

Coping with Stress



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What is stress and what does it look like?

We all experience stress from time to time. An optimum level of stress is actually a good thing as it helps to motivate us to get things done and also to keep us safe. Stress can affect people in different ways and some people can come to feel stress easier than others. Stress is an entirely normal thing but it is something that people sometimes find difficult to manage. Excessive stress over an extended period of time can cause an individual to become more vulnerable to health problems.

Physical feelings are experienced when your body reacts to stress, fear or anxiety. These symptoms are often referred to as the 'fight or flight' response. This reaction quickly and helpfully prepares the body for action. It prepares us to either protect against or escape danger.

- Making our heart beat faster - to supply more blood to our muscles.
- Producing more sweat - to cool us down.
- Tensing our muscles - getting them ready for action.
- Taking deeper and quicker breaths - to supply oxygen to our muscles.
- Shutting down body functions that aren't needed at the time e.g. digestion.
- Racing thoughts - quickly narrowing the available options to make a quick response.

In the past such a reaction would have offered us some protection by preparing us to react quickly in case of predators, and aiding

survival as we hunted and gathered food. These days we do not depend so much upon running or fighting as we negotiate difficult circumstances. The symptoms described above are therefore less helpful. They may even end up being quite confusing. Threats like money problems, difficulties at work, unhelpful staff or rude drivers do not require such an extreme physical reaction. These symptoms are not dangerous in themselves. In many ways it is a useful response, but at the wrong time. We need not fear the fight or flight reaction. It is our body's healthy protection system. Understanding this can help you to manage the physical symptoms. You need not worry about them or feel that you need to respond or react. You can allow them to pass, as they will do quite quickly.

Stress can be caused by any number of things including life events such as starting a new job, becoming unemployed, getting married, having a baby, etc. An individual's thinking styles and behaviours can also contribute to their development of stress. For instance a person who thinks overly negatively or who behaves in an avoidant manner may be contributing to their symptoms of stress. Some individuals are likely to be more prone to experiencing stress due to biological reasons also.

Acute Stress Disorder is a psychological disorder that develops in some people following the experience of an extremely traumatic or stressful event (e.g. witnessing a serious accident). Following such an experience, an individual may develop dissociative symptoms which cause them to decrease their overall emotional responsiveness. As well as this emotional numbness, the individual may also continue to experience the event through thoughts, dreams and flashbacks. This in turn leads to avoidant behaviours which can impair on the individual's day to day living.

This document contains information and strategies that are meant to be helpful to persons experiencing symptoms of stress or acute stress disorder, it is not a substitute for the advice of a qualified mental health practitioner. If you or someone that you know is experiencing symptoms of excessive stress, please contact your family doctor or if in a crisis please call the Crisis Line Association of BC (250-753-2495), 310 Mental Health Support Line (310-6789) or the Crisis Intervention & Suicide Prevention Centre of BC (604-872-3311). Lifespan Development Group Inc. Psycho-Educational Materials ©

Symptoms usually last somewhere between a couple of days to a few weeks. The disorder may resolve itself during this time or it may develop into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Am I stressed? – A checklist for seeking help

If you experience symptoms of stress it is likely that you will recognise many of the feelings, physical symptoms, thoughts and behaviour patterns described below.

Please tick the boxes which regularly apply to you.

Feelings

- | | |
|------------------------|-----|
| Tense | () |
| Irritable | () |
| Overwhelmed / Helpless | () |
| Anxious | () |

Physical Symptoms

- | | |
|------------------------|-----|
| Butterflies in stomach | () |
| Tired / Exhausted | () |
| Light headed | () |
| Nausea | () |
| Poor concentration | () |
| Disturbed sleep | () |

Thoughts

- | | |
|--|-----|
| I won't be able to cope | () |
| There's no way I'll be able to manage all this | () |
| I'm going to end up missing something | () |
| I'm losing control | () |

Behaviour Patterns

- | | |
|---------------------|-----|
| Being busy non-stop | () |
| Easily irritated | () |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Finding it difficult to concentrate | () |
| Being easily distracted | () |
| Procrastinating | () |

If you have ticked a number of these boxes it is possible that you are experiencing symptoms of stress. However don't be alarmed, this is a common problem that can be overcome.

