

INFORMATION ABOUT STRESS

What is Stress?

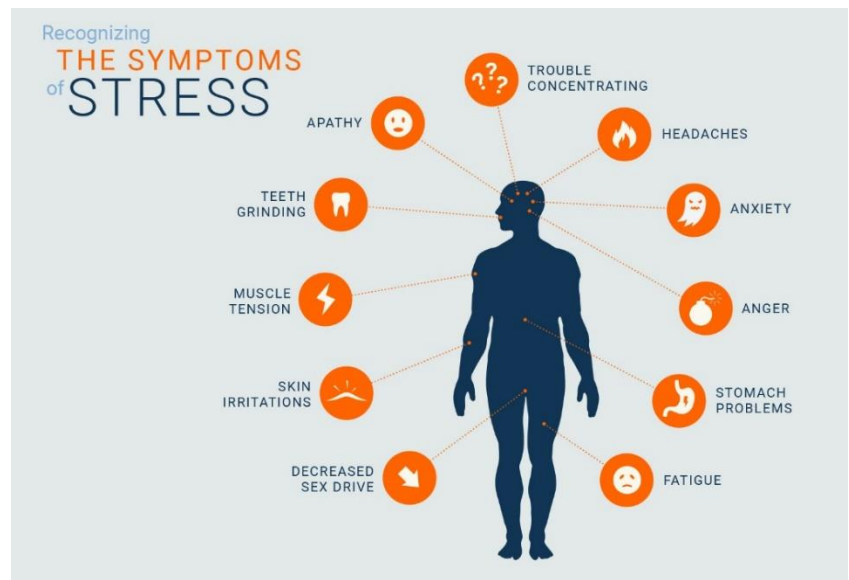
Stress is often described as a feeling of being overloaded, wound-up, tight, tense and worried. We all experience stress at times. Stress can help to motivate us to get a task finished or perform well. If we become too stressed or experience stress for too long it can be harmful. Stress becomes problematic when it impacts negatively on our well-being or ability to function.

Signs and Symptoms

When we face a stressful event, our bodies respond by activating the nervous system and releasing hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. These hormones cause physical changes in the body which help us to react quickly and effectively to get through the stressful situation. This is sometimes called the 'fight, freeze or flight' response. The hormones increase our heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, metabolism and muscle tension. Our pupils dilate and our perspiration rate increases. While these physical changes help us try to meet the challenges of the stressful situation, they can cause other physical or psychological symptoms if the stress is ongoing and the physical changes don't resolve.

Symptoms of stress include:

- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sleep difficulties
- Changes in mood
- Irritability & anger
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Headaches & migraines
- Body aches and pains
- Feeling unwell
- Skin conditions
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Weakened immune system
- Upset stomach, indigestion, diarrhoea
- Feeling tearful, overwhelmed and out of control, and
- Experiencing low self-esteem or lack of confidence.



How to Manage Stress?

- **Identify triggers** – Often there are triggers that raise our stress levels and pose a challenge to manage. If you identify these triggers, you can anticipate them and learn strategies to better manage them. This might include responding differently or even eliminating the trigger. Triggers might include: late nights, long work hours, excessive demands, relationships with particular people, poor self-care or over-tired children.

- **Establish routines** - Predictable routines in your day, or week, can assist achieve life balance. Our bodies have circadian rhythms and function better when we maintain more consistent patterns of behaviour. Routines can include regular times for: meals, exercise, relaxation and sleep for example. Planning and prioritising also increases efficient use of time, optimising resiliency.
- **Practise relaxation** - Practising relaxation will help your body and nervous system settle and restore. Learn formal techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness. Make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music. Plan activities daily which give you a sense of pleasure, like reading a book.
- **Manage your time** – Learn to say ‘No’ and delegate duties to others where possible.
- **Spend time with people who care** – Connection with others is important and spending time with people with whom you share mutual care is important for managing ongoing stress. Spend time with friends and family, especially those that are supportive rather than people who place demands on you. Share thoughts and feelings with others and avoid withdrawing.
- **Self-care** – Maintain a balanced, healthy diet and stay well hydrated. Engage in regular exercise and activities you find calming or uplifting, such as listening to music, walking or dancing. Avoid using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope.
- **Notice ‘self-talk’** - When stressed, we sometimes have repeated thoughts that are unhelpful and magnify our concerns. Unhelpful self-talk might include statements like: ‘I can’t cope’, ‘I’m too busy’, ‘I’m so tired’ or ‘It’s not fair’. These thoughts are not constructive. It is better to acknowledge your situation, problem solve and think positively. Counselling can assist recognise patterns of thinking that are unhelpful and replace them with better ways of solving issues.

