



STRESS AND ANXIETY



KILBRYDE HOSPICE

Information for Patients, Families & Carers

Stress – what is it?

Stress comes from the pressures we feel in life. Dr Richard S Lazarus puts it this way,

Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise.

In other words, if we believe the pressure of a situation or event in our lives is (or is going to be) too much for us to cope with, we will experience stress.

Is stress the same for everyone?

What is stressful to one person is not necessarily stressful to another. However, when stressed, the balance in our body is disturbed. The body will automatically try to restore balance, causing the physiological *fight or flight* response. This is the body's reaction to threat or danger – real or perceived. However, our brain cannot distinguish between our need to run away from a wild animal and our constant need to meet tight deadlines at work, meaning that our body will react in the same way regardless.

Hormones are released which bring about changes in the body. If left unchecked over a period of time, this physiological response will have serious implications for our health. One of the negative effects of a constant state of stress is anxiety.

With anxiety, *fear*, *worry* and *apprehension* become the dominant emotions. This can lead to chest pains, dizziness, shortness of breath and panic attacks. Some people become reclusive and isolated.

Stress is caused by an existing stress-causing factor (or stressor). Anxiety is stress that continues even after that stressor is gone.

Common signs and symptoms of stress

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Neck/shoulder/back ache or tension
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequent headaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jaw clenching/grinding teeth
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Insomnia/disturbed sleep
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased frustration/irritability/edginess
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased or decreased appetite
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constant tiredness, weakness, fatigue, tearfulness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty in making decisions, difficulty concentrating
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling overloaded/overwhelmed
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heartburn, stomach pain, nausea

Have you been experiencing any of these? These symptoms can of course, indicate other issues so it may be beneficial to discuss them with your GP.



1.

NERVOUS SYSTEM

When stressed – physically or psychologically – the body suddenly shifts its energy resources to fighting off the perceived threat. As mentioned earlier, in the *'fight or flight'* response the sympathetic nervous system signals the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones make the heart beat faster, raise blood pressure, change the digestive process and boost glucose levels in the bloodstream.

2.

MUSCULOSKELETAL SYSTEM

Under stress, muscles tense up. The contraction of muscles for extended periods can trigger tension headaches, migraines and various musculoskeletal conditions.

3.

RESPIRATORY SYSTEM

Stress can make you breathe harder and cause rapid breathing – or hyperventilation – which can bring on panic attacks in some people.

4.

CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM

Acute stress – stress that is momentary, such as being stuck in traffic – causes an increase in heart rate and stronger contractions of the heart muscle. Blood vessels that direct blood to the large muscles and the heart dilate, increasing the amount of blood pumped to these parts of the body. Repeated episodes of acute stress can cause inflammation in the coronary arteries, thought to lead to heart attack.

5.

ENDOCRINE SYSTEM

Adrenal Glands – When the body is stressed, the brain sends signals from the hypothalamus, causing the adrenal cortex to produce cortisol, and the adrenal medulla to produce epinephrine (sometimes called the ‘stress hormones’).

Liver – When cortisol and epinephrine are released, the liver produces more glucose, a blood sugar that would give you the energy for ‘fight or flight’ in an emergency.

6.

GASTROINTESTINAL SYSTEM

Oesophagus – Stress may prompt you to eat much more or less than you usually do. If you eat more or different foods (or increase your use of tobacco or alcohol) you may experience heartburn or acid reflux.

Stomach – Your stomach can react with ‘butterflies’ or even nausea or pain. You may vomit if the stress is severe enough.

Bowels – Stress can affect digestion, and which nutrients your intestines absorb. It can also affect how quickly food moves through the body, causing you to experience diarrhoea or constipation.

7.

REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

In men, excess amounts of cortisol, produced under stress, can affect the normal functioning of the reproductive system. Long-term (chronic) stress can impair testosterone and sperm production and cause impotence.

In women, stress can cause absent or irregular menstrual cycles or more-painful periods. It can also reduce sexual desire.

