ You can obtain relaxation tapes if you would like to improve this skill further.

You may want to enrol in a local yoga or aromatherapy course. Your local library will have information on courses.

If you feel your stress problem may now be a more serious anxiety or depression, talk to your family doctor. Try to get help sooner rather than later. Depression is easily treated if caught early.

There are also many books available on coping with stress; these can be bought or could be borrowed from your local library

## **The following organisations and help lines may also be useful:**

- ❖ Association for Post Natal Illness – for women who are experiencing depression following the birth of their baby. 25 Jerdan Place, Fulham, London, SW6 1BE Tel: 020 7 386 0868
- ❖ CRUSE Bereavement Line – help for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people. Tel: 020 8 332 7227
- ❖ National Debt Line - help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt. Tel: 0845 500 511 (local call rate)
- ❖ Samaritans, Linkline – confidential support for anyone in crisis. Tel: 0345 909 090 (local rate)

**You can learn more about the Lancashire Early Intervention Service by visiting our website:-**

**[www.hope-health-recovery.org.uk](http://www.hope-health-recovery.org.uk)**

Email: [info@hope-health-recovery.org.uk](mailto:info@hope-health-recovery.org.uk)

Version 3: April 2010  
Review Date: April 2012