

Stress

Stress is the pressure under which you are placed by daily life. It can be positive and spur you into action to meet a deadline; but too much stress can put your health at risk and leave you unable to function. It is the second major cause of illness at work, after back problems. Anxiety and depression, the most common forms of mental illness, are often caused by stress.

In an emergency the stress chemicals (cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline) give us a surge of energy to flee from danger or fight for survival. When we are immobile, in the office, at home or in the car, these chemicals can build up in our bodies, raising blood pressure, affecting the heart and damaging the immune system.

Stress is an individual problem – what debilitates one person will be invigorating to another. There are two main types of stress: the constant 'drip' of everyday pressure such as deadlines, bills and errands and the 'gushes' of loss and life changes, such as bereavement, divorce, new job, house move and marriage.

Symptoms

Emotional - Anger or snappiness, Crying or shouting, Depression or anxiety
Physical - Increased alcohol/smoking/nail biting, Sleeplessness, Constipation or diarrhoea, Chest pains or palpitations, Dizziness or sweating

Causes

Most people are susceptible to certain types of pressure according to their temperament and the beliefs they hold about themselves. People who are motivated to please others or to succeed at all costs may be less able to deal with stress.

Stress is often caused by what we interpret as being expected of us rather than the reality. It may be our inability to be realistic which puts us at risk. Feeling powerless, at work and in relationships, increases our stress levels. When is the best time to seek help?

When stress and your reaction to it are dominating your life and there is no chance to switch off, it is time to seek help. Inability to sleep, increased alcohol intake and anger outbursts are all early symptoms which can alienate the stressed person from those around them and add to the problem. Some people are unable to acknowledge the stress they are under and may unconsciously project it onto partners or children. This can underlie depression and anxiety.

Stress is a problem which feeds on itself and lowers a person's ability to cope, so seek help as soon as possible to alleviate further tension.

Treatment

The stigma of mental illness means many people struggle without help, often contributing to the vicious circle of stress, depression and anxiety. Acknowledgment of stress is a huge step towards dealing with it.

A visit to the GP or occupational health advisor will help assess the severity of the problem. Often counselling or talking therapies are recommended, and in some cases medication may be prescribed.

Counselling can identify a person's particular triggers for stress and help to re-assess the value system, which may have prevented them from adequate self-protection.

Individual Counselling can address issues of low self-esteem and allow the sufferer to be more realistic about her or his abilities and can help them to be more assertive.

Content written/edited by Denise Pickup BACP (Accred) in 2008. The content is for general information only and may or may not relate to your individual situation; please contact a professional directly to discuss this issue.