

TOO BLESSED TO BE STRESSED

Stress Information Handout

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Stress has become one of the great metaphors of Western life. It is a ubiquitous part of everyday modern living. In fact in 2014 one in four Australians reported moderate to severe levels of distress.

So it would seem then that most of us are faced with stressful situations on a regular basis. These are usually fairly minor stress indicators such as making deadlines, running late to meet a friend, studying for an exam or terrible coffee. At other times these stressors may be more significant such as a death in the family, divorce or losing a job and struggling financially. Regardless of the reasons there can be a physical and psychological impact.

Understanding stress

Stress is both a psychological and a physical response to feeling overloaded or challenged beyond the point at which people are able to cope. Physically, stress activates the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and triggers the release of a cascade of hormones and neurotransmitters, notably adrenaline and cortisol (the flight or fight response). These hormones increase the heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, metabolism, perspiration rate, muscle tension and dilate the pupils. Anxiety is the psychophysiologic signal that the stress response has been initiated. This is a normal health response to stress. Most importantly, however, is that a healthy stress response involves a calming of these hormones once the threat has dissipated.

With prolonged stress these substances can become exhausted leading to a gradual decline of adrenal function and neurotransmitters, and finally to a state of adrenal and mental exhaustion. This can lead to a range of pathologies that cannot be

successfully treated unless the underlying HPA dysregulation has been addressed.

Physical responses to undue levels of stress, or sustained stress, include increased heart rate, headaches, high blood pressure, high blood sugar levels, muscular aches and pains, fatigue, sleep disturbance, insomnia, stomach upsets and decreased immune responses.

Some of the psychological consequences of undue stress can include insomnia, anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, changes in mood, helplessness, concentration or memory difficulties, low self-esteem, or feeling overwhelmed, tearful, worried and out of control.

Chronic stress, where stress levels remain high for an extended period of time, puts us at the greatest risk of developing these symptoms and it is many of these effects which can cause us the most physical damage (such as risk of heart attack and diabetes) over time.

*“When we long for life
without difficulties,
remind us that oaks
grow strong in contrary
winds and diamonds are
made under pressure.”
~ Peter Marshall*

What causes stress

Stress can come from a number of risk factors (stressors) including:

- Biological factors such as genetic predispositions, poor physical health, some medications.
- Social-environmental factors such as relationships with others, life changes such as marriage, divorce or retirement, day-to-day activities and tasks, work related issues, study demands, lack of social support, financial hardship, unemployment, positive events such as organising holidays or parties, juggling many roles or tasks at the same time.

- Psychological factors such as low self-esteem, negative perceptions and beliefs, unhelpful coping strategies.

Stress Management

Because of the effects of stress there are good reasons to take active steps to reduce stress. Some people are aware of what tends to trigger their stress and this increases their ability to either prevent stress or to handle it more effectively. Many others are less able to deal with stress and identifying stressors is a key step in this.

- Identify your stressors and see if there are some things within your control to manage better. Some things will be beyond your control, for example if you work in a job that is based on working towards deadlines then you can't change this without changing jobs. But perhaps you can control some aspects, such as scheduling to have at least a short lunch break each day, or go to bed earlier so that you have more energy to cope with the daytime.
- Exercise on a regular basis: Even moderate levels of exercise (30 minutes per day of gentle walking) contribute to burning up a lot of excess tension and anxiety that builds up due to inactivity.
- Eat and sleep well: When you don't get enough sleep not only are you more reactive to stress but your cognitive functioning isn't as sharp. What you eat can impact how you feel. Just as lost sleep can impact your reactivity so can the wrong diet. Stress can also impact what you crave and lead to emotional eating.
- Explore stress coping programs which may incorporate meditation, yoga, tai chi, deep breathing or other gentle exercises.
- Listen to calming music. Music that sounds soft and easy can aid greatly in helping to slow down some of the psychic noise that may be running through the back of a person's mind. Classical music is a good genre of music to listen to when the goal is stress reduction.
- Take in the natural world. Watching the sun rise, the ocean waves, or simply sitting in a park can have a calming effect.
- Take time out for family, friends and recreational activities. Most of us know that this is important

but we do not all do it. If you find it hard to make time for this, perhaps you need to take deliberate steps to have time out, such as set aside one evening a week where you meet up with friends or enjoy a hobby, or set aside one day of the weekend for relaxing at home.

- Read a book that contributes to cutting down on stress. A book can take the mind off stress, although the right genres should be selected. Horror novels and books that are nihilistic are not great for reducing anxiety. Upbeat and positive works are far wiser choices.
- Watch a funny movie or go to a comedy club: Laughter is a strong medicine for the mind and body and a powerful antidote to stress, pain and conflict.
- Problem-solving techniques can be a useful way of clarifying the problem, brainstorming possible solutions, and then choosing one to put into action after listing the pros and cons of each option.
- You may wish to speak to a professional about assertiveness training and communication skills which can help you to deal with challenging situations more effectively, thereby reducing stress.
- Consider whether there is negative thinking which is contributing to your stress. Negative thinking can make us worry more than is necessary, increasing stress, and generally does not motivate us to take positive actions.
- Take time out to let the above strategies work. Stress reduction does not go away overnight. The right amount of time and commitment is required to experience necessary results.

