

Fact Sheet – Understanding Stress

Stress is the body's indicator that we are uncertain how to handle an event or situation. This uncertainty creates worry and we feel 'stressed.'

The slip road on a motorway maybe stressful for you and another person may not even register that as a stress. Whilst you may relish change another may dread it. How you think about and react to each situation determines whether you find them stressful or fairly easy to deal with. Your reaction to stress can affect your mental and physical health; so it is important for you to learn how to deal effectively with stress as it occurs.

Understanding stress

Firstly don't underestimate your feelings about the events in your life they are very important. By understanding yourself and your reactions to stressful events, you can learn to handle stress effectively. The best place to start is by working out what produces stress in you, such as:

- major events in your life: changing jobs, getting married, having children, buying a house, getting divorced, relocation or coping with the death of a loved one,
- long-term worries: concern about finances, illness of a family member or concern for children.
- daily hassles: negative colleagues at work, the traffic, people being late or rude or the printer breaking down just when you need it! practice: Why not, stop reading and make a list of potential stresses in you life now.

The stress response

The minute we think a situation is stressful are body provides us with evidence that it is! The body moves through the following three stages:

Stage 1 - Increased Energy Kicks in

The body releases adrenaline, your heart beats faster, and you start to breathe more quickly. Remember we can elicit this response in either positive or negative situations i.e. the night before a pitch for your dream job or fear of redundancy in your current job.

Stage 2 - Burning up Energy Stores

Let's say stage one is happening a lot of the time, then you will start to consume your energy stores as the body responds to the increased need for energy, by releasing stored sugars and fats from its resources. At this point, you beginning to feel the prolonged effects of the stress response e.g. more tired, more pressured. You may respond by looking for false energy boosts in coffee or chocolate or maybe you smoke more and to unwind after a hard day drink more than is good for you. This creates a low in your immune system leaving you open to bugs and colds it can also create anxiety, panic and memory loss.

Stage 3 – Drained from the inside out

If you don't put a stop to stress your body's need for energy will become greater than its ability to produce it, and you will become chronically stressed. At this stage, you can experience problems sleeping, anger, frustration, negative thinking, and poor decision making. You may also develop a serious sickness, such as heart disease, ulcers, burnout or depression.

TRY THIS PRACTICAL EXERCISE – The Lemon response!

Where you visualise yourself holding a lemon, smelling the scent, feeling the texture of the peel, looking at the vivid bright yellow of its' colour and really associate with it. Now imagines taking a knife and cut the lemon, observing the juices flowing over the chopping board, feeling the wetness on your fingers and finally taking a slice and biting into it and tasting the tangy, sharp freshness of the lemon. It is virtually impossible not to start salivating at this point. We experienced the LEMON without the lemon. This happens with stress, we keep thinking about our stress, and therefore we get more of it. *'Where the mind goes the body follows.'*