

WILL YOU LET STRESS GET THE BETTER OF YOU IN 2013?

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) the estimated cost to society of work-related stress is around £4 billion each year. 13.5 million working days were lost to stress in 2007/2008 and considering this was at the start of the economic decline it is highly likely that this figure has since increased.

Mark Shields Explains

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 everyday 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.

When our body experiences a stressful situation our adrenal glands (just above our kidneys) produce hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline, nor-adrenaline.

The Adrenal Glands are involved in multiple functions of the body:

- Stress control
- Metabolism
- Blood sugar and cravings
- Digestion and elimination
- Thyroid
- Reproductive hormones
- Mood and chemical imbalances
- Blood pressure and heart health
- Immune system (allergies, infections, etc.)
- Liver and detoxification centers

These hormones are excreted in order to prepare the body for "fight or flight" allowing us to cope, a bit like when cavemen would need to run from danger when faced with a wild boar whilst hunting.

- Pupils dilate
- Heart rate increases
- Breathing rate increases
- Blood flow to skeletal muscles increases
- Intestinal muscles relax
- Blood pressure in the arteries increases which may cause a build up of fatty substances on blood vessel walls, as well as, damaging the functioning of the digestive system.
- Blood sugar levels increase



When the body is under constant stress the adrenals are on constant alert pumping out these hormones which go through three stages.

Stage one:

Also known as "wired" because the cortisol levels are high and the person may feel out of control, fearful, restless and tense. Symptoms of anxiety

Stage two:

Wired and Tired - the person feels agitated, on edge and exhausted. Symptoms of anxiety and insomnia

Stage three:

Tired – The person feels mentally and physically exhausted.

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 one's death.

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.

Ways in which to tackle stress – Five top tips

1. Mind Workout

Commence a mind workout every day. Daily exercises can help you rebalance 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 overcome 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.

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.

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.

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:

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