Unhealthy coping behaviours

Sugar, caffeine, junk food

Often when you are stressed you lack energy and then consume too much of these foods. Overindulgence in these foods actually increases the physical symptoms of stress.

Alcohol, smoking and recreational drugs

It can be tempting to increase intake of these substances and, while a small amount of alcohol can

be relaxing, you can become dependent on it if you rely on it as the only way of reducing stress.

Prescribed Tranquilisers

Pharmaceuticals such as Valium or Xanax are efficacious but they are also highly addictive and should only be used under the supervision of a doctor. They are associated with tolerance, dependence and withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal from use should be gradual and performed under medical supervision. For these reasons their use should be short-term and judicious.

My naturopath asked me if I've ever had a stress test. Sure ... it's called LIFE.

Stress and Anxiety Disorders

Agoraphobia

People who have panic attacks (sudden intense waves of fear) sometimes become afraid of going places where they might be unable to get help or return home easily. Avoidance due to fear of panic attacks is called agoraphobia.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder

This is diagnosed in people with excessive worry and anxiety which the person finds difficult to control. It is associated with a wide variety of physical signs of arousal including restlessness, trembling, feeling keyed up or on edge, concentration problems, being easily startled, fatigue, having difficulty sleeping and being irritable.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

A condition that causes repetitive, intrusive thoughts and the compulsion to complete certain ritual actions. The thoughts might be of things like hurting someone you love without wanting to, making a horrible mistake or being contaminated with dirt or germs. Examples of compulsions might be washing your hands repeatedly or checking the stove or door locks.

Panic Disorder

A condition that causes moments of extreme fear and involves several intense physical signs of anxiety such as a pounding heart and shortness of breath, commonly known as panic attacks.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Those who have been involved with a life-threatening event, either as a witness or a victim, often have some difficulty in recovering from the trauma. They may re-experience the event through nightmares or flashbacks, feel generally anxious and depressed, or feel numb and disconnected from life around them.

Specific Phobia

Specific phobias involve intense and irrational fear of specific situations or things, such as heights, flying, thunderstorms, driving, seeing blood, certain animals or insects or enclosed places. Although many people have fears of these things they are not called phobias unless they interfere with day-to-day functioning or the person is strongly bothered by having the fear.

Social Phobia and Public Speaking Anxiety

People with social phobia have intense feelings of anxiety in situations that involve the possibility of interacting with other people. For some, this fear is limited to public speaking.

Stressful Events

Coping with stressors like having a medical procedure performed or taking an important test can be difficult. People often feel anxious for several days ahead of time and some even have trouble sleeping. Everyone feels the pressure of stressors like these but some people have so much trouble coping that they are unable to continue to function normally.

Interesting stress facts

- The word 'stress' derives from the Latin stringere (to draw tight).
- The Australian Psychological Society's Stress and Wellbeing in Australia survey 2014 has found that young adults (18-25 and 26-35 year age group) experience higher levels of stress than

the remainder of the population. Financial issues were the top source of stress for men (44%) and women (53%) with one's workplace accounting for 44% of the reasons why working Australians experience stress.

- Cocoa and chocolate, which are rich in antioxidants, are known to reduce stress. There are several bioactive compounds in chocolate that promote alertness. A recent study in Switzerland confirmed that chocolate alleviates stress. Following 14 days of dark chocolate ingestion, stress parameters in the adults exhibiting high anxiety profiles became comparable with the low-stress subjects. Chocolate affects stress levels by prompting serotonin production which is a calming neurotransmitter.
- Stress is one of the main factors causing insomnia and other sleep disorders. When stressors are present the body naturally heightens its response system leading to wakefulness.
- Laughter is one of the best medicines for stress. Not only is it associated with feelings of wellbeing it also lowers levels of stress-aggravating hormones cortisol, adrenaline and epinephrine.

STRESSED is DESSERTS spelled backwards.

- While it is a myth that stress can turn hair grey, stress can cause telogen effluvium (hair loss).
- There is controversy over whether psychological stress contributes to the development of peptic ulcers. The most common cause of peptic ulcers is infection by *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria or the use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.
- Sexual interaction and physical affection between two people has been shown to improve mood and reduce stress, with improved mood and reduced stress in turn increasing the likelihood of future sex and physical affection.

What help is available

Counselling is available through psychologists or social workers. Medicare rebates are available for psychological treatment by registered psychologists

under the Australian Government's Better Access to Mental Health Care initiative. A Medicare rebate is available for up to 10 sessions a year if you have a GP referral.

Australian Psychological Society

Australia's largest professional association for psychologists

www.psychology.org.au

Beyond Blue

Provides information on anxiety, depression and related disorders

www.beyondblue.org.au

Headspace

Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation providing assistance for individuals aged 12-25

www.headspace.org.au

Lifeline

A 24-hour counselling, suicide prevention and mental health support service. The phone number is: 13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

Local Council

The local Community Health Centre may offer counselling and support services.

Resources

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