How is stress treated?

There are a number of simple things that you can do yourself to help reduce your stress symptoms:

- **Talk to someone** – Social engagement is the body's most evolved strategy for responding to stress so it's no surprise that people with a strong network of supportive friends and family members are better able to cope with life's stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the less opportunity you have to utilize social engagement and the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Exercise.** Your physical and mental health are intrinsically linked, so the better you take care of your body, the greater resilience you'll have against the symptoms of stress. Exercising regularly (for 30 minutes or more on most days) can lift your mood and help relieve stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It can also serve as a distraction to your worries, allowing you to find some quiet time and break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress and anxiety.
- **Look after your diet.** The food you eat can also have a profound effect on your mood and how well you cope with life's stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks

can worsen symptoms of stress while eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and healthy fats especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life's ups and downs.

- **Try to have a positive attitude** – Optimistic people are often more stress-hardy. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, and accept that change is a part of life.
- **Try to regulate your emotions as best you can** – You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or overwhelmed by a situation. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you bounce back from adversity and is a skill that can be learned at any age.
- **Educate yourself** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.
- **Set aside relaxation time.** Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the fight or flight stress response. The following section has some further information on relaxation exercises.
- **Avoid stimulants such as alcohol, caffeine and drugs.** These will only heighten your physical feelings of anxiety

that come with feeling stress. These also impact on your ability to cope and control behaviors.

In terms of acute stress disorder, medication and psychotherapy options exist. In most cases, the individual's disorder will resolve itself over time but for more severe cases, medication such as anti-depressants may be prescribed in order to alleviate some of the symptoms. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and exposure-based therapies have been shown to increase recovery speed and help prevent acute stress disorder from turning into PTSD.

Some self-help skills for treating stress

- **Challenging Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs)**

The way that we think about things can impact on our stress. Our thoughts can feed into our behaviours, our feelings and how we feel physically, and so it is important to remember that they are just thoughts, and not facts. If thoughts are not facts, then they can be challenged. Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) are common contributors to stress and recognizing them is the first step in learning to change them. By becoming aware of these thoughts and the effect that they are having on us, we are working towards reducing our levels of stress. Below are some common NATs:

- **Predicting the Future:** When we are feeling stressed, it is common for us to spend a lot of time thinking about the future and predicting what could go wrong, rather than just letting things be. In the end most of our predictions don't happen and we have wasted time and energy being worried and upset about them. e.g. Assuming you will perform poorly at your job interview.

- **Mind Reading:** This means that you make assumptions about others' beliefs without having any real evidence to support them. e.g. My boss thinks I'm stupid.
- **Catastrophising:** People commonly 'catastrophise' when they are stressed, which basically means that they often blow things out of proportion. e.g. They assume that something that has happened is far worse than it really is (e.g. that their friend is going to dislike them because they cancelled a night out).
- **Focusing on the Negatives:** People who are stressed often have a tendency to focus on the negatives which keeps their anxiety going. e.g. They focus on the one person at work who doesn't like them, ignoring that they are very popular with the rest of their colleagues.
- **Should Statements:** People often imagine how they would like things to be or how they 'should be' rather than accepting how things really are. Unfortunately when we do this, we are simply applying extra pressure to ourselves that can result in further stress. Instead it can sometimes help to accept that things can't always be perfect. e.g. I should never be stressed.
- **Over Generalising:** Based on one isolated incident you assume that all others will follow a similar pattern in the future. e.g. When enrolling on a college course, you meet a future classmate who you find irritating. As a result, you worry that everyone in the class will be the same and you won't make any friends.