Types of Stress?

Stress can be acute, episodic or chronic as follows:

- **Acute stress** – Acute stress is brief and specific to the demands and pressures of a situation. Examples include meeting deadlines, performing or experiencing a challenging or traumatic event.
- **Episodic stress** - Repetitive stress episodes may be due to a series of very real stressful challenges. An example includes losing a job, then developing health problems, followed by difficulties for a child in the school setting. People can adapt to episodic stress in a maladaptive way and develop a tendency to accept a high level of ongoing stress. This can result in ongoing challenges as their ability to manage demands is compromised. Some people tend to worry constantly about bad things happening, frequently rush and are impatient with too many demands on their time, which can contribute to episodic acute stress.
- **Chronic stress** – Chronic stress involves ongoing demands, pressures and worries with limited respite. Chronic stress is harmful to people’s health and happiness. People can become used to experiencing chronic stress and accept it as normal but it does continue to negatively impact on quality of life, relationships and health.

What causes Stress disorders?

Whilst there is no single known cause of stress disorders, there are several risk factors or triggers that may contribute. These vary between different Stress disorders too. In general, the following factors may play a role:

- **Genes:** Certain Stress disorders appear to have a genetic component. Some Stress disorders have a familial history.

- **Physical health and lifestyle factors:** These factors can increase a person's vulnerability to developing symptoms of Stress.
- **Personality and thinking style:** Patterns of behaving and thinking characterised by anticipating the worst, persistent negative self-talk, low self-esteem and unhelpful coping strategies (e.g., avoidance) are linked to Stress.
- **Stress:** Stressful events such as a marriage breakdown, work or school deadlines and financial hardship can act as a trigger for Stress.

Treatments that work

The following strategies can be used to assist people better manage their Stress:

- **Relaxation** - Learning relaxation techniques such as simple breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation, and practicing them regularly, is part of effective treatment for stress.
- **Problem solving** - Problem-solving skills help a person develop better insight and understanding and enhances coping with situations or thoughts that are making them stressed or anxious. Structured problem solving involves: identifying the problem; exploring, selecting and implementing a solution to the problem; and evaluating its helpfulness.
- **Mindfulness** - In mindfulness-based therapy, the focus is on being in the moment and aware of the distress about the experience of stress, rather than stress itself. The person is assisted to focus on bodily sensations and thoughts that arise when anxious instead of avoiding, withdrawing or fighting against these symptoms. This results in the person becoming more open and accepting of thoughts and sensations associated with stress and less overwhelmed.
- **Cognitive restructuring** - Feelings of stress sometimes stem from an individual's negative or unhelpful thoughts. Cognitive restructuring is a technique used by psychologists to help a person challenge negative thoughts and develop more helpful and constructive ways of thinking.

In addition to these psychological techniques, making simple changes to a person's lifestyle can help lower stress. Lifestyle changes can include: regular exercise, lowering or eliminating alcohol and caffeine, engaging in enjoyable activities, improving time-management skills and adequate sleep.

How a Psychologist can help

Using assessment and psychological counselling, psychologists develop an understanding of the factors contributing to stress. A therapy plan is then developed in collaboration with the client. This can involve relaxation, mindfulness, CBT, exposure therapy and other helpful strategies.

The psychologist can also assist making lifestyle changes to enhance resilience, reduce symptoms of stress and cope better.

When to seek professional help

If stress is affecting a person's work, school, home life, or relationships, psychological assistance should be considered. **iflow psychology** can assist. **Just call 0431 564 257 or book an appointment online** at www.iflowpsychology.com.au

If you want to claim a rebate from Medicare for up to ten sessions then ask your treating doctor to provide a referral and Mental Health Plan. A mental health plan form can be printed from our website for your treating doctor.