

# MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK 2020

## MANAGING STRESS



Once you have recognised that you are struggling with stress and feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope, you will be ready to move on to learning some ways to reduce this stress and begin to enjoy life more. We will share some suggestions here to get you started. For further advice, please contact our AdviceLine.

### Understanding Stress

Stress is how the body reacts to external pressures that we perceive to be challenging or uncomfortable. This is a completely natural bodily response and one detrimental to our survival. Healthy levels of stress enable us to perform well, for instance we might feel nervous when we give a presentation to an audience or attend an interview. The body reacts by releasing adrenaline into our system that invigorates us and can assist us to focus.

Stress becomes problematic when it undermines our ability to cope; when we have periods of panic, cannot focus our thoughts or worry so much that we struggle to fall asleep. Most of us can cope with short periods of stress but if it is prolonged it can develop into chronic stress.

The best way to manage stress is to try to live a balanced life, to notice the warning signs when things are becoming too much, and take steps to address them. We will never eliminate stress altogether but if we can develop our resilience and pay attention to our needs we will cope better when times are difficult.

The first step to managing your stress, is to discover what it is that is causing you this stress in the first place. Some common causes of stress are:

- Pressure at work
- Unhappy relationships
- Financial difficulties
- Chronic illness or injury
- Times of uncertainty

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### Stress-busting Tips

#### Take Small Steps

As the famous saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day. When we work towards goals it can be overwhelming if we focus on the end result. In the worst cases we may give up before we even begin. Breaking things down into manageable chunks can motivate us to continue through each subsequent stage. As an example, if you are writing a novel, you do not immediately write 50,000 words. You write sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, until the work is complete. Whatever it is that is causing you stress, try to look at the problem in this same way and break it down where you can. If you are stressed about a large project you have at work, is it possible to break it down into similar chunks? Alternatively, if you cannot change the stressor itself, you can also apply this method to how you manage the stress. Consider focussing on decreasing just one element of the stress at a time, rather than expecting it to completely evaporate at once.

#### 7/11 Breathing

This is a simple exercise that you can practise just about anywhere when you need to. Breathe in to the count of 7 and then exhale to the count of 11. Making the 'out' breath last longer than the 'in' breath will help the body to relax as it triggers the parasympathetic nervous system. It distracts our minds from our worries and gives us a moment of respite. At first it might seem difficult to breathe out to the count of 11 but don't worry, with time and practise it will become easier. There is no need to force it. You can practise this for one minute or five depending on how much time you have and how stressed you are feeling and how much time you have.

#### Express Feelings

Everyone has feelings but if we fail to pay attention to them they can build up and become overwhelming, or we can wind up acting against our true intentions. Think of feelings as important information about what is right for you; if you are happy things are good, if you are angry something is not right and may need changing, if you are upset you may need to acknowledge the loss of something precious. Paying attention and expressing our feelings helps us to navigate our way in the world, and improve our relationships. Particularly in difficult times sharing our feelings with a trusted friend can help us to feel supported and cared for.

#### Eat a Nutritious Diet

A balanced diet provides the bedrock for our wellbeing. When we eat well we are more likely to feel well and have energy for the activities we enjoy.

#### Spend Time in Nature

Research shows that spending time in natural surroundings can be beneficial for our mood, and a stroll in nature can boost performance on tasks calling for sustained focus. If you can't easily find a natural setting studies show that even looking at pleasing images of nature has some benefit.



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### Learn to Set Boundaries

Many people find it hard to say no. Perhaps we worry that we won't be liked if we don't say yes to people, or as children we were brought up to be nice, obliging and helpful. Yet if we say yes to things we don't agree with, or want, we prevent ourselves from realising our true intentions.

Setting boundaries is about making your needs and wants clear to other people. This involves voicing what you accept and what you do not accept. Saying no doesn't automatically make you a bad or unhelpful person, it allows you to be more assertive and prevents resentment building up. If you find it hard to say no practise saying it in lower stake situations, and build up to saying no in more important matters.

### Be Active

Exercise is a great stress reliever as it releases feel good hormones such as endorphins. It keeps us in better physical condition and provides a break from daily activities. People often report that they come up with their best ideas whilst running, walking or other form of exercise. Without the usual focus on getting things done our mind is free to wander and come up with more creative solutions.



### Eliminate Unhealthy Coping Aids

Reaching for a glass of wine, eating junk food or zoning out online when we feel stressed may make us feel better in the short term but if these become habits and continue long term they will create greater problems. Ultimately our health suffers and problems remain unresolved. We can rely on these habits as a way of escaping from uncomfortable feelings, instead of facing up to them. Although facing up to difficult feelings isn't easy it can help us to deal with the truth of what is going in our lives and, in so doing, allows us to make choices and take control over how to move forward.

### Challenge Negative Thinking

In difficult situations it is easy to think negatively, to predict the worst or tell yourself that things are hopeless. Finding alternative ways of viewing the situation can help to prevent you from spiralling into negativity and inertia. Most of us have what Cognitive Behaviouralists refer to as Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs). These are habitual negative ways of perceiving what is going on and are based on belief systems rather than reality. Here are some examples of NATs; think about what NATs you have and see how you can challenge or reframe them.

### Pause

When we are frantically busy, put on the spot or caught up in a heated exchange it can be difficult to make good decisions or say the right thing. If you find yourself in this situation remember to pause. Take a moment to inhale and exhale as this will give you time to think. If this is not enough, ask for more time to reflect on what has been said so that you can think it through and come up with the best response. Agree a time to return to the conversation.

### Have 'Me-Time'

Allow time in your week for yourself. Think about what would be really nourishing or enjoyable for you and make time for it. It could mean scheduling time with friends, doing something fun, attending a class, seeing a movie, giving yourself some quiet reading time, gardening or having some pampering. Me-time doesn't have to be expensive. These moments will help to get you through a stressful period.