



Stress

What is stress and how common is it?



We have all at some point in our lives felt the effects of stress, it is an unavoidable part of life. Whilst we are all familiar with what it feels like, we may struggle to accurately define what we mean when we say stress. This is unsurprising as stress is not officially an illness in itself and has no medical definition. This has led to disagreement amongst healthcare professionals regarding whether stress itself can be responsible for symptoms or is solely a reaction to symptoms. There tends to be agreement in mental health fields that stress can cause mental health problems and be the result of mental health problems, which can unfortunately create a vicious cycle for the sufferer.

When looking to provide a broad definition of stress we can say that stress is the brain's reaction to excessive pressure or high demands. This can be both the result of a physical demand or a more emotionally based demand. As we will discuss below, this stress reaction can, in some instances, be a good thing. However, problems arise when stress becomes more long term and chronic as the chemicals released by the brain for short term stress can be detrimental when a person is exposed to them for an extended period of time.

With there not being an official medical definition of stress it can sometimes be difficult to establish accurate statistics regarding its prevalence. Data is usually gathered primarily from the workplace and may often be grouped with anxiety and depression. What we do know is that stress appears to be a substantial problem in countries like the UK, with between 9.9 million and 13.3 million work days being lost each year as a result of anxiety, depression and stress. In 2014/15

stress alone was responsible for 35% of work-related illness and 43% of lost work days due to ill health. This grouping of anxiety, depression and stress are also responsible for 20% of GP visits in the UK each year. This is not a problem exclusive to the UK, with 75% of doctor's visits in the USA being for stress related problems. It appears the problem is getting worse, with 44% of Americans reporting higher stress levels than five years ago.

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What causes stress?

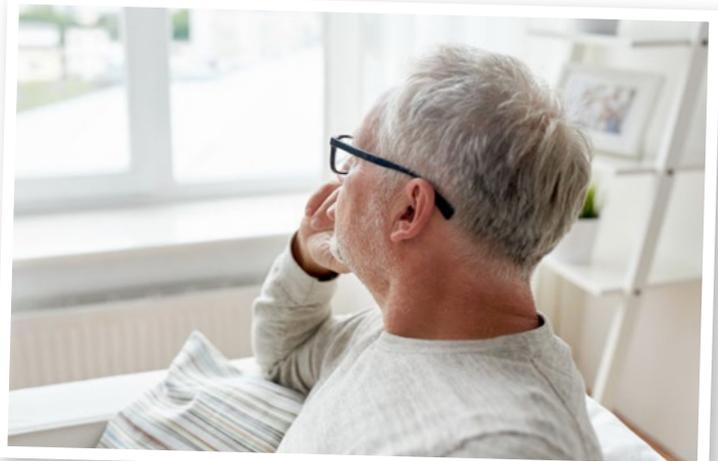
With there being no consensus on whether stress causes or results from other symptoms it can sometimes be difficult to accurately identify the causes of stress. There are however a number of things that people tend to agree are more likely to elicit a stress response. It is important to remember that what may cause stress in one person may have no effect on another. Essentially, any change in a person's life can result in stress; regardless of whether this change is short term or long term. A change can be either negative or positive and still result in stress. In fact a perceived change, without a lot of real evidence, can still result in stress for some people.

Keeping the above points in mind, we can still identify areas that are commonly mentioned when stress is thought about; finances, employment and illness are all examples of fairly substantial life events that can increase a person's stress level. More extreme episodes of violence and traumatic events are also likely to cause stress. It is important not to overlook the everyday events that people face, that aren't drastic life changes, which still increase stress. These may include family interactions, commuting to work, work-related deadlines, and schooling. Events that bring a person joy can also result in a lot of stress; examples of this being a new born baby or moving house. Whilst people are likely to be very happy when these events occur, the increased stress and responsibility is likely to be a rather large catalyst for stress.

It would be remiss of us to overlook the workplace as a key source of stress for a lot of people. After all, workplace stress is often a combination of stress related to finances, relationships, time demands and many other features. It is also an example of an environment where a person is likely to have little control regarding the stresses they are under, and in many cases an environment that cannot be walked away from. The stress caused by the workplace also relates to the time a person spends in a job. For many people the office is where they spend the majority of their time, with 60% of UK employees regularly working overtime.

How does stress impact people?

As with the causes of stress, the impact stress has varies from person to person. Whilst we can suggest a number of commonly occurring symptoms related to stress, the symptoms you personally feel will likely be unique to you, and as such, you will need to learn your own symptoms of stress. Some people may experience more physical symptoms from stress and others may experience symptoms that are more targeted at their emotional and mental health. The symptoms experienced by a person may also differ depending on the situation they find themselves in and the intensity of symptoms is often related to the perceived stress of the situation.



Below are a handful of the commonly occurring symptoms seen in relation to stress:

Physical symptoms include: Headaches, dizziness, digestive symptoms, nausea, and breathing difficulties.

Emotional and mental health related symptoms: Depressed mood, irritable and aggressive mood, sleep disturbances, anxiety, fear, and withdrawn behaviours/ social detachment.

These symptoms can themselves become stressors which will compound the problems a person faces. They are also a likely contributor to the fact that almost 30% of workers have had to call into work sick due to stress.

Long term exposure to stress can not only cause the above symptoms but can unfortunately increase a person's risk for more severe and chronic conditions. It is important to remember that feeling stressed does not automatically mean you will suffer from these conditions and if you are concerned about your risks due to long term stress you should consult your doctor.

