Stress

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Stress is when you feel under pressure to do something and think you will fail. A balanced lifestyle and coping strategies can help you manage stress. Issues that cause stress cannot always be resolved but changing your expectations of a problem may help. Untreated stress can lead to serious illness. It’s important to get help if you feel you can’t cope.

Stress is a process, not a diagnosis. We experience stress when there is an imbalance between the demands being made on us and our resources to cope with those demands. The level and extent of stress a person may feel depends a great deal on their attitude to a particular situation. An event that may be extremely stressful for one person can be a mere hiccup in another person’s life.

You may feel under pressure to do something and fear you may fail. The more important the outcome, the more stressed you feel. You can feel stressed by external situations (too much work, children misbehaving) and by internal triggers (the way you think about external situations).

Stress is not always a bad thing. Some people thrive on stress and even need it to get things done. When the term ’stress’ is used in a clinical sense, it refers to a situation that causes discomfort and distress for a person and can lead to other mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.

Stress may also contribute to physical illness such as cardiovascular disease. When stress turns into a serious illness, it is important to get professional help as soon as possible. Untreated anxiety disorders can lead to serious depression.

Effects of stress

Stress affects us in many ways, including:
- Emotionally – anxiety, depression, tension, anger
- The way we think – poor concentration, forgetfulness, indecisiveness, apathy, hopelessness
- Behaviourally – increased drinking and smoking, insomnia, accident proneness, weight problems, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, nervousness, gambling.

Your response to stress

Your attitude, personality and approach to life will influence how you respond to stress. Factors that play a part include:
- How you think about a problem
- How anxious you feel generally
- How severely the problem affects you
- Whether you have experienced anything like this before
- Whether you can control what is happening
- How long the event affects you
- How important the outcome is to you
- The different ways a person copes with difficult situations
- Your life experiences and life history
- Your self-esteem
- Whether you have people around who can provide support.

Stress as a health problem

As a health problem, stress occurs when a person feels that the demands made on them exceed their ability to cope. Factors contributing to a person feeling stressed might include:
- Environment (work, home, school)
- Lifestyle
- Emotional and personal problems.

Stress and physical illness

When we feel under stress, our body kicks into high gear to deal with the threat. Our heartbeat, breathing rate and blood pressure all go up. The longer we feel stressed, the greater the demand on our body.

The more often we are placed under stress, the more often we have to use energy to cope. There is growing evidence that stress may contribute to physical illness such as cardiovascular disease (although this link remains controversial and research is ongoing), high blood pressure, proneness to infection and chronic fatigue.
Whatever the cause, physical diseases need appropriate medical management before any attempt is made at stress management. Discuss with your doctor how stress management may be used to support treatment of your physical symptoms.

Stress and anxiety

Untreated stress can turn into a mental illness such as an anxiety disorder or depression.

Almost everyone experiences some anxiety. This is normal. However, an anxiety disorder is different from everyday anxiety – it is more severe, can persist and may interfere with a person’s daily life.

Common anxiety disorders include:

- Panic disorder
- Specific phobias – such as fear of flying or of spiders
- Agoraphobia – fear of public places or of being away from home
- Social anxiety disorder – fear of the scrutiny and judgement of others
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – following a real and very distressing event such as a disaster, accident, war, torture, violent death or assault.

Other, less common, anxiety disorders include:

- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Acute stress disorder
- Generalised anxiety disorder – the person is constantly worried, often about irrational things, and cannot be reassured.

Anxiety is a very treatable condition. There are many different psychological and medication options. Treatments need to be individually decided on and regularly reviewed to make sure they are effective and to minimise side effects of medications. Separately and in combination, psychotherapy and medication therapy generally produce good results.

Untreated anxiety disorders and depression

Untreated anxiety disorders can lead to serious depression. Depressive illness is common – about 17 per cent of Australians will suffer from depression at some time in their life.

Depression is about twice as common in women as in men. The most common time in life for people to suffer from depression is in their 40s. However, it can develop at any age. Depression is often associated with an increased incidence of suicide. The annual suicide rate for people with depression is three or four times higher than that of other psychiatric disorders.

Stress at work

Stress in the workplace is common and is caused by many different factors, including excessive hours, conflicts with others and feelings of isolation. The amount of stress a person experiences is often determined by whether or not they can accept that some things in life will simply never be sorted out to their satisfaction. For example, a person may feel stressed by the way they are treated by their employer or by the behaviour of a work colleague.

Sometimes, this stress can be resolved by dealing with the particular behaviour. In many organisations, there are processes to deal with workplace problems like harassment, victimisation or unfair treatment. In many cases, the problem can be resolved if the behaviour is changed.

However, some problems will never be fully resolved and you may have to accept them. For example, if someone who you think is poorly qualified is given a job you felt entitled to, you may continue to feel stressed, unless you are able to let go of that grievance and move on.

