

HEALTH AND FITNESS

STRESS!!

What Stress??

Most of you will be surprised to learn 1.3 million sufferers in the UK alone are feeling the effects of stress and this figure is set to rise significantly by the year 2010. In fact more people are currently off work with stress related issues than are unemployed. Frightening isn't it.

Research has indicated around 12 million adults see their GP each year with mental health problems. Most of these include anxiety and depression with much of it being stress related. By 2010 stress is forecast to be one of the main causes of poor health second only to cancer and heart disease.

I firmly believe that if you are going to overcome a problem or challenge first you have to understand it. You then need the knowledge to implement the appropriate life changes, to change your life forever. Finally you need the tools to help beat your issues on a daily basis. This month I will explain to you what stress is and how it can manifest itself within you and how you can overcome its debilitating symptoms.

What is Stress?

It is important to understand Stress has different effects on different people, depending on how we react to certain situations and challenges in our every day lives. It can easily be defined as the way you feel when you are under too much pressure and are unable to cope.

Stress has many causes and is common at both home and at work and with the world around us becoming faster paced and more competitive the pressures of life can creep up on us when we least expect it. So, it is important we continue to ensure we get the right balance in our lives and keep things in the right perspective, and ultimately retain control of our lives.

Too much pressure or stress can result in a negative impact on our health both physically and mentally. The main symptoms include insomnia, anxiety, sweats, feeling sick, butterflies, and an overall feeling of a loss of control.

The impact of long term stress can be even more severe affecting our ability to function normally in our everyday lives.

That's why it's important to recognise the signs early and immediately consult with your GP and make the appropriate and required changes in your life to regain and retain a healthy mind and physical wellbeing state.

It is suggested a certain amount of stress is good for us as it keeps us challenged and motivated and helps our overall performance. However, too much pressure can lead to stress.

Our conscious mind can only cope with an average of seven pieces of information at any one time. Too many things going on for too long can create overload and pressure therefore we can struggle to cope. It is easy to see how we become stressed isn't it.

The chemistry in the body changes fundamentally every time one reacts stressfully. Stress starts in the mind because of the way in which we perceive a situation as requiring our

immediate attention i.e. a hostile reaction from a colleague, an exam, a financial crisis, a marriage break up, an impossible deadline and a loved ones death.

When the body prepares for "fight or flight" it is ready for a short burst of heightened activity. In today's society, many factors can trigger this response, but few can be dealt with by a short burst of activity. Stress situations are often continuous so stress responses are semi-permanently on red alert, the physical release is unacceptable so the responses are suppressed – a situation which cannot be maintained safely for too long. The stress build up eventually explodes internally, knocks the body systems out of balance and causes extreme physical and mental exhaustion.

Here comes the science part...

When we are stressed deep inside your brain lays the hypothalamus which triggers the pituitary gland which releases hormones to trigger the adrenal gland. These glands release an output of adrenaline and nor-adrenaline into bloodstream. It is these stress chemicals which induce physiological changes designed to improve performance. This is the "fight or flight" effect and the following reactions are carried out:

Blood supply to the brain is increased – improves judgement & decision.

Heart speeds up and fuel is released into the bloodstream from glucose.

Fats and stored blood sugar provide extra energy.

Blood vessels dilate in some areas i.e. the skin to make it available for use in other areas like the muscles.

Air passages relax and breathing rate improves.

Blood pressure rises.

Digestion and excretion are not considered high priorities in a "dangerous situation"; adrenaline causes vascular constriction, which reduces the flow of blood to the stomach and intestine.

Long term adrenal stimulation with no discharge of energy will deplete essential vitamins and minerals from the system, namely, vitamins B & C which are vital to the functioning of the immune system. If these are depleted this could cause lower resistance and susceptibility to diseases such as ME. Blood pressure can also be affected and cause a build up of fatty substances on blood vessel walls, as well as, damaging the functioning of the digestive system.

When a person faces continual or repeated stress, the response system enters the chronic phase during which resistance declines below normal and eventually that person becomes exhausted.

Ways in which to tackle stress – Five top tips

1. Mind Workout Commence a mind workout everyday. Daily exercises can help you re-balance your life and regain control of your

thoughts and feelings. Quiet meditation at home using deep breathing techniques or a yoga class twice a week can help re-balance you internally.

2. Diet Try to cut out any sugary, processed or refined foods. It is these we crave and run for when we need to find comfort, however, the comfort is short lived and once your blood sugar level has risen sky-high it dips just as fast and the cravings return an hour later and the cycle begins again.

Being aware of what you eat is incredibly important in helping to overcoming stress and a diet of fish, white meat, fruit, vegetables, whole grains and pulses can give your body all the necessary nutrients required to retain balance and harmony. If possible avoid stimulants like coffee, chocolate and alcohol and also too much refined and processed foods or sugar as these can only upset the balance.

3. Exercise When we exercise our body releases endorphins which in turn combat stress hormones that are released into the body when we are stressed. Think of this as your endorphins putting out a fire. A fire caused on the inside by all the stress feelings and overload experienced every day.

I would recommend a minimum of forty minutes cardiovascular exercise everyday even if it is just a short walk to work and back. I know it is hard to find the time but instead of taking the car try a brisk walk instead. Many people use their lunch hour as a time to get some exercise and go for

a stroll, apart from the fact that it breaks up the working day and gives your body a break from work. To make it more fun you could invest in a MP3 player and listen to your favourite tunes as you stroll. For those of you who may like to try jogging there are some particular tracks you can download that give you a kick to motivate from the start to the finish of the jog.

4. Sleep Sleeping problems are common with stress. Ensure you have a consistent bedtime routine and go to bed at the same time every night. If you have worries or problems on your mind at night keep a notepad and pencil by the bed so consciously you are in control as you know you can write them down and forget about them if you need to. Avoid cat napping during the day, and try not to

become too obsessed with how much sleep you have had. If you have a bad night, draw a line under it and go to bed earlier the next night after a hot bath and relaxing your body through reading a book or listening to some calming music. It is suggested that we only really need a minimum of 4 hours sleep per night to function normally. We have convinced ourselves we need 6 or 8 hours. Take the pressure off yourself.

5. Goal setting Sometimes, we lose our way in this busy world and our aims and objectives become confused or unclear. I would recommend that you write down your goals and actions to ensure you implement the correct solutions that suit you. Ensure you keep a diary so you can monitor your results.

So there we have it. Our five top tips for beating stress. Remember once you have recognised the symptoms of stress, you simply need to start doing things differently and make the appropriate changes to take back control of your life.

Remember: If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.

For any further information on Stress Management Contact Mark Shields, The Channel Islands Life Centre Head Office
Tel: 01462 451473
Mobile: 07700 333324
Email: channelislandslifecentre@hotmail.com
Website: www.channelislandslifecentre.com

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**34 La Ville Vautier, Rue des Cosnets,
St Ouen, Jersey,
JE3 2WF**

Tel 510564 / 07797775169

Email steveodriscoll@newtelsurf.com