

About stress

Some stress may help your body to prepare for certain challenges, so it's probably impossible to live without any stress. But too much stress, especially if it's day in, day out, can cause physical and emotional problems.

So that your body can respond almost instantly to challenges, many of its control mechanisms happen without you having to think about them. This involuntary control of things, such as how fast your heart beats, is achieved by a network of nerves called your autonomic nervous system. This is an essential part of the 'fight or flight' response.

As well as triggering responses in muscles, including your heart, your autonomic nervous system sends signals to your hormonal system, triggering the release of chemical messengers such as adrenaline. These are released into your bloodstream and travel all around your body contributing to the 'fight or flight' response by, for example, making you more alert, boosting your blood pressure and releasing sugars into your bloodstream. This results in a heightened - or stressed - state that prepares your body for optimum performance in dealing with a situation.

The stresses we face in our everyday lives - such as deadlines at work or money troubles - don't really trigger a 'fight or flight' response. However, they do release the same stress hormones, and this natural reaction can damage your health and reduce your ability to cope.

Overall, if you're under long-term stress you're at greater risk of developing disease or dying prematurely.

Symptoms of stress

Everyone reacts to stress differently. However, there are some common symptoms to look out for.

People who are chronically stressed may have:

- periods of irritability or anger
- apathy or depression
- constant anxiety
- irrational behaviour, mood swings and be oversensitive
- loss of appetite
- a tendency to comfort eat
- an inability to concentrate or make decisions
- loss of sex drive
- an increased likelihood of smoking, drinking, or taking recreational drugs

There can also be physical effects, which may include the following:

- excessive tiredness
- sleep problems

- tearfulness
- frequents colds and infections
- high blood pressure
- skin problems, such as eczema
- aches and pains from tense muscles, including neck ache, backache and tension headaches
- increased pain from arthritis and other conditions
- feeling sick and dizzy
- stomach problems including constipation, diarrhoea or ulcers
- for women, missed periods

In times of extreme stress, people may tremble, hyperventilate (breathe faster and deeper than normal) or even vomit. For people with asthma, stress can trigger an asthma attack.

Stress and illnesses

The exact role of stress in causing illnesses isn't known. However, it's clear that stress can temporarily weaken your immune system. If your body is put under too much stress, it can become exhausted.

Over time, the chemicals that are released during times of stress, and the changes they produce in your body can seriously damage your health. In the long-term, this may increase your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Chronic (long-term) stress can also contribute to anxiety and depression.

You may also be more exposed to risk factors for diseases when you feel stressed. For example, smokers may smoke more if they're stressed, and people who drink alcohol to relieve stress may become dependent on it.

Post-traumatic stress

Post-traumatic stress can affect anyone who has been through an extremely difficult or violent experience, such as witnessing a violent death or disaster, being involved in a serious car crash, or surviving a fire.

People suffering from post-traumatic stress may experience any of the symptoms listed. They may also feel a mixture of emotions such as fear, shame, depression, guilt or anger, and recurrent memories or images that may be haunting or lead to nightmares. These feelings can last for weeks, months or even years after the traumatic event that triggered them. Specialist treatment, possibly with medicines and psychological therapies, is available.

Causes of stress

Many things (or the anticipation of them) can lead to stress. These include:

- pressure to perform at work or school
- money worries

- family and relationship problems
- arguments
- divorce
- bereavement
- unemployment
- moving house
- threats of physical violence

Often there is no particular reason for developing stress, and it's caused by a build-up of a number of small things.

It's important to differentiate between temporary stress that you know will go away when a situation is resolved, and long-term or chronic stress. Most people can cope with short periods of stress. Chronic (continuous) stress is much harder to deal with, and can be psychologically, emotionally damaging, to you and your friends and family.

Diagnosis of stress

Don't be afraid to ask your GP for help. He or she will usually be able to spot the symptoms of stress, but may also do some tests to exclude other conditions. Your GP may be able to help you identify the causes of your stress, give advice on techniques to help you relax or refer you to a counsellor.

Treatment of stress

There are a number of ways of tackling stress and preventing it from returning or affecting you as much. You will need to identify its cause and then review your lifestyle to make changes.

Self-help

It's important to make time for exercise. Exercise helps to use up the stress hormones that cause your symptoms, giving you a sense of wellbeing and helping your muscles to relax. Even a brisk walk for 30 minutes every a day can help.

Another good way to tackle stress is to talk to your friends or family - sharing your worries can help you to look at how you react to stress in a new light. It's important to talk directly to your manager if you're suffering from work-related stress. Your manager has a duty to take reasonable steps to try to resolve the problem.

Other ways to help you deal better with stress include the following:

- delegate or share your work responsibilities
- learn to be more assertive - say no to things you know you can't do well or aren't your responsibility
- don't drink too much alcohol or caffeine or take illegal drugs - these will not help you to cope better and may make you ill

- eat a healthy, balanced diet, rich in fruit and vegetables - avoid giving into 'bad' food cravings and try not to skip meals as it may make you feel worse
- set aside time to organise yourself and prioritise tasks, going through them one at a time
- take up a new hobby or interest to take your mind off things
- have some fun - do something you love, even if it's just listening to music

Stress management

There are four basic approaches to dealing with stress:

- removing or changing the source of stress
- learning to change how you react to a stressful event
- reducing the effect stress has on your body
- learning alternative ways of coping

Stress management techniques aim to promote one or more of these approaches. You can learn these techniques from self-help books, attending a stress management course or at therapy sessions run by a counsellor or psychotherapist.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy that challenges negative thoughts, feelings and behaviour and helps you to react differently to events. CBT is often available at GP surgeries.

Medicines

Sometimes, your doctor may prescribe medicines such as antidepressants.

Complementary therapies

Aromatherapy, reflexology and massage may provide a quiet, relaxed environment in which you can wind down.

Learning relaxation techniques such as meditation, self-hypnosis, visualisation and breathing exercises can also help you to relax.

Yoga or Pilates may help you to control your breathing in stressful situations. They may also help you sleep better and relieve stress-related physical pains such as stomach pains, muscle pains and headaches.

How can we help?

As stated in the self help section exercise is a great way of dealing with stress. Here at Edenmore we have a full team of fitness professionals trained to build fitness programmes for any individual no matter what the goal. If you would like to arrange a free consultation simply pick up the phone and call Kenny our Country Club Manager on 02892 613838. Let's get stress busting!!!!