Management of stress

The old adage ‘prevention is better than cure’ is certainly true for stress management. It will help if you:

- Exercise regularly – regular exercise is a great way to manage stress. You should do some form of exercise that causes you to feel puffed afterwards – a leisurely stroll to the bus stop is not enough! Have at least 20 minutes of exercise three times a week
- Avoid conflict – avoid situations that make you feel stressed such as unnecessary arguments and conflict (although ignoring a problem is not always the best way to reduce stress). Assertiveness is fine but becoming distressed is not
- Relax – give yourself some time to relax each day and try to spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself
- Eat well – a nutritious diet is important. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and avoid sweet and fatty foods
- Sleep – a good sleep routine is essential. If you have difficulty falling asleep, do something calm and relaxing before you go to bed like listening to music or reading
- Enjoy your life – it’s important to make time to have some fun and to get a balance in your life.

To deal with stress more effectively, it helps to investigate your stresses and how you react to them. Try to:

- Understand what situations make you feel stressed
- Understand what situations you can and can’t control
- Prepare for stressful events in advance, by thinking about the future
- Keep yourself healthy with good nutrition, exercise and regular relaxation
- Try to do happy things every day.

Getting help for stress

You should see your doctor or community health centre if:

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• You feel stressed often
• Particular things stress you and you feel they are beyond your control
• You feel your reactions to stress are extreme or worry you
• You feel anxious or depressed about stress.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• Psychologist or counsellor
• This way up - an online Coping with Stress and an Intro to Mindfulness course developed by the Clinical Research Unit of Anxiety and Depression (CRUfAD) at St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney and University of New South Wales (UNSW) Faculty of Medicine.
• Community mental health service
• Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria) Tel. (03) 9826 1422 (Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm)
• Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
• Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
• Suicide Helpline Tel. 1300 651 251
• Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria: OCD and Anxiety Helpline Tel. (03) 9830 0533 or 1300 ANXIETY (269 438)

Things to remember

• Stress is when you feel under pressure to do something and think you will fail.
• A balanced lifestyle and coping strategies can help you manage stress.
• Issues that cause stress cannot always be resolved but changing your expectations of a problem may help.
• Untreated stress can lead to serious illness.
• It’s important to get help if you feel you can’t cope.

References

Healthy mind basics

- Exercise and mental health
  
  We all know how important exercise is for keeping us physically healthy. But did you know that exercise can also help keep you mentally healthy? Research shows that people who exercise regularly have...

- Exercise and mood
  
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise...

- It's okay to feel sad
  
  Sadness is a feeling that everyone experiences. It is part of life. We can respond to our sadness in ways that help us feel better...

- Monitoring your mood
  
  Most people know when they are feeling ‘in a mood’. But do you know what 'mood' means? Or where your mood comes from? Or how to change your mood? Understanding your moods may help you work out what...

- Mood and sleep
  
  Getting enough sleep is vital. Long term sleep deficiency can affect your mood. You can improve your sleep quality...

- Talking through problems
  
  Kids and teenagers may be worried that adults won't take their feelings seriously...
Talking to health professionals about mental health issues

Talking with a doctor or healthcare professional about your mental health issues will help you to feel comfortable and get the most appropriate treatment for your needs.

Healthy thinking

- **Assertiveness**
  It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity.

- **Exercise and mood**
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise.

- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)**
  Worrying can be constructive if it helps you to work out possible solutions to a problem, but some people are troubled by excessive anxiety.

- **It's okay to feel sad**
  Sadness is a feeling that everyone experiences. It is part of life. We can respond to our sadness in ways that help us feel better.

- **Look after your health at harvest time**
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

- **Negative emotions**
  Negative emotions can dampen our enthusiasm for life, depending on how long we let them affect us.

- **Rural issues - coping with stress**
  The effort of trying to provide for the family and keep the farm going can be intensely stressful.

- **Rural issues - suggestions for families in crisis**
  Financial hardship can increase the risk of workplace accidents on a farm.

- **Self esteem**
  Low self-esteem can be remedied but it takes attention and daily practice.

- **Self-harm and self-injury**
  Self-harm and self-injury is when people hurt themselves on purpose, usually in response to intense emotional pain or negative feelings, thoughts or memories.

- **Stress**
  Stress affects people in different ways, but a balanced lifestyle can help you manage everyday stress.

- **Stress busters**
  Stress can affect your health and your life, so you need to know effective ways of dealing with your stress.

- **Strong relationships, strong health**
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

- **Talking through problems**
  Kids and teenagers may be worried that adults won't take their feelings seriously.

Healthy mind throughout life

- **Bullying**
  Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions.

- **Christmas can be stressful**
  The expense of gifts and food, the pressure of shopping, and the expectations of the season can make Christmas an extremely stressful time.

- **Exercise and mood**
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise.
Healthy ageing - stay involved
Reach out to the world around you for fun, a sense of achievement, social contact and mental stimulation...

Healthy ageing - stay mentally active
Researchers believe that many of the supposed age-related changes affecting the mind, such as memory loss, are actually lifestyle related...

Holiday stress
Holidays are supposed to offer relaxation and recuperation, but some people find them disappointingly stressful...

How to volunteer and boost your health
Volunteering is great for our health – it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process...

