



Stress at Work

It is a rare occupation which does not involve some stress. Some people thrive on pressure and seek jobs which push them hard. Others prefer to be left alone to work at a pace that suits them. Others of us feel stressed by financial worries, a difficult home life or too little excitement. Very few of us achieve our ideal stress-balance all of the time.

What is stress?

STRESS is a word that can be used to describe both the cause and the results of pressure building up in the body and mind. Commonly associated with pressure to work hard, it can also arise from boredom, procrastination, perfectionism, bullying, job insecurity, relationship difficulties and many other situations associated with the home or workplace. Stress can be generated internally or externally. At its root, stress is caused by the difference between expectation and reality. The Health & Safety Executive's definition is that stress occurs "when the demands placed upon a person exceed the capacity to cope with them." Each of us has an optimum level at which we work for our satisfactions and achievements, and when that is out of balance we often achieve less and are dissatisfied, no matter how hard we work or how much we try to relax. If the factors causing stress build up for too long, we can all experience 'symptoms' – usually at a physical and emotional level. Although these signs are called symptoms, stress is not an illness: stress is a psychological condition which has unpleasant physical side effects – but it is a condition which can be addressed by learning about it and changing behaviour.

Are there know causes of stress?

Apart from extreme mental or physical hardships, it is difficult to be categoric about what will cause stress. We have attempted to list those sources of stress that we most frequently hear about.

It is so unfair ...

None of us like to work in situations where we, or others, are aggrieved by a sense of unfairness. Not being able to remedy situations where people are taken advantage of, manipulated or discriminated against can be a prime source of stress building up ...

I'm exhausted ...

Feeling pushed to perform, to be perfect, to take on more responsibility, to please everyone, to compete, to attract more money, to stay ahead of others, to work all hours – all are conditions which can be brought on by others or by our own demands of ourselves. Over time, and with two or three things coming to a head at the same time, feelings that you thought you could handle may well become less manageable ...

I wish I could get out of this but ...

Trapped in a job that pays the mortgage but no longer satisfies; fearful of tackling a bullying boss because of the consequences; holding secrets on behalf of others – or yourself; getting so specialised you can't see any career options' holding on until retirement; difficult relationships in the team – most of us try to find ways out of these situations but if our efforts prove fruitless, it might be time to talk to someone who can help make changes ...

My body is complaining ...

Working conditions that are too hot, too cold, have bad seating or bad lighting can make you feel tense even when the work itself is easy. Similarly, tasks that are too repetitive, for too long hours, cause eye, wrist or back strain take all the joy out of the working day. We can all endure bad working conditions for a short time, but the body starts to tell you when it has had enough ...

How do you recognise that you, or others, are becoming stressed?

The most common mental and physical signs of a build-up of stress are ones that you may have experienced already, but not to any great extent. When stress begins to become dysfunctional and harmful, these signs become more frequent, compulsive or more overwhelming. They can include any or all of the following – and you may want to add others to your personal list.

- Accidents
- Aggression
- Back pain
- Compulsive working
- Diarrhoea
- Excessive ruminating
- Exhaustion
- Forgetfulness
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Impatience
- Insomnia
- Lack of concentration
- Over-reacting
- Panic attacks
- Performance anxiety
- Poor productivity

There are usually one or two signs that you know are your own personal warning signs of stress building up. When you notice them it is time to stop and take stock. Whether the stress is generated internally or externally, it is time to regain control.

How do you regain control?

Stress can be complex, and often arises from a lot of things building up together, but you can begin to deal with it by making some changes in your life.

Identify your own stressors

Sit down on your own, or with someone who knows you well, and write down all the things that are contributing to your high stress levels – even the ones you feel you can do nothing about. Don't miss anything out. When you've got a general list, try to identify the problems more specifically – e.g. instead of just writing "work" as a stressor, write down what it is about work that is getting to you. (You may note as you write your list that your body starts reacting to the thoughts you're having.) Choose one item from the list you feel you can start to do something about.

Make a plan

- Create a list of possible ways out of this one problem, even if some of the solutions seem unrealistic, or will take some time to progress. Write them down as they occur to you, rather than censor them out of your thinking. Very often one problem overlaps with another, and you will find that tackling one issue helps deal with others.
- Decide on one thing you are going to do from that list, and give yourself a specific timetable – e.g. I will phone the Bank Manager this week and arrange an appointment.
- Don't worry about the other items stressing you – they can either wait (you've lived with them this long already!) or they can be fitted in immediately after you've made a move on this issue. Be focused and do what you have promised yourself to do. (Don't make the first step too large or you will let yourself down and feel worse than ever.)

- If your plans are usually helped by telling someone else what you intend to do, then tell someone...; if you are more focused by keeping your plans to yourself, then keep quiet about them. Only you will know what helps you best to get things done.

Progress so far

Despite the current stresses, no doubt you have done a few things in your life which have worked well, or given you or others pleasure. These personal resources, natural talents, successful strategies have got you through hard times before now and have made good things happen. Recall them now and list them. If you run out of ideas too quickly, ask someone who knows you well to add their own observations to the list. (It is easy to forget the road you have travelled to get where you are.) Your inner resources are still there in you, even if they seem inaccessible, and you can draw on them again.

What about the physical side of stress?

Think of a time when you felt really healthy, however long ago. Remember that clear-headed, alive, sensuous feeling that comes from having a healthy body. Would you work better if your body felt like that most of the time? Probably. Many jobs these days require little or no physical movement to get them done – so you can't rely on the ordinary working week to meet all your bodily needs. It might help to draw yourself a time-line of your ordinary working day: e.g.

6am _____ 11pm

and mark it out in sections to show walking, standing, sitting, running etc. Are there any points in the day when you could do something more energetic? If you do a job that requires a lot of physical exertion, are there any times when you could relax more? The body responds quickly to being treated differently so you may not need to make much change in your usual schedule in order to feel different.

If you are someone who tends to punctuate the day with tea, coffee, cakes, cigarettes (and alcohol in the evening)... you are probably trying to de-stress yourself with comfort food and drink. Is there anything else you could do to give yourself some reward but not depend so much on essentially chemical inputs? Coffee, tea, sugar, nicotine and alcohol all lift you up but then drop you down, so you crave more to feel OK. Caffeine will tend to increase any tension you have and after the initial high of a sugar input you will often find yourself feeling sleepy or slothful. It is hardly worth it. Have a think about your diet and habits. It could be time for a change.

And finally ...

If it just seems too hard to change things on your own, or even begin to think about the stresses in your life, you might find it helpful to talk to a Counsellor. He or she can be alongside you as you try to identify and address your concerns, and may have some creative ideas of their own. And because they are not involved in your life, they can help you think things out for yourself and find your own solutions. The Staff Counselling Service is open Monday-Friday, and on two evenings of the week. (Contact details are at the end of this leaflet)/

Stress is something that the University takes seriously.

There is a Managing Stress and Promoting Wellbeing At Work policy

<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/hr/policy/stress/>

and a Dignity@Work policy

<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/hr/policy/dignity/>

Don't let stress go on too long – you know you can do something about it!

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