Understanding and Dealing with Stress

In today’s fast paced world of ever increasing demands, shorter deadlines and seemingly endless tasks, we have come to accept the presence of stress in our lives. Research has shown that stress is becoming more and more of an issue across the world, yet not many of us understand enough about stress, how it affects us and importantly how to cope healthily with its effects.

What is stress?
Stress is most often thought of as something negative, harmful and to be avoided. However, the stress we experience is actually part of our body’s “fight or flight” response to challenging and even dangerous situations. The “fight-or-flight” response is a natural survival mechanism that functions to mobilise the body’s energy stores and focuses attention in order to overcome the challenge at hand. Some stress therefore helps increase our alertness and energy to better deal with challenging situations demands and problems over the short term. Experiencing stress is part of being alive and very functional in many instances. However, if stress lasts a long time or overwhelms our ability to cope, it can have a negative effect on our health, wellbeing, relationships, work and general enjoyment of life.

While we cannot eliminate stress from our lives, we can be more aware of what stresses us, monitor our stress levels and actively work on managing our stress in a healthy manner.

Causes of Stress
The situations and pressures that cause stress are commonly known as stressors. Anything that places a high demand on you or forces you to adjust can be a stressor, including negative events like work overload and marital conflict as well as positive events such as getting married, buying a house, or even getting promoted.

While people often think of stress as something imposed by an external person or situation, stress can also be self-generated.

Below are some examples of both external and internal stressors:

Common external stressors
- Major life changes
- Work
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Being too busy
- Children and family

Common internal stressors
- Inability to accept uncertainty
- Pessimism
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations
- Perfectionism
- Lack of assertiveness
Stress Tolerance

Stress is a very individual phenomenon and whether or not someone finds a situation stressful largely depends on how they perceive it as well as their ability to tolerate stress in general. As such you may find that something that’s stressful to you may not even faze someone else, and vice versa. The following are some factors that affect one’s stress tolerance:

► Support network – A strong network of supportive friends and family members is a good buffer against life’s stressors. Conversely, the more lonely and isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.

► Sense of control – Confidence in yourself, your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, helps you take stress in stride. People who are vulnerable to stress tend to feel like things are out of their control.

► Attitude and outlook – An optimistic attitude, desire to take on challenges, a strong sense of humour and acceptance of change often helps inoculate one against stress.

► Ability to deal with your emotions – Everyone has ups and downs and being able to calm and soothe yourself when you are distressed helps you bounce back from adversity.

► Knowledge and preparation – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to realistically expect, the easier it is to prepare for and cope.

Signs and Symptoms of “Excess” Stress

When stress lasts too long or overwhelms our ability to cope, we commonly fall into distress. While people often experience stress as a feeling, excess stress actually manifests in a variety of emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and even physical symptoms. People under excess stress also have a greater tendency to engage in unhealthy behaviours, such as excessive use or abuse of alcohol and drugs, cigarette smoking, and making poor exercise and nutritional choices. These often function to worsen the effects of their stress symptoms or develop into unhealthy habits. Since the experience of stress is highly individualized, the signs and symptoms of poorly managed stress can also be very different for each person. The following are some of the more common signs and symptoms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive symptoms</th>
<th>Emotional symptoms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>► Memory problems</td>
<td>► Moodiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>► Inability to concentrate</td>
<td>► Irritability or short temper</td>
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<tr>
<td>► Poor judgment</td>
<td>► Agitation, inability to relax</td>
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<td>► Pessimistic approach or thoughts</td>
<td>► Feeling overwhelmed</td>
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<td>► Anxious or racing thoughts</td>
<td>► Sense of loneliness and isolation</td>
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<td>► Constant worrying</td>
<td>► Depression or general unhappiness</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical symptoms</th>
<th>Behavioural symptoms</th>
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<tr>
<td>► Aches and pains</td>
<td>► Eating more or less</td>
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<tr>
<td>► Diarrhoea or constipation</td>
<td>► Sleeping too much or too little</td>
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<td>► Nausea, dizziness</td>
<td>► Isolating oneself from others</td>
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<td>► Chest pain, rapid heartbeat</td>
<td>► Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities</td>
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<td>► Loss of sex drive</td>
<td>► Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax</td>
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<td>► Frequent colds</td>
<td>► Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)</td>
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Coping with Stress

There are several ways of coping with stress, such as controlling the source of stress or learning to set limits around some of the demands from bosses or family members. A person's capacity to tolerate the source of stress may be increased by thinking about another topic such as a hobby, listening to music, or spending time with nature.

The following are some other simple steps you can take to manage your stress:

▶ **Exercise** – Since the stress response prepares us to fight or flee, our bodies are primed for action. Exercise on a regular basis helps to turn down the production of stress hormones and associated neurochemicals. Exercise can also help avoid the damage to our health that prolonged stress can cause. In addition, studies have also found that exercise is a potent antidepressant, combats anxiety, and is a sleeping aid for many people.

▶ **Relaxation** – Research has shown that one or two 20-30 minute meditation sessions a day can help you manage your stress and have lasting beneficial effects on blood pressure, heart rate and general health.

▶ **Elimination of unhealthy coping** – Elimination of drug use and moderation of alcohol use are important for the successful management of stress. People often seek these outlets when stressed, but many of these substances either accentuate the stress response, or mask the stress thereby preventing the person from facing their problems.

▶ **Take regular breaks** – Chronic or uninterrupted stress is harmful and regular breaks are necessary to moderate your stress levels. Take a lunch break without talking about work. Take a walk instead of a coffee break. Use weekends to relax. Take regular vacations or even long weekends or mental-health days at intervals that you have learned are right for you.

▶ **Embrace structure and routine** – Structure and routine in your work and personal life provide a comfortable framework from which to respond to the unexpected. Think ahead and try to anticipate the varieties of possibilities, good and bad, that may become realities at work or home. Generate scenarios and response plans. With this kind of preparation, you can turn stress into a positive force to work for your growth and change.

▶ **Seek help** – For those who may need help dealing with stress, individual counselling/coaching is a great way to reduce stress symptoms, build your ability to cope with stress and improve overall health and attitude.

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Remember the EAP offers support through confidential face-to-face, telephone, video and online counselling for individuals and coaching and advice for managers. For support, advice or to make an appointment just call your EAP provider, Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC), on 1300 360 364.