



Stress...

Stress is a part of day-to-day living. Mild forms of stress can act as a motivator and energiser. However, if your stress level is too high, medical and social problems can result. Although we tend to think of stress as caused by external events, events in themselves are not stressful. Rather, it is the way in which we interpret and react to events that makes them stressful. People differ dramatically in the type of events they interpret as stressful and the way in which they respond to such stress.

All sorts of situations can cause stress. The most common involve work, money matters and relationships with partners, children or other family members.

Stress may be caused either by major upheavals and life events such as divorce, unemployment, moving house and bereavement, or by a series of minor irritations such as feeling undervalued at work or dealing with difficult children. Sometimes there are no obvious causes.

Some stress can be positive and research has suggested that a moderate level of stress makes us perform better. It also makes us more alert and can help us in challenging situations such as job interviews or public speaking.

But stress is only healthy as a short-lived response. Excessive or prolonged stress can lead to illness and physical and emotional exhaustion.

What are the warning signs of stress?

Your body sends out physical, emotional, and behavioural warning signs of stress.

Emotional warning signs include:

- Anxiety (see our **Fear & Anxiety** factsheet)
- Sleep disruption
- Anger
- Inability to concentrate
- Unproductive worry
- Sadness
- Frequent mood swings

Physical warning signs include:

- Stooped posture
- Sweaty palms
- Chronic fatigue
- Weight gain or loss
- Physical symptoms that your doctor cannot attribute to another condition

Behavioural warning signs include:

- Over-reacting
- Acting on impulse
- Using alcohol or drugs
- Withdrawing from relationships
- Changing jobs often
- Feeling agitated most of the time

How to cope with stress

Recognition

An important step in tackling stress is to realise that it is causing you a problem. You need to make the connection between feeling tired or ill with the pressures you are faced with.

Do not ignore physical warnings such as tense muscles, over-tiredness, headaches or migraines. If you find yourself becoming angry or upset you may find it helpful to take time out, even if it's only for five minutes.

Relaxation

Take time to relax – Atrium counsellors can give you some useful relaxation techniques. Saying 'I just can't take the time off' is no excuse if you want to feel better.

Striking a balance between responsibility to others and to yourself is vital in reducing stress levels. Relaxation classes can help you learn how to control muscular tension and breathe correctly. Also try to spend more time on leisure activities such as sports, hobbies or evening classes (see below).

Letting go

Once you have recognised you are suffering from stress, try to identify the underlying causes. Sort the possible reasons into those with a practical solution, those that will get better anyway, given time, and those you can't do anything about. Try to let go of those in the second and third groups – there is no point in worrying about things you can't change or things that will sort themselves out.

Counselling

Some problems may be more complicated and need to be dealt with head on. If you are going through a bad patch in your marriage, for instance, you have to begin to talk things through. Atrium has counsellors trained in listening and helping to guide you through your problems.

Self-help

Review your lifestyle. Are you taking on too much? You may need to prioritise things you are trying to achieve and reorganise your life so that you are not trying to do everything at once.

Healthy eating and exercise

Exercise and a healthy diet can help protect you from stress.

If you are feeling angry, for example, it can be really helpful to play a game of squash in which you take out your anger on the ball (but not on the player). Even moderate physical exercise, like walking to the shops, can help.

Try to keep smoking and drinking to a minimum. They may seem to reduce tension, but in fact they can make problems worse.

Enjoy yourself!

Bring some fun into your life by giving yourself treats and rewards for positive actions, attitudes and thoughts. Even simple pleasures like a relaxing bath, a pleasant walk or an interesting book can all help you deal with stress.

For more help or information, visit your GP or contact:

Atrium Clinic and Therapy Centre
13 Weston Road, Southend
01702 342 256
www.atriumclinic.co.uk

For more background reading:

Mental Health Foundation
020 780 31101
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

All enquiries are dealt with compassionately, efficiently and in the strictest confidence.

A GP referral is not essential for self-funding patients

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Clinic and Therapy Centre
Bringing back the brightness