

While most of us use the word 'stress' quite frequently in relation to events in our daily lives, we are often hard pressed to define exactly what we mean.

For many people, stress means the feeling of frustration encountered when their three-year-old dawdles over their Cheerios and then refuses to have their seat belt tied, causing a five-minute delay that escalates to fifteen minutes when you hit the morning traffic at precisely the wrong time.

However, the most commonly accepted definition of stress describes the emotional pressure that is created when the demands placed on us are perceived to exceed our ability to cope.

### Good thing or bad thing?

Stress in itself is not necessarily a bad thing and indeed is a normal part of living. In fact, stress increases the level of adrenaline in the body, energising the individual to face hurdles that are encountered in the course of the average day. It is often the emotional power that motivates us to respond positively to the challenges that we face in our work and personal lives adding a sense of excitement to every day achievements.

It is when daily life challenges become greater than our coping resources that the negative effects of stress kick in, creating feelings of pressure, frustration and panic. In such situations, a series of physical and emotional symptoms are displayed which, if they become prolonged or intensified,

may affect the health and emotional well-being of the individual.

### How do I cope with stress?

*Getting to the heart of it:* It is often valuable to ask yourself why it is that you are so stressed. Are you saying yes to everybody's demands? Do you find it impossible to say no? Are you trying to achieve the impossible by being a perfectionist? Are you trying to live up to other people's ideals? Are you fighting a million unnecessary little battles every day? Do you have to 'Save the Whale' right now?

*Reduce Demands:* As negative stress is caused by a feeling that we are unable to meet the demands

placed on us, the first step is to reduce those demands in any way possible. Getting someone in to help with housework, teaching the children to pick up after themselves, asking the boss for more assistance or a reduction in workload, ordering the groceries online to save a traumatic trip to the supermarket – every little helps.

*Get organised:* Much of the stress in our lives is caused by time pressures. Getting up fifteen minutes earlier can prevent the seething anxiety of being late for work or an important meeting. Even preparing the vegetables the night before diffuses the tension of hungry, irritable children at teatime. Making the lunches, laying out

clothes for the morning or having your shower before bedtime all add a few precious minutes to the morning melee.

*Learn the art of relaxation:* Just because you can't afford an exclusive spa weekend doesn't mean you can't experience an oasis of calm. An hour pulling weeds in the garden will expand your sense of achievement no end, not to mention all that fresh air and the possibility of a tan.

A lingering bath when the kids are safely in bed can be a life-saver. A few candles can make all the difference.

*Aids and Appliances:* It only takes a minute to light a candle and add a few drops of relaxing lavender oil to

your aromatherapy burner or to pick out a relaxing CD to drown out the Hip-Hop blaring from your teenager's bedroom. Use a dimmer switch or shaded lamps to calm the mind and create a soothing mood nearer to bed-time.

*Food for thought:* The old adage, 'Let food be your medicine' certainly rings true when it comes to stress. Eating a nutritionally-balanced diet can prevent the highs and lows of sugar cravings that leave many of us feeling tired and irritable. Cut down on caffeine in coffee, tea and soft drinks as this can increase the heart rate and enhance feeling of panic and anxiety. Avoid heavy meals before bedtime as eating late may contribute to poor sleep patterns.

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# Stress Fractures!

Words by Mairead O'Driscoll,  
Qualified Reflexologist

*“Worry a little bit every day and in a lifetime you will lose a couple of years.”*

MARY HEMINGWAY

**Exercise your rights:** Regular exercise promotes the release of endorphins – the feel-good hormones. A brisk walk at lunchtime, taking the stairs, going cycling or trampolining with the kids can all help to activate the natural antidepressants in the brain. Try to do 20 to 30 minutes of physical exercise two or three times a week.

**Sleep it off:** For most of us, the luxury of eight hours sleep is an unattainable mirage. However, it isn't just the quantity of sleep that matters but also the quality. Winding down with a cup of Valerian or Camomile tea an hour before bed time promotes restful sleep, as does a relaxing bath and some tranquil music. Two drops of lavender oil on the pillow will also usher you towards dreamland. Avoiding caffeine in the evenings is essential unless you actually like counting sheep.

**Learn it – Live it:** Relaxation is an art in itself and may need to be worked at if you are a person who is naturally inclined to worry. Going to a relaxation seminar, listening to a CD of relaxation techniques or buying a few books on the subject of stress will all reiterate the importance of leading a calm and stress-free life.

**Talking it over:** Sometimes, the act of expressing to a friend or loved one just how snowed-under you are can help to alleviate the feeling of being alone and overwhelmed. Solutions can often be found merely by saying it out loud, especially to someone who might not be aware that you are shouldering so much of the responsibility in the home or workplace.

Ask for help – you may find that your friend or partner thought that you actually liked doing the shopping, cutting the grass or doing the ironing!

**Taking it easy:** Cutting down on alcohol and smoking will make the world of difference in improving your general lifestyle. Too often, our response to stress is to use alcohol or drugs to forcibly induce relaxation. However, the opposite effect occurs with the after-effects generating a more stressful situation the following day. Absenteeism from work can create a risk to job security, ensuring negative conditions with colleagues and superiors. All this is aside from the adverse effects on general health and well being.

**Prevention, Prevention, Prevention:** Always better than cure, it is the wise woman who can see a stressful situation coming and makes a move to avoid or deflect it.

It might mean turning down an offer of promotion or saying no to yet another after-school activity but positive action can be better for the whole family in the long run.

## Having it your way!

One of the key factors in leading a relaxed yet productive lifestyle is to let stress work for you by harnessing the creative energy generated by adrenaline and using it to your advantage.

*It is advisable to contact your doctor or health professional if stress-related symptoms become overwhelming or if depression, hopelessness or despair develops.*

## How will I know if I'm stressed?

The signs and symptoms of stress are many and varied but may include the following:

### Physical

- Racing heart or palpitations
- Headaches
- Tummy upset or “butterflies”
- Weight loss or gain, disinterest in food
- Sexual difficulties
- Poor sleep pattern
- Stiffness and tension in neck or shoulders
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Gastric ulcers

### Emotional

- Anger, irritability, moodiness
- Anxiety/feeling over-whelmed
- No interest in friends/family
- Feeling out of control
- Poor concentration
- Lack of motivation
- Poor work performance
- Lethargy or tiredness
- Over dependence on caffeine, alcohol or drugs
- Forgetfulness