

Information Sheet

Relieving Stress

Stress describes an emotional and physical response to pressure, and is a common condition in today's busy and fast-paced world. Stress can arise from many different environmental factors including major life events, work, study, living conditions, finances, family issues and shortage of time. It can also be the result of internal demands we place on ourselves, such as very high standards or unachievable time limits. Events that induce stress can also include things we perceive as pleasant such as moving house, becoming a parent, getting married, starting a new job, holidays, new relationships and so forth.

Stress tends to increase irritability and anxiety, reduce patience and may even lead to depression or feelings of hopelessness. It often leads to physical sensations such as shortness of breath, racing heart, muscle tension, restlessness, headaches, stomach aches, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating and agitation. It can result in sleep difficulties, appetite disturbances, increased tendency to use alcohol or other drugs, bladder/bowel troubles and constantly rushing around and feeling unable to settle. In certain situations (e.g., study, work), stress can lead to procrastination or "giving up".

Chronic stress can have serious long term effects on physical and psychological wellbeing, largely due to the constant release into the body of the stress chemicals adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine. While these chemicals are extremely helpful to us in times of danger, over the long term they can affect heart health, immune functioning, energy and psychological functioning (anxiety, depression). If left unaddressed chronic stress may lead to a state of burnout, which prevents individuals from functioning effectively in their personal and professional lives.

If you are noticing any of the above symptoms it is crucial to take early action to alleviate stress before the physical and psychological consequences become severe. Both practical strategies and coping strategies can be useful in relieving stress.

Alleviate Stressful Situations Where Possible -

Sometimes it is possible to find practical solutions to alleviate stressful situations, and this should be the first step in relieving stress. Speaking to key people about whether certain aspects of your life could be changed to reduce your commitments either temporarily or permanently is important here. Our *Approach Info* Sheets Problem Solving and Assertive Communication may be of help.

Address Unhelpful Thinking-

Stress can lead to thinking patterns which are unhelpful in that they increase feelings of stress. Thoughts such as "I'll never get this done", "I don't have enough time", "I can't cope" and "It's not fair" are common and – while possibly accurate – are likely to increase stress levels if they become the focus of our mental energy. It's important to implement some more helpful self-talk, such as "I'll just focus on this next thing", "I can only do what I can do", "The world won't end if this doesn't get finished", which may reduce stress and free up some mental space to work more productively. You could also *defuse* from unhelpful thinking by imagining the unhelpful thoughts on a shelf or in a box – still present but no longer the focus of your attention.

Reduce Stressful Physiology -

Simply pausing to take 10 deep, abdominal breaths has a calming effect on our Central Nervous System. Another extremely useful technique is mindfulness, which teaches you to notice stressful thoughts and physiology, but to be less distracted by them (see our *Approach Info* sheet on Mindfulness).

Increase Pleasant Events –

A great way to relieve stress is to introduce (or reintroduce) small, manageable activities that you enjoy and/or which nurture you. The idea is to replenish some of your stress-depleted physical and emotional resources.