

## **Stress Management**

We tend to feel stressed when the demands placed upon us are greater than our resources and abilities to cope with them. Demands may be external - i.e. family, money, environmental or work pressures, having an illness; or internal - i.e. physical symptoms and the demands we make on ourselves. We cannot avoid stress but we *can* learn how to understand what causes it and how better to manage it.

Although we may think of 'stress' as a single problem, it can be understood in different ways.

### **1. Stress and our body**

When we are under stress, stress hormones e.g. adrenalin are released which activate the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) which prepares the body for a 'Fight or Flight' response. These cause certain bodily changes including:

- breathing - may speed up, become shallow or less regular
- heart racing and increased blood pressure
- increased sweating
- flushed face
- "knotted" stomach, butterflies or nausea
- increased need to go to the toilet
- feelings of "light-headedness"

### **2. Stress and our thoughts**

When we're stressed we may also feel overwhelmed and think 'I can't cope' or 'This is awful' and predict that things will go badly.

The following may also contribute to the stress that we feel:

- very high expectations we have of ourselves.
- critical comments we make to ourselves in situations.
- mental pictures we form of what will happen in the future.

For example, if you are shopping at the supermarket and realise you have forgotten an item whilst at the checkout, you may feel stressed and think: "I am an idiot, and I'm always doing this". A mental picture of an irritated queue behind you may accompany such thoughts.

### **3. Stress and how we behave**

This includes the things we actually do and say when we are under stress. For example, stress may lead to increased drinking, changes in eating habits, withdrawing from friends and reduced exercising. We may become less assertive and feel taken for

granted or we may feel more irritable and snap at people.

## **Managing Stress**

1. **Breathing and relaxation** are invaluable aids to help our bodies relax. Our minds often feel calmer as a result of our bodies and nervous systems being less tense. These activities work to turn off the Fight or Flight responses described above.

## 2. **Coping thoughts**

Just as we give encouragement and support to friends and family, learning to be your *own* supporter is a useful tool in tackling stress.

“I can do a bit this and then take a break.”

“One step at a time. I can handle this situation”

“This feeling may be unpleasant but it will pass. I can tolerate it”

“What would I say to a close friend if they were in this situation?”

It may be useful to discuss these issues with a friend or partner to help you gain a different and more helpful perspective on the situation and identify useful ways of coping or solutions. Try to give yourself credit for having handled a difficult situation or got through a difficult time.

## 3. **Changing Behaviour.**

Over the years we all get into habits of behaving which may add to the stress we feel. For example: we may find it difficult to tell other people what we need, or want, or feel, in a straightforward way. We may take on too many things, have difficulty saying no or push ourselves too hard. As well as becoming more aware of these patterns of behaviour, we can build up our use of alternative ways of handling things such as:

- taking slow, deep breaths
- relaxing
- taking time out
- talking to someone
- Asking for help
- telling people how you are feeling
- gentle and appropriate exercise
- saying ‘no’ without feeling guilty
- problem solving and decision making
- eating healthily
- goal setting
- breaking a task down into small parts
- pampering and treating ourselves
- giving ourselves credit for things we have done (even if they did not go exactly how we had hoped!)

## 4. **Using resources**

Getting support from family, friends and professionals is another way we can reduce our levels of stress. Learn to identify areas where you need support and then actually ask for it (and say yes if it is offered!). Sometimes this can feel difficult to do, especially if we have a habit of never asking for help or putting other people's needs before our own. This may take a bit of getting used to.

There are also many good resources available for managing stress. You can try the self-help section of bookstores and there are lots of courses available on stress management, relaxation or communication skills.