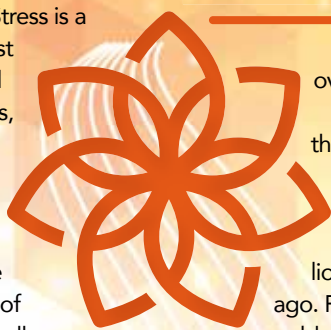


As the cliché saying goes 'life is a roller-coaster' and not everyone gets to enjoy the ride all the time. It has its ups and downs and hair-pin bends that threaten to de-rail you. Stress is a word you hear every day – just about anyone you ask will tell you they are stressed, anxious, worried about something or have been (or are) depressed.

Stress is a normal reaction to the challenges we face in life. A certain amount of stress is necessary to keep us all going; without it, we would be bored and listless. However, continued stress over a long period of time can be exhausting and if your energy levels are low because of illness, pain, anxiety, or depression, the additional drain on energy because of stress is a particular problem. Prolonged levels of stress can be one factor that makes you more vulnerable to physical illness and makes recovery more difficult. Long-term stress, which causes over-production of cortisol, can compromise immune function. More and more scientists believe stress contributes up to as much as 70% of diseases/illness, like cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain cancers.

People differ both in the way that they react to stress and the extent to which they are aware of their own stress levels. Stress may affect you physically, emotionally and in the way that you behave.

All of the physical reactions above are normal. When we face physically threatening situations these responses help the body prepare itself for action. This is known as the 'Fight or Flight' response because the body prepares itself to fight or to run away from dangerous situations. This is a helpful, instinctive, 'self-preservation' response. When the dangerous situation is



People Positive

over, the body can recover.

In modern society, a lot of the things that create stress are not life-threatening – in the extent to which a bushman confronting a lion may have been years ago. Financial worries or family problems for example can make us feel under stress but won't necessarily kill us as long as we learn to deal with it properly. In these situations stress levels accumulate and rise. Over a long period of time stress can contribute to making us feel exhausted and unwell.

STRESSING ABOUT STRESS

Excessive worrying can trigger a stress response and muscles then become tense. Changes in muscle tension can be quite subtle and it is difficult to be aware of it happening. This increased tension can worsen fatigue, and aggravate any pain, leading to more stress and worry.

You may also tend to put yourselves under added stress by doing some of the following things:

- taking on more than you can possible do
- never saying 'no' to people
- never being satisfied with what you have achieved – perfectionism
- not relaxing enough.

If you need a pick-me-up, what do you generally do? It's tempting to go for a pint, order a pizza and a film or treat yourself to some new shoes. But do those things really help to improve your mood and have a positive outcome on your day? Not in the long term, no. There are, however, really

good alternatives to help manage your stress, which improve your overall physical and mental wellbeing.

REDUCING STRESS THROUGH RELAXATION

Has someone ever told you to 'just relax' when you're in the middle of a stressful situation, and you thought to yourself, "Well, that's easy for you to say!"? Relaxation actually isn't easy (and doesn't come naturally) for many of us. It's hard not to get caught up in worry during our fast-paced, time-crunched days, whether from work deadlines, financial worries, or feeling like we don't have enough quality time for family and friends – or for ourselves and our favourite activities.

Learning how to relax is a little like learning meditation – or taking a vacation, for that matter: we can't just do it once or twice a year and expect it to work miracles throughout the rest of the year! To get better at relaxation takes practice. Luckily, there are a number of easily accessible relaxation techniques and strategies to help you consciously relax the body and mind on a regular basis.

Most people already have things they tend to do when they feel quite stressed – some listen to music, talk with a friend or go for a walk. Regular exercise can also help to reduce tension in the muscles and give a feeling of wellbeing, as does massage. Sometimes your usual methods of handling stress may become less effective when stress rises beyond a certain point. It is useful during these times to have some specific tools of dealing with stress.



