

LIVING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY

What is stress?

Stress is an everyday term you may use if you feel overwhelmed with the pressures of everyday life, or you are faced with a situation that makes you feel anxious.

Stress can be difficult to measure. It may build up quickly, for example, when you are in a traffic jam. Sometimes it is ongoing such as a having a difficult or demanding job.

Stress is not always a bad thing. It is your body's natural way of preparing you to deal with physical or emotional demands – good or bad. Stress triggers the release of adrenaline into your bloodstream which increases your heart rate. More oxygen is then pumped to your heart and muscles to prepare you for 'fight or flight'. In other words, adrenaline gives you access to energy and strength to cope when faced with a 'dangerous' situation.

Ongoing stress is thought to be bad for health but this can be hard to prove. We **do** know that stress **can** make you react or behave in harmful ways such as smoking, drinking alcohol, eating badly and not making time for exercise. All of which are known risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

Recognising stress

If you have lived with a high level of stress, for a long period of time, you may not be aware of being stressed or of your inability to relax. Tell tale signs of stress building up include:

- Feeling frustrated and irritable.
- Finding concentrating and decision making more difficult.
- Always feeling there are things you have to do or that there is never enough time to do everything.
- Not being able to sleep properly for things running through your mind.
- Muscles in your shoulders and neck being tensed up or having a clenched fist without realising it.

What triggers your stress?

Keeping a diary of when you feel most stressed or hassled can be a start to understanding how you personally cope with stress. This will tell you what kind of situation makes you feel a certain way.

It is also helpful to try and think about how you reacted in certain situations:

- Did you do something to calm yourself down or make yourself feel better such as having a cigarette, an alcoholic drink or eating rich fatty food?
- Did you feel yourself tense up?
- Did your emotions get the better of you?

FACTSHEET

Reviewing your life and priorities

Recognising a pattern in the way you behave can help you to look for other ways of coping with stress that are less harmful.

- Once you recognise your stress ‘triggers’ you can consciously try to relax in these situations by stretching tense muscles, breathing slowly and putting things into perspective.
- At work, take jobs in order of importance and try to plan ahead.
- You may have to make difficult decisions about your future, e.g. changing to a less stressful job.
- Use exercise, breathing and relaxation techniques to help you relax.
- Watch your alcohol intake. Having a drink to calm your nerves can be the beginning of heavier and problem drinking.

Recognising anxiety

Anxiety or panic attacks are usually brought on by a tiny thought that goes through your mind without you even really recognising it. A fearful or negative thought triggers a rush of adrenaline that causes real physical symptoms. As you become aware of these unpleasant symptoms, you start to feel that there is something wrong and the symptoms worsen.

By now your heart is beating fast, you may be sweating and breathless and even feeling some chest pain. This is often what it feels like to have a panic attack.

Learn how to recognise anxiety symptoms

Anxiety can effect you in different ways: physically, emotionally and behaviourally. You may often mistake your symptoms for illness. Recognising your symptoms will help you to control them and understand what is actually happening.

Possible physical symptoms include:	Possible emotional problems include:	Possible effects on behaviour include:
Headaches	Feeling irritable	Temper outbursts
Shaking	Feeling anxious or tense	Over drinking and / or smoking
Muscle tension or pain	Feeling low	Changes in eating habits
Stomach problems	Feeling of apathy	Withdrawing from usual activities
Sweating	Feeling low in self esteem	Being unreasonable
Feeling dizzy	Feeling frightened	Being forgetful and / or clumsy
Bowel and / or bladder problems		Rushing around
Breathlessness and / or palpitations		Restlessness
Dry mouth		
Tingling in body		
Sexual problems		



How to control your anxiety

If you have to do something that you are not looking forward to ask yourself if there is anything you can do to make it easier for yourself and try and remember that most things are not as bad as you think they are going to be.

There are some techniques that you can learn that will, with practise, help you to deal with stressful situations, or any situation that makes you feel anxious.

Learn a relaxation technique

Methods of relaxation are numerous and variable. Many involve a comfortable sitting or reclining position and concentrating on various parts of the body and then tensing and relaxing the muscles in that area.

It is very important to breathe normally and not hold your breath or take deep gasps. A quiet peaceful environment, avoiding distractions and interruptions with soft lighting is ideal. By practising the breathing and relaxing of muscles regularly means that in time you will be able to focus on how it feels to be really relaxed, more and more easily. This can then be used as a tool whenever you need it as well as giving you the added benefits of regular use.

Relaxation CDs are available in bookshops and supermarkets. Some community centres run relaxation classes – your local library, or health centre, should have information about local classes.

Learn breathing control

This is actually a very simple way of learning how to breathe normally and restore normal breathing when you are anxious. It involves gentle breathing using the lower part of your chest, with the upper chest and shoulders relaxed.

The more you practise this the easier it becomes. You will then be able to practise it standing as well as sitting and be able to use it whenever you are anxious.

How to do breathing control

- Settle yourself into a chair in a comfortable position.
- Make sure your back is well supported.
- Rest one hand on your lower rib cage with the other hand on your upper thigh.
- Let your shoulders and upper chest relax, think about letting your shoulders go.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Concentrate on letting the lower part of your chest move under your hand.
- Feel your hand rise and fall with your chest as you breathe gently in and out.
- Breathe at your own rate. Doing this should not tire you.
- Continue until your breathing is back under control once more.
- Once you feel happy about doing this, you may like to try resting both hands down on your thighs with the palms of the hands facing up.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT is a form of therapy which focuses on how you think about yourself, the world and others as well as how your thoughts and actions affect your feelings. CBT can help you to change how you think (cognitive) and what you do (behaviour). These changes can help to reduce your feelings of anxiety.

Living Life To The Full (www.lttf.com) provide a free web-based CBT course. Telephone and face-to-face CBT counseling services are available from some support organisations as well as the NHS. Contact the Advice Line Nurses for more information.

How your doctor can help

All of this is quite hard to take in at once. You may find it easier to learn relaxation and breathing techniques with the help of a professional, for example, a counsellor or a psychologist.

Speak to your doctor in the first instance. It may be hard, at first, to talk about how you are feeling but remember doctors are used to talking about emotions and will be able to help you find the support that is right for you.

Depending on your situation, your doctor may also suggest treating your anxiety with anti depressant drugs. This group of drugs has been found to be very helpful for some people with anxiety; however, this does not mean that you are depressed.

Useful contact details:

Anxiety UK

Zion Community Resource Centre

339 Stretford Road, Hulme

Manchester M15 4ZY

Helpline: 08444 775 774 (Mon – Fri 9.30am – 5.30pm)

General information: info@anxietyuk.org.uk

Email support service: support@anxietyuk.org.uk

Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Breathing Space

Phoneline: 0800 83 85 87

Website: www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

The phoneline is open 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday - 6am Monday) and from 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday - Thursday).

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line Nurses

0808 801 0899

Call FREE from landlines and mobiles