Given the effects that stress can have on our physical and emotional health, it is crucial that we learn how to cope with it.

How can I cope with stress?

Remember, stress is perceived differently by everyone and can come in many different forms. The key to coping with stress is to firstly recognise it! Once we know it's there, we can take steps to deal with it and reduce it.

We are going to go through a process of deconstructing our own stress - really taking time to think about what its sources are, then finding ways forward to reduce the causes of our stress.

You will need paper and a pen or pencil for the following exercises.

STEP 1 - RECOGNISING YOUR INDIVIDUAL SIGNS OF STRESS

As discussed already, stress can cause many different physical, mental and emotional symptoms. Which symptoms or signs have you personally experienced? Write them down. With this knowledge, you can recognise possible signs of stress in yourself in future.

STEP 2 – EXAMINE THE REASON FOR ANY STRESS YOU ARE FEELING

In this exercise, allow yourself to pour out all your worries onto a sheet of paper - everything from the biggest to the smallest thought that lives in your head.

Having completed Steps 1 & 2, you now have a visual representation of how stress is making you feel, and the amount of worries that are on your mind. The very act of putting these things down on paper can help give you some perspective. Can you see how your worries (thoughts) influence the symptoms of stress you are experiencing?

Looking at the list of worries you have written, examine each one in turn and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this something I can change or control?
2. Is this my worry or someone else's?

Once you have asked yourself these questions, work down your list of worries and score out those that you cannot change or control. This may reduce your list significantly and now it is down to you to decide what you will do with any remaining worries that are on your list.

You can resolve to take some action to alleviate the worry or, if this is not possible at this time, you can take the action to score this off your list too – if there really is nothing you can do to change it, you can decide not to worry about it any longer.

Remember, the purpose of these exercises is to help you

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Calm your mind |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce the things that you are expending energy worrying about |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus more on WHAT CAN be done and less on what cannot |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enjoy the present. Don't miss out due to worrying about the future |

Is there anything else I can do to manage stress?

It is important to breathe properly as shallow, rapid breathing can exacerbate some symptoms of stress. Ideally, we should breathe steadily in through the nose and out through the mouth. Our abdomen (not chest) should rise as we inhale and lower as we exhale.

In addition, Kilbryde Hospice has produced two CDs (Music for Relaxation and Guided Meditation) for home use, to help those who want to 'switch off' for a while and try to relax. These are available on request, free of charge.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a technique that can assist with relaxation. A guide has been produced by Kilbryde Hospice and is available on request.

The power of positive thought

Positive thinking can most certainly help reduce stress. Stay as positive as you can at all times. Here are some quotations that may help along the way,

There's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self."

Aldous Huxley

...there's no such thing as stress, there are only people thinking stressful thoughts...

Stress is an inside job."

Dr Wayne W Dyer

Please use this page to write down your own thoughts and notes

About Kilbryde Hospice

Kilbryde Hospice is a voluntary independent hospice which exists to provide specialist palliative care to patients with life limiting progressive illnesses and to their relatives and carers. Services provided by Kilbryde Hospice are available to those people with palliative care needs. The service is provided free and does not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, faith, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, age or financial means.

We would like to hear from you!

We take all compliments, comments and complaints about our service seriously and deal with them in confidence. Kilbryde Hospice welcomes feedback on any of our services which can be submitted by post, or on our website.

www.kilbrydehospice.org.uk or by Email: info@kilbrydehospice.org.uk

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Should you feel that your complaint has not been resolved by Kilbryde Hospice, you may contact Healthcare Improvement Scotland regarding services delivered within Kilbryde Hospice or within a person's own home.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland, Gyle Square, 1 South Gyle Crescent, Edinburgh EH12 9EB, Telephone 0131 623 4300

www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org

Kilbryde Hospice aims to communicate effectively with all patients and carers. This document is available in braille format for those who are visually impaired. A translated version is also available for those whose first language is not English.

To facilitate this service, please call 01355 202020, or Email your request to info@kilbrydehospice.org.uk