

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK 2020

UNDERSTANDING STRESS & ANXIETY



There are many signs that you are suffering from stress; feeling unusually irritated, having difficulty sleeping, feeling isolated and lonely, drinking or smoking more than usual or struggling with commitments. These are just some common symptoms of stress.

The Mental Health Foundation published results from a survey run by YouGov, in which 74% of respondents reported having felt so stressed in the past year that they have been overwhelmed or unable to cope.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in 2018/19 found that stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 44% of all work-related ill health cases and 54% of all working days lost due to ill health. If the picture at work isn't very encouraging, home life isn't much better.

More and more of us in the UK are living alone. The number of people living on their own went up by 16% to 7.7 million between 1997 and 2017, while the UK population increased by only 13%.

The gradual erosion of community and family structures underpinning that statistic has led to a loss of social support that has left millions feeling increasingly lonely, vulnerable and stressed.

When stress mounts, it can turn into anxiety, which can have a debilitating impact on both long-term physical and emotional wellbeing. At the extreme end of the spectrum lie so-called anxiety disorders, which almost always require professional help.

Although we can't always do something about the things that are causing our stress, we can always do something about how we respond and how stress and anxiety is managed.

If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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What Exactly Is Stress?

Due to the way in which stress means so many different things to so many people, and the way that it manifests differently from individual to individual, it can be rather difficult to pin down what exactly stress is.

One of the founding fathers of modern stress research, Hans Selye, tried to sum it up in 1956: "Stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." But it gets more complicated if we take into account that what will seem "exhilarating" for one person could easily feel overpowering for the next. Recent definitions have focused much more on the fact that stress is not determined just by events in the outside world, but by how each individual perceives them.

The International Stress Management Association (ISMA) describes stress as:

- The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them.
- Where those pressures are subjectively felt to have importance.
- Where those pressures exceed the person's current perceived resources and coping ability.

Put simply, we're in trouble when the stresses that we face are putting us under more pressure than we can easily deal with. And the longer it goes on, the worse it can get.

Understanding Anxiety

Just like stress, anxiety can be hard to define. For the sake of simplicity, we can identify three different types.

Fear – a feeling that we experience in the face of threatening or difficult situations. Just like stress, it helps us recognise dangerous situations and motivates us to address problems, but can become debilitating in the long term. **Panic** – an unexpected surge of negative feeling and acute anxiety, characterized by an inability to think and a desire to escape the situation that you are in immediately.

Phobia – a constant, extreme or irrational fear of an animal, object, place or situation that would not normally worry the majority of people.

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can help us deal with difficult situations such as confrontations and tests. It actually helps us cope. But if it becomes excessive and chronic, it can develop into a disabling disorder. Major types of anxiety disorders include:

General Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



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Warning Signs

Some symptoms of stress, like panic attacks and extreme tension, are easy to spot. There are, however, a whole range of cumulative symptoms that can creep up on or us without our really realising what's going on. They can be:

Physical: fatigue, headaches, back pain, insomnia, indigestion, cramps, constipation, diarrhoea, sweatiness, sleeping too much

Mental: forgetfulness, poor concentration, boredom, paranoia, perfectionism

Emotional: irritability, depression, mood swings, apathy, increased sensitivity to criticism

Relational: loneliness, withdrawal, intolerance, relationship problems

Behavioural: substance abuse, eating problems, overwork, procrastination

Spiritual: sense of emptiness, loss of beliefs and sense of meaning, cynicism

Learning to spot the warning signs is the first step to dealing effectively with stress. People who are unaware of what is happening to them are much more likely to resort unthinkingly to negative coping strategies, such as heavy drinking, overeating, overspending and overwork.

While these behaviours may provide some initial relief, they actually run us down even further, pushing us into a descending spiral of ever more ineffective attempts to cope with ever intensifying levels of stress.

Once you've recognised the symptoms, it is also crucial to remember that they are perfectly normal responses to life's pressures. This will stop you from falling into the trap of thinking something is "wrong" with you for feeling this way and put you quickly into a position to do something constructive about it.

