

# STRESS

Stress can be defined as our perception to the pressures that are placed upon us compared to our perceived ability to cope with these pressures.

Stress is very much an individual reaction - what is stressful to one individual may not be a problem for another. This is part of the reason why you can't buy an off-the-shelf stress management strategy; each individual has to sort out his or her own sources of stress, and then build a personal strategy.

There are four main ways in which we may respond to stress:

- physical changes in the body, such as tension headaches, skin rashes
- emotional changes in the way we feel, such as feeling angry or 'high'
- mental changes, such as decreased ability to concentrate or make decisions
- behavioral changes, such as becoming withdrawn, aggressive or irritable

Use the ten questions below as prompts to develop your own strategy to manage pressure.

## ***1] Do I need to give myself permission to take charge of the pressures in my life?***

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to handling stress is the fear of taking charge of your life. "It's in the lap of the gods." or "There's nothing I can do." are thoughts that may seem to sum up your situation but they also relieve the individual of the need to "Do something". Even small actions to try to change the situation, allows the individual to feel good about themselves. Better to have the thought "Well at least I am doing something about it". If you still feel uncomfortable with the idea of taking charge of the pressure in your life you need to work through your attitudes first. Probably the best way to do this is to talk through them with a friend or someone who won't judge you negatively. Another thought process that empowers is "What's the worst that can happen?". The answer to this often allows the individual to rationalize their options and take appropriate action.

Possible barriers to overcome include:

- "I feel guilty spending time on myself."*
- "I don't have the time to devote to this."*
- "I don't know if this will work."*

If you have any of these attitudes try turning them round into a positive statement:

## ***2] Do I need to sort out the balances in my life?***

When some people are pressured they allow work to take over more and more of their

lives. This means that their family and social lives suffer, and their life loses balance.

Think about the proportions of your time you devote to

- work
- home/family life
- social/community life
- time for yourself
- other ways you spend your time

Then ask yourself what proportion of your time would you like to devote to the items above? If you are being realistic, there will be a difference between the desired proportions and what happens in reality.

Do you need to adjust the balance? If the answer is yes, you now have an action plan showing where in your life you may need to start to think about taking control.

### ***3] Do I need to increase my resistance to stress?***

If you have a relatively unhealthy lifestyle, one way of reducing the effects of high pressure is to improve your resistance. Taking exercise, learning to relax and eating a healthy diet can all help make you less vulnerable to stress.

### ***4] Do I need to concentrate on internal or external pressures?***

Are most of your pressures are coming from yourself (internal pressures), or are most coming from other sources (external pressures). Internal pressures are your beliefs, fears, worries. Reviewing your beliefs and worries can change your perception of events, so that they become less of a threat and therefore less stressful to you. So this is another way of reducing your vulnerability to stress.

### ***5] Do I need to concentrate on managing change better?***

If change is a major source of pressure, you should start by working at this aspect of your work/life. Most changes are accompanied by a short-term reduction of what we had previously. This can naturally lead to frustration, irritation even anger. Starting to manage stress is in itself a change so you should prepare yourself for changes which occur when we manage change.

### ***6] Do I need to concentrate on improving relationships?***

If you feel stressed by relationships, an assertive approach can be applied to problems varying from expressing your opinions to being able to say 'no' to requests. Learning to be assertive will be equally helpful for work and home situations.

### ***7] Do I need to concentrate on acute or chronic pressures?***

If your job leads to frequent acute pressure, the skill of relaxation (or learning relaxation techniques) will help you modify your response.

***8] Do I need to review my job/career?***

If you experience pressure coming from the various aspects of your job, reviewing and analyzing your job will help you assess how your needs are being met by your job, and what you can do to reduce these pressures. If you are clear what needs to be done, and need to negotiate change with your boss, assertiveness will help you put your case.

***9] Do I need to tackle specific pressures?***

Any stress you experience is the result of the combined effects of the various pressures affecting you at the time. So you may decide to take a general approach to reducing pressure in general, as suggested in most of the above questions.

On the other hand you may have identified a particular strong pressure you want to tackle. If this is the case you do not necessarily tackle the ‘worst’ pressure first, because it may be the most difficult to deal with. Select, say, three pressures to start with, including one which is not too threatening. Identify the appropriate activities to help take control of any specific pressures.

***10] Do I need to start immediately?***

As we mentioned before, stress can produce many unwanted side effects such as tension headaches, skin rashes, becoming withdrawn, aggressive or irritable. Unless the causes are dealt with effectively, the resultant stress can produce symptoms that can be very damaging to health, such as damaged immune system, nervous breakdown and suicide. While most people do not suffer the extreme effects, putting off doing something positive to tackle stress is not recommended.

The time to deal with stress is now.