

Understanding Stress

Stress is a natural human response to pressure when faced with challenging and sometimes dangerous situations. That pressure is not only about what's happening around us, but often also about demands we place on ourselves. Experiencing stress is part of life and some stress helps increase our alertness and energy to meet challenging situations.

If stress lasts a long time or overwhelms our ability to cope, it can have a negative effect on our health, wellbeing, relationships, work and general enjoyment of life. Stress doesn't have to control our lives. Taking steps to cope with situations we find stressful is important so we can function and live productive lives.

Here are some tips about what to look for and how to help yourself or get help.

Some causes of stress

Everyone responds differently to stress depending on personality, cultural background, social circumstances, past experiences, stage of life, support networks and the situation we find ourselves in. Causes of stress vary from person to person because of a mix of personal risk factors and difficult life events. A situation one person finds stressful, another person may consider normal, or even fun e.g. flying in a plane may be terrifying for one person and pleasurable for someone else.

Causes of stress can include:

- Interpersonal relationship problems
- Personal or family illness
- Conflict e.g. bullying or harassment
- Death of a relative or friend
- Work or study pressures
- Traumatic events
- Financial problems
- Concerns about life direction
- Job loss/insecurity
- Pressures from competing demands or a combination of the above

Stress is unhelpful when we:

- Can't switch off – feeling alert and anxious even when we want to be resting.
- Can't cope – even small things get us down, leave us exhausted.
- Withdraw from relationships, work or fun activities or become irritable.
- Have difficulty concentrating.
- Have aches and pains unrelated to exercise or any medical condition.

- Have difficulty eating or sleeping properly.

Sometimes stress builds up and takes on a life of its own – so that we feel anxious, even when not facing difficult situations.

Signs of stress

- Lack of motivation
- Sleeplessness or over sleeping
- Moodiness
- Headaches
- Feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- Reliance on alcohol or other substances to cope
- Increase eating, drinking or nervous habits
- Not coping with demands or responsibilities

Helpful tips for managing stress

Taking steps to manage stress is important for your current and long-term health.

1. Be aware – monitor your levels of stress and ask whether they are helpful or getting you down.
2. Take stock – think about things in your life or pressures you place on yourself that may be increasing your stress.
3. Talk to someone you trust - Talking to family, friends, a counsellor or a teacher can help you release negative feelings and develop an understanding of your situation and help you move forward.
4. See your doctor - Talk to your doctor about how you've been feeling, and to check your physical health and general wellbeing.
5. Look after yourself - Eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly and get enough sleep. Exercise has been shown to trigger a chemical response that releases positive feelings.
6. Limit alcohol, caffeine and nicotine because they can increase anxiousness and sleeplessness.
7. Take time out. Relaxing and doing activities you love can recharge your mind and body.

These are ways to help you bounce back and become more resilient. Sometimes, it can help to see a counsellor to talk about stressors in your life and find better ways to cope.

Sometimes it helps to know that someone is listening, and you never have to be alone. Lifeline WA connects people with care and compassion and during their time of need.

Please call Lifeline WA on 13 11 14 if you, or someone you know, needs crisis support. For more information please visit www.lifelinewa.org.au