

Stress and How to Deal with It

Tutor's Handbook



Stress and How to Deal with It

Recognising Stress

When we experience chronic stress – this is stress that is on-going and constant – we start to accept stress as a part of every-day life. Stress becomes ‘normal’ and ‘familiar’ to us; and we think that it just part of life in a modern workplace. This is dangerous behaviour for our health, and it is something that we each need to work on to ensure that we do not let stress become an accepted norm in our working lives.

Stress places additional strain and pressure on our bodies, and chronic stress can have negative and long-lasting effects on our health. Therefore, when we experience stress, it is important that we train ourselves to recognise the symptoms of stress. These symptoms are our body’s natural reactions and responses to stressful events or situations. By recognising when our body has this reaction, we can start to use coping strategies to relieve these symptoms and reduce the impact that stress has on our bodies.

By identifying the symptoms within ourselves, we can also help to identify the triggers that lead to us experiencing stress, which is an important step in understanding and overcoming our personal stress. Symptoms of stress can be divided into four categories, namely: cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural. The

following lists provide examples of the symptoms that you may experience under each category.

- Cognitive symptoms:
 - Failure to remember recent information
 - Constant worrying
 - Over-thinking problems
 - Having racing thoughts
 - Always focusing on negative aspects
 - Lapses in sound judgement
 - Problems concentrating on simple tasks
 - Having unusual dreams
 - Loss of sense of humour
 - Loss of creativity
 - Difficulty in learning new things or taking in new information
- Emotional symptoms:
 - Feeling anxious on a continual basis
 - Feeling agitated
 - Experiencing mood-swings
 - Sense of panic and feeling overwhelmed
 - Experiencing emotional out-breaks over daily events
 - Sense of loneliness, helplessness and isolation
 - Experiencing bouts of anger and irritability
 - Feeling depressed

- Feeling a lack of control over your life
- Feeling frustrated
- Feeling nervous
- Physical symptoms:
 - Regular headaches or migraines
 - Dizziness and blurred vision
 - General aches and pains, most commonly in shoulders and back – caused by muscle tension induced by stress
 - Tight feeling in the chest
 - Rapid heartrate or experiencing palpitations
 - Nausea, diarrhoea or constipation
 - Susceptible to frequent colds, flu and other illnesses
 - Poor posture
 - Prone to breakouts – this can be caused by hormonal changes due to stress
 - Hair loss
 - Itchy skin – anxiety can aggravate dermatitis and eczema, etc.
 - Sore jaw – caused by grinding teeth during sleep or clenching teeth during the day
- Behavioural symptoms:
 - Change in regular eating pattern – eating more or suffering a loss of appetite
 - Increase in nervous habits, such as biting nails, tapping, shaking legs or pacing
 - Change in sleeping pattern – sleeping too much or too little
 - Procrastination and neglecting responsibilities
 - Withdrawing from social circles
 - Increased use in alcohol, cigarettes or drugs
 - Being impulsive and irrational
 - Changing jobs frequently
 - Any change in regular behaviour that would be considered by other as 'out of character'.

Techniques to Help Manage Stress

Now that you understand the different symptoms of stress, it will be easier to identify when you are experiencing acute or chronic stress. When you have identified your type of stress, the next step is to develop some coping mechanisms that will help you to limit the impact that stress has on your wellbeing, and will also help you to take steps to take control and manage your stress.

Breathing Techniques for Stress Management

Breathing techniques can help to calm your breathing, slow your heartrate and reduce

the levels of stress hormones in your body, when you experience an episode of acute stress.

Acute stress is a dramatic or immediate response that your body makes to a stressful event or situation, or to a terrifying or traumatic accident for example.

When you feel the symptoms of acute stress setting in, one of the most effective breathing techniques you can practice calming your breathing is called 'deep breathing'.

As an introduction to deep breathing, one of the simplest techniques you can practice is called the 4-7-8 breathing exercise. When using this technique, you are instructed to follow these simple steps:

- Breathe in for a count of 4 – so as you are breathing in, count in your head 1....2....3....4....
- When you reach 4, hold your breath for a count of 7 – so while holding your breath, count 1....2....3....4....5....6....7....
- Lastly, exhale slowly, for a count of 8 – so when you are exhaling, make your breath last all the way to out. Breathe out and count 1....2....3....4....5....6....7....8....

The 4-7-8 technique has been used to effectively to slow people's heart rate so that they find it easier to get to sleep; but it can also be used to reduce the level of

stress hormones in the body and to help you to maintain control over your body when stressful situations occur. It might be a good idea to practice this technique with your local health network so that they can call on it when they need it during a stressful situation.

Meditation for Stress Relief

Meditation can be used as an effective tool for stress relief. When practiced regularly, meditation can help to improve your mental and emotional health. Research also shows that regular meditation can help to improve muscle pain and cardiovascular health.

Meditation is a good practice for countering the effects of on-going, subtle stress. We can all experience this form of stress; however, as it does not produce immediate symptoms, like with the body's reaction to acute stress, we do not always realise the damage we are doing to our bodies on a cellular level, all caused by prolonged episodes of stress.

Meditation is recommended as a means to overcome the effects of chronic stress. Through meditation, we can develop a sense of peace, calm and balance in our lives, which leads to an improved sense of overall well-being.

The benefits of using meditation for stress relief include:

- Counter-acting racing thoughts and over-thinking
- Being more 'present' and feeling more 'in the moment'
- Being more self-aware
- Reduction in negative thinking
- Reduction in feeling negative emotions
- Developing core coping skills to help to manage stress

Headspace have published a series of mini-meditations on YouTube, to help people experiencing stress, anxiety and depression, to find 1-2 minutes to practice some 'mini-meditations'. These mini-meditations are effective in helping individuals to incorporate mindfulness practices and meditation techniques into every-day activities and routines. The following is a sample of these mini meditations. To see how you can integrate meditation and mindfulness into your daily routines, watch this video and practice the techniques it demonstrates:

- Mini meditation to help you to let go of stress: <https://youtu.be/c1Ndym-IsQg>

It is a nice idea to prepare this mini meditation and to practice it with members of your local health network.

How to use this Resource with your Local Health Group?

This handbook presents some information on about our body's response to acute and

chronic stress and also gives some simple techniques for addressing both acute and chronic stress, without the need to leave the house or take on any additional expense. To use this resource with your local group, we recommend that you first play the short video lecture and then lead a group discussion about how they cope with stress.

To accompany this handbook, you will also find a short PowerPoint presentation that can be used with your local health network. This presentation contains an overview of the breathing and meditation techniques included in this handbook. We would suggest that as part of your group activity, you should use this PowerPoint to test these techniques with local health network members.

Group Activity

Once you have shared the digital resource and the PowerPoint presentation with your group members, you can start a group discussion about stress and what group members do to manage their stress – try to lead the discussion so that you have a range of different coping strategies identified. Following on from this discussion, please use the slides 7-10 in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation and practice the breathing and meditation techniques. Afterwards, ask for feedback on how they found the activities and if they would use these again in their own time to manage their stress.



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