

**What is Stress**

* Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way.
* When you sense danger – whether it is real or imagined, the body’s defences kick in to provide a rapid, automatic response. This process is known as “fight or flight”
* Your nervous system responds by releasing hormones that rouse the body for emergency action. This can include increased heart rate, muscle tension, breathing faster, heightened senses etc.
* These physical sensations are intended to increase your strength and stamina and speed up your reaction times. When working correctly these responses can assist you in overcoming danger (e.g slamming on the brakes in a car to avoid an accident)
* Stress can also help you rise to meet challenges such as a presentation at work, giving you a boost of energy during sport or driving you to study for an exam.

Chronic Stress

* Beyond a certain point stress stops being helpful. When we are constantly exposed to high stress the body does not get enough time to recover and as a result, stays in a state of high stress.
* When experiencing chronic stress our bodies struggle to distinguish between physical and emotion stress. An argument with a friend, a busy schedule or a traffic jam can seem to our body like a life or death situation, creating the same release of hormones and physical sensations.
* If you have a lot of responsibilities or worries, you may find that your emergency stress response is “on” most of the time. The more it is activated the harder it is to switch off.
* How much stress is too much differs from person to person

Stress tolerance   
Things that influence your ability to tolerate stress include:

* Your support network – a strong network of supportive friends and family can help us to deal with life’s stressors. When we are isolated or lonely this becomes more difficult.
* A sense of control – having confidence in your ability to manage a difficult situation can help you accept stress as a normal response when it arises. Alongside this, knowledge and preparation (knowing what to expect) can help you feel more in control. For example, if you were aware of what to expect when starting treatment you may be less stressed about the process.
* Outlook and emotional intelligence – Optimistic people tend to manage stress more effectively, embracing challenges and using a sense of humour and understanding of the ever changing nature of life as ways to deal with stress. Understanding what helps you to relax when you are angry, sad or afraid is also very important. If you know how to sooth yourself during these times you are more likely to be able to quickly bounce back from adversity.

Symptoms of stress overload

**PHYSICAL**

* Over or under sleeping. Waking throughout the night
* Persistent tension in the shoulders, neck and back, tension headaches
* Abdominal symptoms such as constipation, diarrhea, stomach pain
* Anxiety symptoms such as excessive sweating, palpitations, shortness of breath and deep sighing
* Regular bouts of viral and bacterial illness
* Loss of libido
* Over/under eating
* Restlessness

**EMOTIONAL**

* Chronic fatigue or exhaustion, often mistaken for physical fatigue
* Frustration, anger and intolerance
* Anxiety
* Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and helplessness
* Depressed, negative or suicidal thoughts
* Poor decision making
* Addiction
* Impaired short term memory

Strategies for managing stress

Identify the sources of stress – starting a stress journal can help you to identify patterns of stress

Avoid unnecessary stress

* Not all stress can be avoided however you may be surprised by the stresses you can eliminate from your life
* Learn to say “no” – whether in your personal or professional life, knowing your limits and sticking to them is important
* Avoid people who stress you out – where possible notice the individuals who cause you the most stress and limit your contact with them
* Take control of your environment – limit access to media if that stresses you out. If traffic stresses you out can you take a slightly longer but quieter road? Turn off notifications on your phone when you need to focus. Avoid comparing your life to others on social media.
* If working from home try to have a defined workspace and home space. Keep your work from home routine similar to the in-office routine, include start and end times, breaks and use the time you would normally spend commuting to relax.
* Pare down your to-do list – Analyse your schedule, responsibilities and daily tasks. If you have too much on your plate, push the tasks that are not necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely

Alter the situation

* If you can’t avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it.
* Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If someone or something is bothering you try to communicate your concerns.
* When asking someone to change their behaviour, be willing to meet them in the middle and change your own too.
* Be assertive when needed – if you are busy in work and have a chatty colleague, try to set boundaries and let them know you don’t have long to talk
* Plan ahead so that you don’t over-schedule yourself. Effective time management can help to avoid stress later.

Adapting to the stressor

* Reframe the problem – try to view the situation in a more positive light. For e.g rather than getting annoyed while in traffic, try to view it as an opportunity to listen to your favourite radio station, podcast or audio book. Or just enjoy some alone time
* Take perspective – ask yourself how important this stressful situation will be to you in the long run. Will it matter in a month/ a year? If the answer is no try to focus your energy elsewhere
* Adjust your standards. Nobody is perfect! Set reasonable standards for yourself and others and learn to be ok with being imperfect.
* Gratitude – taking time to reflect on the positives in your life can help you to keep things in perspective.

Accept what you cannot change

* Some stressors are unavoidable such as grief, a national recession or a new illness. When you can’t change the situation it can be better to accept things as they are rather than fighting against it.
* Focus on what you can control in the situation rather that what you cannot
* Look for the upside – this may be hard but trying to look for look for opportunities for personal growth during challenging times be helpful.
* Share your feelings with a trusted friend, family member or therapist. Talking can help to relieve feelings of stress even when you can’t change the situation

Make time for relaxation and fun

* Nurture your body and mind by finding ways that help you relax. This builds resilience for times when you inevitably find yourself under stress.
* Avoid feelings of isolation when WFH by taking time to communicate with colleague
* Include rest/ relaxation in your daily schedule
* Consider the things you enjoy doing for e.g. walking, being creative, reading, gardening, listening to music, spending time with friends and try to fit some of these things into your day/ week.

Adopt a healthy lifestyle

* Regular exercise – 30 minutes of exercise x 3 times a week. Also include regular stretch or movement breaks during your day.
* Eat a healthy diet – start your day with a healthy breakfast and keep your energy up with balanced nutritious meals and snacks throughout the day
* Reduce caffeine and excess sugar. The temporary “high” caffeine and sugary treats provide often end in an energy crash that leaves us feeling drained. Reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, sugary snacks and chocolate in our diet can help us feel more relaxed and help us to sleep better.
* Avoid alcohol, drugs and cigarettes.
* Sleep – good sleep hygiene, no screens in the bedroom, no caffeine before bed and a wind down period can all help to get a better 8 hours sleep.