Internet safety for children
A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints...

Meditation [infographic]
Mindfulness meditation has a range of benefits and can help clear your mind...

Pregnancy and your mental health
Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby...

Secrets to healthy ageing
Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

Strong relationships, strong health
Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

Tertiary studies - managing stress
Stress is a common issue for all tertiary students, but there are lots of ways to manage your stress...

Tertiary studies - mature age students
Returning to study as a mature age student presents many challenges and rewards...

Workplace conflict
A clash of personalities at work is bad for business, because it can affect productivity and increase absenteeism...

Work-related stress
Work-related stress causes an increase in sick days and absenteeism, a higher turnover of staff and a drop in productivity...

Year 12 exams - managing stress
Help your child manage stress during exams by getting them to use good study habits, eat well, exercise, relax, sleep and keep things in perspective...

Identity and relationships

Anger - how it affects people
Well-managed anger can be a useful emotion that motivates you to make positive changes...

Anger - tips to resolve arguments
There are many people you can talk to who can help you overcome feelings of wanting to lash out...

Body image and diets
Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...

Body image and young people - staying positive [video]
The pressure on young girls and boys to be physically perfect is creating an epidemic of children and teenagers with low self-esteem and negative body image. Reporter Flip Shelton introduces us to the...

Body image - men
Homosexual men and athletes are particularly vulnerable to poor body image or feeling insecure about their bodies...

Body image – tips for parents
Give your child opportunities to appreciate their body for what it can do, rather than what it looks like.

- **Body image - women**
  The urge to diet or use other dangerous weight loss methods is almost always prompted by feeling unhappy with body shape or size.

- **Family conflict**
  It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time and occasional conflict is part of family life.

- **Is my body normal? (Boys)**
  Boys’ bodies come in all shapes and sizes. As you get older, and go through puberty, you become more aware of your body and how it compares with others.

- **Is my body normal? (Girls)**
  Puberty is a time when your body goes through lots of changes. It’s wonderful and exciting, and can sometimes feel overwhelming. This is the time your body changes from being a girl into being a woman.

- **Making friends**
  Friendships are an important part of life, but many of us find it difficult to find, make or keep friends.

- **Peer pressure**
  Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager’s life.

- **Strong relationships, strong health**
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

**Getting help**

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy**
  Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving.

- **Counsellors**
  Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor.

- **Fighting your fears**
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

- **It's okay to feel sad**
  Sadness is a feeling that everyone experiences. It is part of life. We can respond to our sadness in ways that help us feel better.

- **Mental health problems - early care helps**
  If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it’s important to seek professional help early.

- **Pregnancy and your mental health**
  Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby.

- **Psychoanalysis**
  Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past.

- **Strong relationships, strong health**
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

- **Talking through problems**
  Kids and teenagers may be worried that adults won’t take their feelings seriously.

- **Talking to health professionals about mental health issues**
  Talking with a doctor or healthcare professional about your mental health issues will help you to feel comfortable and get the most appropriate treatment for your needs.

**Goals, tips and tools**
- 10 tips for being assertive
  Practise speaking in an assertive voice...
- 10 tips to improve your mental fitness
  The brain is like a muscle – if you don’t give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical...
- 10 tips to raise an optimistic child
  Be a positive role model...
- 10 tips to stay mentally healthy
  Take a few tips to improve your health and wellbeing...
- Fighting your fears
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life...
- How to volunteer and boost your health
  Volunteering is great for our health – it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process...
- Relaxation and alternative therapies
  - Alexander technique
    The Alexander technique stresses that movement should be economical and needs only the minimum amount of energy and effort...
  - Aromatherapy
    The different smells and chemical constituents of aromatherapy oils can produce different emotional and physiological reactions...
  - Breathing to reduce stress
    Many people use controlled breathing to help promote relaxation and reduce the effects of stress...
  - Fighting your fears
    Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life...
  - Laughter clubs (video)
    Laughter has some great health benefits such as boosting your immune system, lowering your blood pressure and reducing stress...
  - Meditation (infographic)
    Mindfulness meditation has a range of benefits and can help clear your mind...
  - Pregnancy and your mental health
    Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby...
- Health conditions and mental health
  betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Alcohol and drugs - dependence and addiction
  Asking for help when you first suspect you have an alcohol or drug problem is important. If you think you have an addiction, speak to your local doctor or phone DirectLine...

- Anxiety disorders
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people...

- Dementia explained
  Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and can happen to anybody...

- Depression explained
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support...

- Eating disorders
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups...

- Exercise and mood
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it's important to keep up an exercise...

- Fighting your fears
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life...

- Mental illness explained
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness...

- Postnatal depression (PND)
  Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...

Related Information
- Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
  Worrying can be constructive if it helps you to work out possible solutions to a problem, but some people are troubled by excessive anxiety...

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Home
Related information on other websites
- Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria – Types of anxiety disorders.
- Australian Psychological Society – Tip sheets.
- beyondblue
- Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria).
- Return to Work Knowledge Base.
- Stress Tips

Support Groups
- Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

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