

Stress

Stress occurs when we respond to situations in our life. It is very individual to each of us and our situation at the time. It has an external component or stimulus, the situation giving rise to our reaction within the individual. It also has an internal component, how we respond at the time. This interaction between ourselves and the environment has been a focus of discussion for 1000's of years. As noted by the Greek Philosopher Epictetus, it is not what happens to us, but how we respond that matters.

Stress helps us stay alert to what is happening around us and an absence of stress may limit our abilities to respond to dangerous situations. Stress is often said to produce the fight, flight or freeze response. Stress can also help keep us interested or motivated to perform tasks and achieve goals.



What happens to our bodies during stress?

There are 3 main phases. The first is the fight, flight or freeze response. There is increased activity in our sympathetic nervous system producing our hearts to beat faster, our muscles tense and we breath faster. The second phase if the stressor is not removed involves the bodies hormonal system changing to produce more cortisol and change the way we metabolize proteins and fats to create more energy. If the stressor is removed, then our bodies gradually return to normal. However, if the stress situation continues the bodies resources depleted and long-term medical conditions can develop.

How can stress affect your health?

You may feel overwhelmed emotionally, “snap” and become irritable and worry or become anxious. You may have difficulty concentrating or making decisions, moving on. Uncontrolled stress can negatively impact our sleep patterns, so we feel tired. We may have muscles aches and pains and headaches. We may change the way we eat, drink and or smoke and produce changes in behaviour so that we become more withdrawn.

How to manage stress levels?

There may be several approaches we can take to manage our stress levels. Talking to friends and family, a troubled shared is a trouble halved. Take exercise or down time with a holiday. Focus on eating healthily and try breathing exercises or develop mindful practice with apps on your phone or in groups. Consult a professional to help get back on track.

Some useful information can be found at the NHS moodzone

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/understanding-stress.aspx>