

What are some of the warning signs of stress?

- Losing your zest for life; losing interest in family, friends or work.
- Changes in your sleeping patterns.
- Nervous 'twitches' or muscle spasms.
- Indigestion, stomach upsets.
- Pains in lower back, chest, shoulders, joints or other parts of body.
- Skin itches or rashes for no apparent reason.
- Frequent colds or flu.
- Shortness of breath or shallow breathing.
- Memory or concentration problems.
- Feeling anxious and tense for no obvious reason.
- Finding it hard to make decisions.
- Tearfulness for no apparent reason.
- Feeling impatient or irritable.
- Losing confidence.

**any persistent symptoms should be checked by a GP*



If you are experiencing high and persistent levels of stress and would like further information or support:

- *talk to your doctor or health professional*
- *phone your local mental health service – numbers are in the front of the phone book under 'Hospitals and Other Health Service Providers.'*

Other resources available

The Mental Health Foundation has a number of books and videos on stress and relaxation which are available for purchase or loan.

Relax for Health – a CD designed to help you relax deeply and leave you feeling refreshed and more energetic. The two relaxation methods used have been shown through research to be beneficial to physical and mental health. Instructions are included.

For further information or to order resources

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand
National Information Service and Resource Centre
PO Box 10051, Dominion Road, Auckland 1446
81 New North Road, Eden Terrace, Auckland 1021
Phone: 09 300 7030 Fax: 09 300 7020
Email: resource@mentalhealth.org.nz
Website and online bookstore: www.mentalhealth.org.nz

Working Well is the workplace health division of the Mental Health Foundation. www.workingwell.co.nz for workshops and support for individuals and workplaces.

© Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand 2006



Mental Health
Foundation
of New Zealand



Stress – and how to handle it

*Working to improve the mental health of all people
and communities in New Zealand Aotearoa.*

"It's not the stress that kills us; it is our reaction to it."

Hans Selye, pioneer stress researcher

What is stress?

'Stress' describes our physical and emotional response to a demand or 'stressor' in our environment. Many things that stress us are real, but we can also 'turn on' the stress response with negative thoughts, beliefs or attitudes.

Sometimes we respond to stressful situations by creating even more stress in our bodies by overeating, smoking, drinking too much alcohol or coffee and not exercising.

Not all stress is bad. Stress is a natural occurrence in life and everyday stress is necessary for growth and development. The human nervous system is designed to cope with a degree of stimulation. Most people enjoy being stimulated or challenged. If we can unwind and recover afterwards there are no harmful effects. The danger lies in too much stress or prolonged stress. At first we may become tired and irritable but if the stress continues and is not dealt with effectively the result can be physical and mental ill-health.

Our stress response may be activated by extreme danger or intense pleasure. More usually, we encounter numerous potentially stressful experiences in our everyday lives such as the weather, work, relationships, losses, lack of time, boredom, money worries and many more.

Stress levels are individual – what one person may experience as energising another may find stressful. Taking action on stress may involve managing the stress response and/or dealing with the stressor. Remember that your capacity to cope with stress changes at different times and stages of your life.

How can work contribute to feeling stress?

One of the major causes of stress in the workplace is feeling that things are beyond our control. Advances in technology bring many advantages, but they are also a major contributor to daily stress. People may also find travelling to and from work very stressful.

Other stressors that may arise from the workplace include:

- overload – 'too much work, too little time'
- relationships – conflict with colleagues or boss
- conflicts between work roles, job demands, and juggling the balance between work and home life
- long hours, shift work, being unclear about work roles
- complicated tasks, poor training, feeling isolated or undervalued
- changes in role or organisation (e.g. restructuring); lack of communication between managers and workers, or between departments
- bullying or harassment
- not being able to talk openly about stress, health or mental health problems
- physical environment – noise, dirt, dangers, lack of air, poor equipment, messy workspace.

Many of these stressors will also apply to people who work from home or do unpaid or voluntary work.

What can I do about the stress?

One way to reduce stress is to change the stressor (cause). The most drastic way is to change your environment – where you live, where you work. Of course, this is not often possible. Instead, you can think of changes to those parts of your environment which are causing the most stress.

Another way is to cope differently with stress. Here are some ways to help you reduce and prevent too much stress and tension. But you have to practise!

Talk your worries over. Talk with a friend, your partner, parents, counsellor or clergy or someone else you trust.

Limit your expectations. Be selective and use your energy to do the most important and possible tasks. Set goals you can reach. Do not blame yourself if you don't reach all your goals – these may be possible next time.

Eat well. Eat a variety of fresh foods in a well balanced diet. Some foods actually cause or increase nervous tension, for example, coffee, tea, chocolate, and soft drinks. These are usually foods we crave when we are stressed so try to avoid them.

Make time to exercise. Make some time (three times a week minimum) for exercise such as walking, swimming or anything you enjoy doing.

Create a harmonious work environment. Organise your workspace; have some flowers in your office; check your light source.

Organise your work habits. Get up 5 or 10 minutes earlier so you don't have to rush; set aside time for processing email; break large projects down into small steps. Spend 5 to 10 minutes at the end of the day preparing for the next day.

Take time out. Some people find it hard to take time out for a holiday or a weekend. Give yourself a breather every now and then. This can even be just a short break during the day at work or home. Do something you really enjoy.

Solve problems. Try to find a quick solution to conflict; learn to be more assertive and learn to say NO. Compromise or find ways to deal with your frustration and anger.

Feel better about yourself. Identify what you do well, and recognise and acknowledge your qualities and characteristics. Practice positive self-talk.

Practise relaxation. Try yoga, meditation or have a massage. Listen to music. Relaxation is extremely important; learn what works for you and practise it regularly.

Get sufficient sleep. To help you sleep take a walk in the evening or meditate or practise relaxation. Avoid taking sleeping tablets as they will disrupt your sleeping pattern even more.

Put fun and laughter in your life. This has been proven to be good for our health and it feels good!