Physical Changes	Emotional Changes	Behaviour or What People Notice	Other Effects
Heart racing	Tense	'Short fuse'	Poor concentration
Sweating	Frustrated	Always rushing	Memory problems
Breathing faster	Afraid	Loss of humour	Difficulty making decisions
Queasy stomach	Irritable/angry	Impatience	
Trembling	Tiredness	Don't listen	
Dry throat	Fear/dread	Sudden mood change	
Muscle tension	Argumentative	Forgetful	

Relaxation is different from watching TV or reading a book, where it is quite easy to remain tense, and which may be tiring in their own right. When practising relaxation you need to find somewhere quiet and warm, where you can find a comfortable position and you will not be interrupted.

At the beginning relaxation may be frustrating if you find it difficult to concentrate or feel it is not working. It is a skill and is likely to take a bit of practice to master. Remember that there are different forms of relaxation to meet individual preferences. It is worth seeing the initial

stages as an investment of time, which can pay dividends in the medium and long term. Daily practice will give the best results. Download some apps or find some online meditation videos to follow. Many provide guided instruction which may help in the early stages.

MANAGING YOUR STRESS

What do you do when you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed?



When you do these things to manage your stress, ask yourself these questions:

1. How do these strategies work for me?
2. Do they work in the long term?
3. If not, what else could I do?

Examples of ways you could better manage, that may lead to a more positive outcome include:

Behavior Changes:

- Time management
- Assert yourself with others
- Break larger tasks into smaller achievable tasks
- Goal setting
- Communicate your needs, feelings and thoughts in a productive way

Thoughts:

- Challenge these: are they based on reality?
- Be optimistic with positive self-talk & affirmations
- Distract from negative thoughts by exercising, watching TV, reading, cooking, etc
- Start journaling or keeping a gratitude diary

Resource Yourself:

- Ask for help
- Accept help



Relaxation:

- Self soothe: do nice things for yourself like music, soft fabrics, good food, aromatherapy, hot bath, painting
- Deep breathing
- Stretching, yoga, light exercise
- Experiment with relaxation techniques and meditation

TECHNIQUES FOR MANAGING STRESS

There are many ways to manage stress, anxiety or depression to ensure your mental and physical wellbeing improves. Holistic health looks at you as a whole: mind, body and spirit. To bring about positive change you need to find something – anything – that works for you. Now 'holistic' and 'alternative' traditionally have a bad rap in medical circles but more and more evidence is proving the benefits of these treatments. Not everything is everyone's cup of tea, but "if you change nothing, nothing will change" (Tony Robbins). It's important to experiment, be brave and try something, at least once (remember the story of Green Eggs and Ham by Dr Seuss) until you find that thing that works for YOU.

Being physically active, having a healthy diet and getting sufficient sleep are good starting points and we have some specific tips to help you*. Looking at other ways to express your feelings and focus on the

positive may include journaling or keeping a gratitude diary. You could always go out and purchase one, but we have some pre-made templates available for you already*. Other treatments for calming and focusing your mind, body and energy include:

1. Deep breathing*

When you're anxious your breathing tends to be shallow and rapid. One of the simplest ways to relax is to take some deep diaphragmatic breaths, also called belly breathing. By shifting your breathing rate and pattern you can stimulate the body's parasympathetic nervous system, and trigger a calming response, which decreases your heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Your physical therapist can guide you through some breathing exercises.

2. Meditation for relaxation

Follow guided meditation to start, using an app or joining a class.

3. Yoga*, tai chi, Pilates

4. Acupuncture

5. Spending time in nature

6. Massage*

Massage affects your body's production and regulation of hormones which influence your behaviour and feelings of wellbeing. A therapist's touch tends to elevate our body's level of dopamine, which affects inspiration, joy and enthusiasm. Serotonin is also released which can bring about calm and relaxation. The gentle pressure of massage stimulates the body's circulation and helps us to relax and rest.

Enjoy yourself! This may seem odd but, as hard as it may be, having a good catch-up, natter and laugh with family or friends can be the exact medicine you need to de-stress and lift your spirits.

*Ask your practitioner for the associated leaflet

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