



Stress and Tips on How to Avoid It

Niamh

Mental Wellbeing





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What is stress?

Stress is difficult to define or measure. Some people thrive on a busy lifestyle and are able to cope well with life crises. Other people feel tensed or stressed by the slightest deviation from their set daily routine. Many people fall somewhere in between, but may have periods when levels of stress increase. Tell-tale signs of stress building up include:

- Not being able to sleep properly with worries going through your mind.
- Being impatient or irritable at minor problems.
- Not being able to concentrate due to many things going through your mind.
- Being unable to make decisions.
- Drinking or smoking more.
- Not enjoying food so much.
- Being unable to relax, and always feeling that something needs to be done.
- Feeling tense. Sometimes this includes a 'knot' in the stomach, or feeling sweaty with a dry mouth or a thumping heart.

Sometimes stress builds up quickly. For example, the unexpected traffic jam. Sometimes it is ongoing. For example, a difficult job.

Is stress harmful?

Ongoing stress is thought to be bad for health, although this is difficult to prove. For example, stress is thought to be bad for the heart and is possibly a 'risk factor' for developing heart problems in later life. Stress may also contribute to other physical illnesses in ways little understood. For example, it is thought that irritable bowel syndrome, psoriasis, migraine, tension headaches, and other conditions are made worse by an increased level of stress.

Your work performance, and relationships, may also be affected by stress.

How can I avoid stress?

The following is a list of suggestions that may be useful to try and combat stress, some more appropriate to some people than others.

Stress list

You can try making a 'stress list'. Try keeping a diary over a few weeks or so, and list the times, places, and people that aggravate your stress levels. A pattern may emerge. Is it always the traffic on the way to work that sets things off to a bad start for the day? Perhaps it's the supermarket check-out, next door's dog, a work colleague, or something similar that may occur regularly and cause you stress.

Once you have identified any typical or regular causes of stress, two things may then help.

- If you discuss this with a close friend or family member, it may help them and you to be aware of the reasons why you are feeling stressed. Simply talking it through may help.
- Secondly, these situations can be used as 'cues' to relax. You can use simple relaxation techniques (see below) when a stressful situation occurs or is anticipated. For example, try doing neck stretching exercises when you are in that traffic jam rather than getting tense and stressed.

Try simple relaxation techniques

• Deep breathing

This means taking a long, slow breath in, and very slowly breathe out. If you do this a few times, and concentrate fully on breathing, you may find it quite relaxing.

• Muscular tensing and stretching

Try twisting your neck around each way as far as it is comfortable, and then relax. Try fully tensing your shoulder and back muscles for several seconds, and then relax completely.

Try practising these simple techniques when you are relaxed, and then use them routinely when you come across any stressful situation.

Positive relaxation

Set specific times aside to positively relax. Don't just let relaxation happen, or not happen, at the mercy of work, family, etc. Plan it, and look forward to it. Different people prefer different things. A long bath, a quiet stroll, sitting and just listening to a piece of music, etc. These times are not wasteful, and you should not feel guilty about not 'getting on with things'. They can be times of reflection and putting life back in perspective.

Some people find it useful to set time aside for a relaxation programme such as meditation or muscular exercises. You can also buy relaxation tapes to help you learn to relax.

Time out

Try to allow several times a day to 'stop' and take some time out. For example, getting up 15-20 minutes earlier than you need to is a good start. You can use this time to think about and plan the coming day, and to prepare for the day's events unrushed.

Take a regular and proper lunch break, preferably away from work. Don't work over lunch. If work is busy, if possible try and take 5 or 10 minutes away every few hours to relax.

Once or twice a week, try to plan some time just to be alone and 'unobtainable'. For example, a gentle stroll or a sit in the park often helps to break out of life's hustle and bustle.

Exercise

Many people claim that regular exercise reduces their level of stress. (It also keeps you fit and helps to prevent heart disease.) Any exercise is good, but try to plan at least 30 minutes of exercise on at least 5 days a week. A brisk walk on most days is a good start if you are not used to exercise. In addition, if you have difficulty in sleeping this may improve if you exercise regularly.

Smoking and alcohol

Don't be fooled that smoking and drinking can help with stress. In the long run, they don't. Drinking alcohol to 'calm nerves' is often a slippery slope to heavier and problem drinking.

Hobbies

Many people find that a hobby which has no deadlines, no pressures, and which can be picked up or left easily takes the mind off stresses. For example: sports, knitting, music, model-making, puzzles, and reading for pleasure.

Treatment

Some people find they have times in their life when stress or anxiety becomes severe or difficult to cope with. See a doctor if stress or anxiety becomes worse. Further treatments such as anxiety management counselling, other therapies, or medication may be appropriate.



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