

# Struggling with stress?

## Tried and tested tips to help you cheer up and chill out

***Has your get up and go got up and gone?***

***Are you tired, frustrated, anxious and angry?***

***Do you dread the thought of each working day, but dread the weekends too?***

***Do you feel you ought to make some changes but are too tired to know where to start?***

***Do you worry about everything even when you know there's nothing worth worrying about?***

***Do you suffer from a myriad of minor physical ailments that keep you under par?***

***Do you regularly eat, drink or smoke too much?***

***Do you find yourself not enjoying things you know you've been looking forward to?***

***Are you sick of it all?***

Sounds like you're probably suffering from stress.

According to the media we're all up to our eyeballs in stress and heading for burnout. It's caused by *too much* work or *not enough* (or no) work; a hectic lifestyle, or boredom; 'juggling' too much or being too single-minded. In short – 'stress' seems to be caused by pretty much everything!

### The meaning of 'stress'

This being the case, surely we must question what exactly we are talking about when we use the term 'stress'? Well according to the dictionary it's *'intense emotional, physical or mental pressure or tension'*.

On top of this, the most commonly accepted definition of stress (mainly attributed to renowned American psychologist Richard S Lazarus) is that stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that **demands on them exceed the personal and social resources they are able to mobilise.**

Our definition is that stress is the gap between what you do and how you feel about it. If your daily activities are causing you to feel harassed, anxious or frustrated you're probably stressed. However, if you feel relatively relaxed, cheerful and in control of what you do, there's no stress.

As you're probably aware, levels of stress can vary enormously between individuals in the same situation. Very few events will create identical stress levels for everyone – which seems to underline the fact that the condition known as 'stress' usually results from a combination of different factors, rather than just one and it's that combination that will make the difference.

However, whatever the cause, what *stress* adds up to for many is an ongoing feeling of continuously being crushed between a rock and a hard place resulting in an inability to cope, and a poor emotional state which can be revealed by a variety of physical symptoms.

So what can we do to overcome it?

### Identify what causes stress

There's no quick-fix solution, but the answer lies in focusing on dealing with your feelings and how you react to stress, rather than attempting to master or 'manage' it.

Studies have shown that 'control' is perhaps the biggest contributory factor in stress. As you can see from the above examples, too much pressure (e.g. a hectic job) can cause stress, as can having no job at all. The key lies in the amount of control that we feel we have over a situation. Here the link seems to be fairly straightforward: more control = less stress.

So part of the answer to reducing stress must be to gain more control over your life. Obviously that can be easier said than done, but for starters, try these tips:

- **Ensure your life has meaning** If you're on a daily treadmill with no idea of the bigger picture, it's no wonder you're stressed. It's all

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too easy just to push on doing what you've always done, without taking time out to ask why, and question whether there might not be a better way. Replacing mere routine with a definite sense of purpose will give you energy and enthusiasm. If you feel you haven't got one, maybe it's time you thought through what your vision of a perfect life would be.

- **Understand that you do have choices.** We all have commitments, but ultimately we chose to have them and we can choose whether or not to change things. Making fundamental changes might be scary but it can be done. Very little is impossible, though some changes are not as straightforward as you might wish.
- **Stop wasting time.** Increasingly our lives are under siege from random, time-wasting activities – mobile phone calls and texts, emails, rubbish TV. Cut down their relentless interference by actively limiting your access to them (and other people's access to you) and replace their mindless 'noise' with quiet time in which to think, reflect and plan.
- **Set yourself realistic targets.** Don't try to prove you're Superman (or woman) by taking on too much. You'll only beat yourself up when you struggle – or fail - to deliver. Tackle one thing at a time, and devote all your concentration to that task for as long as you have set yourself to complete it. Butterflying from one thing to another without ever completing anything is a surefire route to stress and frustration.
- **Stop worrying and let go.** A lot of stress is caused by the fact that we worry too much – before, during and after what we do. Learn to take action or let go. Worrying contributes nothing at all. Mostly we worry about things we can't control and even worse, worry about things that never happen. Let go of the past, live for the present and by all means **plan** for the future, just don't worry about it.
- **Learn to say 'no'.** There's a fine line between being regarded as diligent, conscientious and helpful and being known as a push-over. Which side of the line are you? Oddly enough, those 'lucky', carefree, stress-free people who seem to breeze through life are often like that because they're very good at conserving their energies for those things they're good at and actively want to do. As a result they're rarely stressed by over-commitment.
- **Develop a positive attitude.** Ultimately how you feel is pretty much a result of the attitude you choose to adopt. You can decide to be positive, optimistic and unfazed by the demands of others, or you can choose to be negative, pessimistic, angry and resentful. No

one has the right to say you have to be positive but it's amazing how much seems to go right and how much more cooperative and supportive people seem to be towards you, if you're consciously cheerful and resilient.

- **Make time to do things you enjoy.** Often when we're stressed, it seems that there's hardly enough time for life's essentials, let alone having time for activities that would positively cause us enjoyment. However, creating a balanced lifestyle is key to maintaining an ability to cope. The majority of world leaders and entrepreneurs all take time to ensure that they regularly have some time to relax and enjoy themselves – whether with their families, playing sport, or just sitting quietly with a drink.
- **Stop doing and start being.** Most of the time our thoughts are completely tangled up in the tasks we're facing, which prevents us from seeing the bigger picture. So every now and again throughout the day, consciously stop what you're doing, and let your mind go blank. Breathe deeply several times. Now think of something uplifting and just concentrate on that and nothing else for five minutes. It's the greatest stress-buster known – you can do it anywhere and it's free.
- **Look after yourself physically.** Stress and physical ailments are intrinsically linked and it's all too easy to find yourself in a vicious circle you can't get out of when it comes to trying to decide whether your stress is causing your headaches, indigestion, insomnia etc, or vice versa. Although it may be difficult to 'cure' physical symptoms immediately, eating properly, getting enough sleep, taking regular exercise and avoiding heavy drinking or smoking will help alleviate the symptoms and improve your ability to cope.
- **Find a new source of support.** As stress is an emotional condition, finding someone empathetic to talk to about it can be hugely beneficial. Very possibly your partner, family members, or good friends may be too close to the situation, but an acquaintance, colleague, coach, mentor or counsellor may provide just the arena you need to talk about how you feel and discuss ways of improving things.
- **Find something to laugh about every day.** Laughter, as they say, is the best medicine so consciously seek out something that will cause you to laugh out loud every day – whether it's a DVD of your favourite comedy series, a CD of a stand up comedian or a book of jokes (there are even joke websites – just enter 'jokes' into Google). Laughter provides a great sense of release and nothing's that bad if you still have the ability to laugh and see the funny side of life.