



Stress – the facts

The UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as:

"the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them".

Source: www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm

Stress is the "wear and tear" our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment. It has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings.

As a positive influence, stress can help spur us into action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger and depression which, in turn, can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and strokes.

With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion or a new relationship, we experience *stress* as we readjust our lives. As we adjust different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it.

How can you eliminate stress from your life?

Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Your goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help you.

Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling 'tied up in knots'. What we need to do is find the *optimal level of stress* which will individually motivate but not overwhelm each of us.

How can you tell what is your Optimal Level of Stress?

There is no single level of stress that is optimal for all people. We are all unique and individual with different needs. As such, what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. And even when we agree that a particular event is distressing, we are likely to differ in our physiological and psychological responses to it.

The person who loves to mediate disputes and moves from job site to job site would be stressed in a job which was stable and routine, whereas the person who thrives under stable conditions very likely would be stressed on a job where duties were highly varied. Also, our personal stress requirements and the amount that we can tolerate before we become distressed changes with experience.

How can you manage stress better?

Identifying unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect on our lives is not sufficient for reducing its harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. However, all require work toward change: changing the source of stress and/or changing your reaction to it.

Top Stress Tips

1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional/physical reactions.

- Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems.
- Determine what situations distress you. What are you telling yourself about the meaning of these situations?
- Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

2. Recognise what you can change.

- Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?
- Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)?
- Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)?
- Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.

- The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger ... physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
- Are you expecting to please everyone?
- Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent?
- Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?
- Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
- Try to temper excessive emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not brood on the negative aspects and the 'what if's'.

4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.

- Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
- Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help you gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure.
- Medications, when prescribed by a Doctor, can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.

5. Build your physical reserves.

- Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling or jogging).
- Eat well-balanced, nutritional meals.
- Maintain your ideal weight.
- Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine and other stimulants.
- Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.
- Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep pattern as possible.

6. Maintain your emotional reserves.

- Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
- Pursue realistic goals which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
- Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
- Always be kind and gentle with yourself -- be a friend to yourself.

Further tips

- 1) For stress in the workplace, please visit the Calma Partnership website at www.calma.co.uk and go to 'Stress at Work Test'. This test draws from the UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE) 'Management Standards for work related stress'. The results page of the Calma Partnership 'Stress at Work Test' also offers you some useful tips on managing stress.
- 2) Sometimes it can be useful to speak to a counsellor if you feel you are stressed. The Calma Partnership have a network of highly qualified and professional therapists who specialise in counselling in the workplace.

The Calma Partnership would like to acknowledge the grateful assistance of the Health & Safety Executive (HSE).