- **What If Statements:** Have you ever wondered "what if" something bad happens? This type of thought can often make us avoid going places or doing the things that we would like and ultimately causes us to become stressed.
- **Labelling:** Do you find that you attach negative labels to yourself? e.g. I'm weak. Labels like these really influence how we see ourselves and can heighten our stress levels.

If some of these thought processes resonate with how you think about things, it might be useful to try to challenge your NATs.

Below is a helpful template to track your challenging thoughts:

| Where were you? | Emotion or feeling | Negative automatic thought | Evidence that supports that thought | Evidence that does not support that thought | Alternative thought | Emotion or feeling following alternative thought |
|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------|--|
| | | | | | | |

- **Relaxation techniques.**

It is important to make time to relax in order to improve your overall stress levels. Stress is more than just a feeling. It's the body's physical "fight or flight" reaction to a perceived social threat. Your heart pounds, you breathe faster, your muscles tense up, and you feel light-headed. When you're relaxed, the complete opposite happens. Since it's impossible to be anxious and relaxed at the same time, strengthening your body's relaxation response is a powerful anxiety-relieving tactic. Progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and meditation can help you to relax. These are skills that might take some practice initially.

The following are a set of links to further information about these relaxation techniques.

Progressive muscle relaxation can help you release muscle tension and take a "time out" from your worries. The technique involves systematically tensing and then releasing different muscle groups in your body. As your body relaxes, your mind will follow.

<http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/ACF3C67.pdf>

<http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/MuscleRelaxation.pdf>

Deep breathing. When you're anxious, you breathe faster. This hyperventilation causes symptoms such as dizziness, breathlessness, lightheadedness, and tingly hands and feet. These physical symptoms are frightening, leading to further anxiety and panic. But by breathing deeply from the diaphragm, you can reverse these symptoms and calm yourself down.

<http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/CalmBreathing.pdf>

<http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/ACF3C8B.pdf>

Meditation. Research shows that mindfulness meditation can actually change your brain. With regular practice, meditation boosts activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of serenity and joy.

http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=21

<http://cdn.franticworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Mindfulness-Of-Body-And-Breath-from-book-Mindfulness-Finding-Peace-in-a-Frantic-World-128k.mp3>

- **Problem-solving**

You might find it more difficult to cope if you have lots of problems that you can't seem to get on top of. This can have a clear impact on our stress levels. Struggling with unresolved problems can often make us feel worse. We can end up worrying or ruminating over our problems without finding a way to resolve them. This can make us feel even more upset, and can end up interfering with our sleep.

It can help to develop a structured way of working through a problem. Beginning to overcome some of your problems might help you to feel better. You can improve your problem solving skills by learning to apply the steps outlined here:

1. Identify your problems
2. Come up with a number of possible solutions. Don't worry how silly or unrealistic the ideas seems, write down anything and everything.
3. Choose a solution. Think carefully about each option. It useful to do a pros and cons list for each option, this will help you to make the best decision.
4. Break down your solution. It can be helpful to break down the solution into a number of steps.
5. Try your solution out and review the outcome. Follow the steps required to carry out your solution. Go at your own pace and don't allow yourself to feel too rushed. Once you have completed all the steps, try to review the outcome. If you have not resolved your problem work back to try another solution.

The following template can be helpful for problem-solving:

Problem Solving

Identify a problem and try to come up with solutions to overcome it. By considering all of the options you will hopefully come up with the best solution.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Identify Your Problem | |
|-----------------------|--|



| | |
|-----|---------|
| For | Against |
| | |



ΔTΔ



| |
|-----------------|
| Chosen Solution |
|-----------------|

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Steps Required | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |



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Some helpful links for dealing with stress:

Self-help for dealing with stress

<http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stress.htm>

Self-help for dealing with stress and worry

<http://www.cope.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/stress-and-worry-your-self-help-guide.pdf>

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