

Dealing with stress

Stress is a part of everyday life for the vast majority of people, and with uncertain times ahead, the toll that it takes on us as a society is likely to get worse. Stress in itself isn't a bad thing – if it's managed properly.

So, what is stress?

Most people think of stress as the feeling they get when everything gets on top of them, when it all seems too much to deal with, or when they feel overloaded and don't think that they can cope with all the demands placed upon them.

You probably don't need anyone to tell you when you're feeling stressed – it's that slow build up of pressure that can make you feel as if you're an elastic band about to snap. Sometimes you might not realise how stressed you are until you reach breaking point – and then everybody knows about it. In small doses, it's nothing to worry about. But if you are feeling constantly stressed, it's time to think about ways of managing your physical and emotional symptoms before you make yourself ill.

How do I know if I'm stressed?

Stress can manifest itself in many ways, but it's generally accepted that the most common symptoms are:

- feeling angry
- depression and anxiety
- food cravings or loss of appetite
- crying a lot
- sleep problems
- tiredness
- difficulty concentrating

Physically, your body may be trying to tell you that you need to slow down, by producing other unpleasant reactions to your stress:

- chest pains and breathlessness
- constipation, nausea or diarrhoea

- cramps and muscular pain
- dizziness and fainting
- nervous twitches,
- restlessness
- loss of sexual desire

Of course, these symptoms can all be caused by other things, but if you're suffering from more than a few of them, you need to get a grip on the problem as it's already making you feel bad.

Techniques for stopping stress in its tracks

Once you've recognised the "I'm stressed" feeling starting to build up – well done! That's the first step to dealing with it. Now you can quite literally take a deep breath and relax. One thing that people who are dealing with a stressful situation seem to do is take shallow, fast breaths, so stop for a minute. Make sure you are sitting, lying or standing in a comfortable position, and breathe in really deeply, to the count of four. Hold this breath for another four counts, and then exhale really slowly to a count of eight. Repeat this exercise six times, concentrating on each breath and counting as you go. This will start to slow you down, and mentally disconnect you, however briefly, from the stress that you can feel escalating inside you.

Dealing with stress on a daily basis

There is no magic secret when it comes to dealing with stress, we all have to find a way of dealing with it that works for us. Recognising that you are feeling overwhelmed, and that it's OK just to take some time to look after number one, is key.

If you can take a day off from the things that are causing you stress, it won't make them go away but can at least give you some breathing space to decide how you are going to approach the problems. Spend a day, or a couple of days, being kind to yourself. If work is the stressor, removing yourself from a busy office can make all the difference.

If it's hard to escape from the things that are causing you stress, sometimes facing up to issues such as relationship problems, money worries or any other major issues can help you to deal with them. Don't just sweep these kind of long term worries under the carpet, the relief you could feel from actually getting your fears out in the open could go a long way to helping you relieve some of the pressure.

Make sure that you eat well, as stress can cause you to either binge eat or lose your appetite. Many women turn to food when they feel stressed, and researchers at the University of Liverpool¹ discovered what most women could have told them anyway,

that stress acts as a trigger to over-consume and in particular, women who eat in response to their emotions as a rule were more prone to excessive food consumption when they were feeling stressed. Eating cakes doesn't make you feel better in the long term, and when the cake has gone, the stress is still there.

Try to get enough sleep, even when you think there's no point going to bed because your mind is racing. Sometimes the old tricks are the best – a soothing cup of chamomile tea, a warm bath and an early night really can help. They won't make the cause of your stress magically disappear, but at the very least you'll feel as though you are taking care of yourself, and sometimes that can make all the difference.

Stress relieving therapies

Aromatherapy is an easy and inexpensive way to induce calm if you're feeling stressed. The great thing about it is that it's now so mainstream that you can find essential oils and other aromatherapy supplies anywhere. The most-prescribed relaxing aromatherapy oil is Lavender, which is even available in a roller pen for those days when you need an instant calming fix. You can also buy pre-mixed relaxing bath and burner formulas designed to soothe your frayed nerves.

A massage is an age old method of relieving stress and getting the knots out of tense shoulders. Gentle touch has been proved as a way of relieving stress and anxiety in studies – in one 2006 study people reported a reduction in their stress levels, anxiety and depression as well as an increase in relaxation levels and ability to cope when they were treated with touch therapy.

When to see the doctor

If you feel that your stress is becoming unmanageable, and that you're teetering on the verge of depression, you should see your doctor. Check the symptoms again, and if stress is really causing you to suffer physically, and long term, you need to ask for medical advice.

Summary

- Stress can make you feel as if you can't cope
- Stress can manifest in many physical and mental symptoms
- Breathing techniques can help in the short term
- Look after yourself, get enough sleep and eat well
- Face up to problems
- Aromatherapy and massage may help
- If stress is overwhelming, see your doctor.

References

1. http://www.liv.ac.uk/news/press_releases/2004/10/chocolate.htm
2. Healing by Gentle Touch Ameliorates Stress and Other Symptoms in People Suffering with Mental Health Disorders or Psychological Stress - Clare Weze, Helen L. Leathard, John Grange, Peter Tiplady and Gretchen Stevens.

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

© Copyright Bayer plc 2009 Last reviewed: March 16th 2009 Doc ID: Oi123 Version: 1