Longer term problems: Susceptibility to flu, stroke, heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, and anxiety disorders.



Can stress be good?

When we hear the word stress we tend to automatically think of a negative emotion but in certain situations stress can be useful. Stress is an evolutionary response to a change in a situation and in many instances it can be a good thing. In fact the stress response can be lifesaving as the reaction this causes relates to the 'flight or fight' response which helps humans, and other mammals, identify dangerous situations and react accordingly; fleeing situations where necessary.

Moderate levels of stress have also been shown to increase performance on certain tasks, making a person more alert. This is beneficial in situations such as job interviews and public speaking, as long as the levels of stress do not reach a point of causing the symptoms mentioned in the previous section. Stress is also the reason that people receive a thrill when completing high risk activities and extreme sports and can lead to exceptionally thrilling life experiences. Again, in these situations stress is a good thing, until it reaches a level where a person is putting themselves at risk.

Ways to cope with stress and to reduce stress

As with all the things we have mentioned regarding stress, each person will find ways to cope and reduce stress that are best suited to themselves and their lifestyles. What we do know is that people are unlikely to be able to completely remove stress from their lives and so it is useful to have some tips of where to start to try to improve symptoms. Below we have compiled a short selection of possible ways to improve symptoms of stress and to avoid stressful situations. You may need to try a few of these before you find something that works for you.

Visit a mental health professional	Whilst stress is not technically a medical condition, many people will benefit from a session with a mental health professional. Treatment will often involve cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which will look into changing thought patterns and identifying stress triggers.
Identify stress triggers	This can be a difficult task when you cannot differentiate between symptoms and triggers. However, identifying triggers is important so you can focus your energy on reducing these situations. One way to keep track of, and identify triggers is to use a diary to record instances of high stress and the situations surrounding this. You can then sort these triggers in to two groups; those you can control and those you can't. You can then focus your management efforts on the triggers you can control.
Physical health care	If physical conditions are the root of some of your stress then it is important to seek appropriate treatments to relieve the stress these conditions can cause.
Social support	It is important to maintain a healthy social network as this can help prevent stress and other mental health problems. It is also useful to fall on your support network when you are suffering from stress. Local groups and activity clubs are a good way to meet people with similar interests to grow your network.
Ask for help	If you feel you are struggling to cope with your stress symptoms on your own then it is important to ask for help from a friend or professional.
Learn how your body reacts to stress	As we have said previously, people react to stress in their own ways. It is important to learn your own reactions to stress to help you identify periods of chronic stress in future.
Task management	This applies to both work and personal life. If you have a task to complete then it is important to plan ahead to leave yourself enough time to complete whatever task you are working on. If you do think you are going to struggle to complete a task then don't be afraid to ask for support. If you already feel overrun do not be afraid to say no to a task, or to doing a favour for a family member.
Exercise and healthy eating	It has been shown that regular exercise and a healthy diet can help reduce instances of stress. Therefore it is important to eat your five fruit and vegetables a day and to undertake sufficient exercise. It is also important to avoid excessive drinking, smoking or caffeine intake.

Schedule relaxation time	It is important to remember to schedule time to relax into your timetable. This relaxation time does not need to be an elaborate task or activity, it may simply be half an hour to read a book, but it is important to remember to take time to unwind.
Relaxation activities	Whilst not all relaxation needs to be organised, many people do find activities such as yoga and meditation to be successful stress-coping mechanisms.
Take a break	If work is becoming stressful or you are really overwhelmed it is important to take a break. It is not always feasible to take extended breaks, but five minutes away from the problem can help reduce stress and tension.
Mindfulness	Taking a course, or attending a class on mindfulness can be beneficial in reducing and managing stress symptoms. In some cases mindfulness may be taught during professional therapy.
Attend a stress management class	Talking about stress and the underlying problems can be a great way to relieve stress. One environment where you may feel more comfortable sharing is in a stress management class.
Be realistic	It is important to be realistic in your expectations of yourself and of others. Nobody is perfect so there is no point in being annoyed when people do not reach perfection.
Take control	When we are passive in situations it is easy to start feeling helpless. Where possible take control of your situations and make changes to your benefit.

Helping someone suffering from stress

There are two main roles you can fill when you know somebody who is suffering from stress; observer and supporter. As the observer you are not passively watching your loved one suffer as the name may suggest, instead you are observing key behaviours that may be symptoms of stress. You may know these signs from reading this brochure, or from previous instances of stress experienced by your loved one. The important role of the observer is to highlight these concerns to the loved one, as they may not be aware they are exhibiting signs of stress in the early stages. It is important to not be accusatory when putting these views forward, and to be open to alternative suggestions that explain the symptoms. However, if the symptoms do turn out to be stress-related, helping a loved one notice the signs earlier will help in relieving the symptoms sooner.

In the second role as a supporter, you will be supporting your loved one through coping with stress. This can be done through supporting them with trying the techniques for coping with stress, or simply by listening to their concerns and reassuring them that the stressful period in their life will pass. You may find that you both find an enjoyable activity to do together to help improve both of your mental states. When stress is bad a person may need to discuss their problems with a professional, and in these instances it will help to have a supportive friend or loved one throughout the process. Whilst you may wish to fulfil all of these roles and to get the person better, the process can take its toll on you and can lead to your own stress developing. It is therefore important to be mindful of your own mental well-being in this time as well.

For more information on mental health please visit our website:
www.shawmind.org



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