



mental health
association nsw

Recognising and Managing Stress

What Is Stress?

We are all familiar with stress. It is a normal response that we experience to some extent every day. A certain level of stress is necessary to not only function, but to motivate us to reach our full potential. Too much stress, however, can be a health hazard. The first important step in stress management involves noticing when our stress levels have become unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised there is a range of stress management skills available to address the problem.

What Are The Symptoms?

A state of chronic stress is not reached overnight - it takes time! Before reaching this state we may notice many symptoms. Rather than acknowledge the signs, we may push ourselves harder, pretending that everything is fine. This continual exposure decreases our ability to function in every area of our lives. The good news is we can stop stress escalating by recognising the warning signs:

Behavioural Changes in appetite Problems in relationships Increased nicotine, alcohol or caffeine use	Emotional Tense and anxious Depressed Lack of enthusiasm
Physical Headaches Heart palpitations Nausea and fatigue Muscle aches and pains Increased sweating Constipation or diarrhoea	Cognitive Impaired judgement Negative thoughts Loss of concentration Forgetfulness Difficulty making decisions Bad dreams

What Causes Problem Stress?

There are many explanations about why we experience excessive stress. Some studies suggest that individuals inherit the tendency to feel more stress. Others describe stress as a response that is learned over a lifetime. Thus, people who experience high levels of stress tend to hold beliefs which make them feel threatened, hyper-vigilant and out of control. These studies indicate that thinking plays an important role in our response to stress.

Irrespective of the cause, stress is an increasing part of our lives, and ignoring it will not make it go away. Once stress overload is recognised, there are skills you can acquire to address the problem.

Managing Stress

Does what I eat matter?

When we experience stress, our bodies use up enormous amounts of vitamins and minerals. The depletion of our body's nutrients can leave us tired, run down, irritable and less able to deal with our responsibilities. Vitamins C and B complex, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc are the hardest hit. These can be restored through a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy products, nuts, yeast, brown rice, fish, liver, eggs and kelp. Sometimes the foods that we reach for when stressed are the foods that interfere with our body's ability to absorb vitamins and minerals and therefore compound the stress experienced. Foods to steer clear of when stressed include tea, coffee, cakes, biscuits, soft drinks, chocolate and white bread.

Is exercise useful?

Physical exercise is invaluable in releasing tension and assists in the processing of vitamins and minerals. Any physical exercise is helpful - walking, swimming, jogging or gardening. Exercise need not be a chore - especially if it is done with friends. The most important point to remember is to do it regularly.

How can I relax?

Relaxation is a useful tool, either used alone or in conjunction with other strategies. The most common form of relaxation exercise involves progressive muscle relaxation. This involves consciously focusing on one area of the body at a time, clenching the muscles, and then relaxing them. When relaxing your muscles, imagine all the tension flowing from your body. This exercise can be performed lying down or sitting.

If you can, make time to relax each day. You will be amazed by how quickly the physical tension you experience is reduced. Relaxation can also mean listening to music, stroking your pet, having a nap or reading a good book. A meditation program will also prepare you to manage both physical and mental stress and will help to recharge your system. The most important thing is to set aside time for it to happen.

How can I practise 'realistic thinking'?

Beliefs and thoughts determine the intensity of our feelings when faced with a stressful situation. When we are experiencing extreme feelings of stress, it is often because we are having extreme thoughts. For example, extreme feelings of hopelessness and frustration can be a result of thinking, 'I can't stand it. I'm never going to get this done in time.' As we overestimate the consequences of any event we become increasingly stressed.

To begin to think realistically try the following:

- Think about what is making you feel this way
- Question how likely it is that this will happen
- Ask what is the worst possible outcome
- Consider the likelihood of the outcome in the scheme of things-look at the 'big picture.'

This simple exercise can be helpful in changing the way we think, and therefore feel, in stressful situations.

Can I re-organise my time?

We can reduce the amount of stress we experience by using our time and energy more effectively. A realistic list of things to do for the day is a good start. Allow ample time to get things on your list done. It is important to acknowledge that you can only do so much in a given period. Setting priorities and learning to slow down are essential ingredients in reducing your level of stress.

Talk To Someone

We often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking to and sharing our feelings with other people. This may be as simple as talking to your partner or best friend. Other people may find regular sessions with a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist helpful. Don't let misconceptions about mental illness stop you from seeking help.

- Contact the Mental Health Information Service on 1300 794 991 for information about services in your area.
- Speak to your local doctor (GP)
- Contact your local Community Health Centre (under 'Community Health' in the Business and Government White Pages)
- Contact the Australian Psychological Society (APS) on 1800 333 497 for the names of psychologists practising in your area.
- Contact the Counselling and Psychotherapists Association on (02) 9235 1500 for the names of counsellors practising in your area.



Telephone Interpreter Service 131 450

If English is not your first language please call the Mental Health Information Service through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). This service is free to non-English speaking Australian citizens or permanent residents. TIS have access to interpreters speaking more than 120 languages and dialects.

Mental Health Resource Centre

The Resource Centre contains material that promotes a better understanding of mental health issues. New books and DVDs are purchased on a regular basis and visitors are welcome to come in and browse.

Members of MHA, CAG and ARAFMI may check-out resources on loan. The length of the loan is 3 weeks. Membership costs between \$10 - \$30 per individual per annum. Please note that most of the reference books are not available for loan

You will find the Resource Centre Booklist on our website: www.mentalhealth.asn.au for further information contact 1300 794 991.



Medicare Rebates and Accessing Private Practitioners

What is the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists?

Psychiatrists are medically trained doctors who specialise in the treatment of mental illness. Like GPs they can prescribe, administer and monitor medication. Psychiatrists do not advertise so it is up to your GP to refer you to someone appropriate.

Psychologists are trained in human behaviour and use a range of therapies to treat patients. They provide services including assessment, psychological testing, and various types of psychotherapy and counselling.

Medicare rebate for psychologists

A Medicare rebate is now available for a number of sessions per calendar year with a registered psychologist* with a Medicare Provider Number. To obtain the rebate you must be referred by an appropriate medical practitioner, i.e. a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician. The practitioner will ensure that you meet the eligibility requirements and develop a management plan for your condition.

The cost and rebate from Medicare can vary depending on the consultation length and fee charged. If the psychologist bulk bills there will be no extra cost.

For further information about the rebate or to locate a psychologist in your area contact the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 www.psychology.org.au.

* Similar Medicare rebates also exist for mental health accredited social workers and occupational therapists.

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed. The listed websites provide additional information, but should not be taken as an endorsement or recommendation.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW. This and other fact sheets are available for download from www.mentalhealth.asn.au. The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

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