



MANAGING STRESS

What is stress?

We define stress as the way we react to any situation that requires us to adjust or respond. The body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses. Each of these responses are important when it comes to managing stress. It's important to add that stress is a normal part of life, and we actually benefit from experiencing a certain level of it. Different problems can arise when we have too little or too much of it in our lives.

Is stress the same as anxiety?



Stress and anxiety are often used interchangeably, and there is certainly overlap between stress and anxiety. Both tend to involve the activation of the fight, flight or freeze response, for example.

However, stress might be differentiated from anxiety in a number of ways. Stress is more of a banner term, under which you will find anxiety, along with some other challenging emotions such as depression, anger, guilt, panicky feelings, poor sleep and poor wellbeing, to name a few. A person under stress may experience anxiety along with a range of other emotions.

Stress focuses on external pressures that we find hard to cope with. Anxiety is one of a number of possible internal reactions we might have to that stress.

How does stress affect us?

Stress can affect several different aspects of our lives, including our physical body, the way we might think about things, how we might be feeling, how we behave, our sleep patterns, and our overall wellbeing. All these areas are important to look at to manage stress effectively. We will look at three in particular

The Mater Hospital Stress Control Lecture Series (SCLS) covers these three areas in further detail. The lecture series is part of the HSE National SCLS initiative. This program is a six week lecture series devised by Dr Jim White, Consultant Clinical Psychologist.

Controlling Bodily Symptoms

Stress can activate an ancient biological mechanism in our bodies, described as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. This is because, once activated, it prepares us to fight a potential threat, run away quickly from it, or we remain rooted to the spot.

This has helped us to survive as a species over the thousands of years we've been around, but the problem is it can be activated by a perception of threat, not just an actual one. So we can trigger it simply by thinking we are in danger, even when we're not.

Once triggered, it activates the musculoskeletal system (all of the muscles in our bodies) and the autonomic nervous system (a part of our nervous system that's normally not under our conscious control). The physical symptoms that get triggered can be quite unpleasant (nausea, tension, palpitations, hypervigilance etc.) and it can take time to reverse them once they appear. They get triggered in the blink of an eye, but they may require several minutes to calm down, if not longer. This is important to bear in mind when trying to slow them down. The following suggestions may help in this regard

- ▶ Cut down on caffeine if not avoid it altogether
- ▶ Diaphragmatic breathing (a form of breathing that helps to elicit relaxation)
- ▶ Progressive muscle relaxation (a relaxation exercise than can reduce body tension)
- ▶ Exercise (a way of 'burning off' excess bodily tension)
- ▶ Mindfulness (which can help to build self-awareness that can aid relaxation)



Managing our thoughts

Stress can greatly affect our ability to think straight. We are more likely to pick up on negatives rather than seeing the bigger picture. If we are under stress, we are more likely to be 'hypervigilant', which increases the risk that we'll potentially jump to unhelpful conclusions. This is sometimes called 'grasshopper' thinking and results from 'cognitive distortions' that can affect us all at times. It is important that we try to listen to our 'common sense' voice and reduce the volume on our 'stress' voice. This can be done by considering the following suggestions

- ▶ Taking a moment to consider the accuracy of your thought (press pause)
- ▶ It might be helpful to remind yourself that thoughts are not facts - they're 'just' thoughts
- ▶ Maybe there's opportunity to pull back any blinkers that you might have on (bigger picture)
- ▶ It might be possible to challenge your thoughts if there's a chance they're not accurate (What are the chances of something being true? What's the problem if it is accurate? Will it be important in 5 days/weeks/months' time? How important an issue is it?)

- ▶ Can you talk to someone about it? “A problem shared is a problem halved”
- ▶ Is there anything else you can do about it? Being proactive feels empowering

Controlling our thoughts

We can actually control our behaviour far more than we can ‘control’ our thoughts or feelings. This makes it a really useful area when it comes to managing stress, because there’s likely to be a number of opportunities for us to make improvements. An important behaviour that we need to mention is avoidance, because it’s very common in the context of stress. Most of us would rather avoid dealing with something than taking it on. It’s human nature. But whilst avoidance can make life easier for us in the short term, it’s generally creating problems for us in the long term, because it undermines self-confidence. If you have excess stress in your life, consider the following suggestions

- ▶ Face your fears (sensibly!)
- ▶ Get out of your safety zone (gradually growing it)
- ▶ Use problem solving as a skillset to help you do this
- ▶ Be more active in general terms
- ▶ Break stress up so that you just tackle one issue at a time
- ▶ Keep ‘avoidance’ to a minimum
- ▶ Be careful about other ‘maladaptive’ coping methods (withdrawal, self-medicating etc)

If you would like to learn more about Managing Stress, feel free to look at www.stresscontrol.org or contact psychology@mater.ie to learn more about the Mater Hospital Stress Control Lecture Series.



THE MATER
WELLBEING CENTRE

CONTACT US

Mater Misericordiae University Hospital

Dept of Psychology • 63 Eccles Street • Dublin 7

✉ psychology@mater.ie • ☎ 01-854 5439