

Stress information sheet

Stress levels in the workplace are rising with 6 in 10 workers in major global economies experiencing increased workplace stress (The Regus Group).

What is Stress?

- We're all likely to find ourselves feeling stressed. It's part of being human and something we can't avoid, although we can learn how to manage it.
- Stress is how our bodies and minds react to the demands of day-to-day life, to important or distressing events, or to significant changes in our lives, whether they are positive or negative. We can experience stress in relation to our work, our personal lives or to external events.
- Stress is a very subjective experience so what makes one person feel stressed might not have the same impact on another. Try not to judge your reactions to stress as often our responses to stress are quite automatic. We also all have different stress triggers which may have been shaped by our personal histories and events outside of our control.
- Whilst a certain degree of stress can sometimes be helpful (for example, motivating us to succeed or alerting us to avoid danger) long or intense periods of stress can be damaging in terms of the toll they take on our bodies and minds. Extreme stress can impair our ability to focus and perform well, as well as affecting our sleep, physical health and interactions with others.
- The impact of stress can extend from individuals to their teams, organisations and personal relationships. Therefore, it's important to recognise and respond to stress when it arises, and to create environments where it can be discussed in honest and constructive ways.



What are the common signs of Stress?

Fight, Flight or Freeze.

When we're stressed we tend to respond from the primitive part of our brain, which detects and reacts to perceived threat. We generally have little control over this response. When in fight or flight mode we'll become primed for action with our sympathetic nervous system activated.

This means we might experience:

- sleep problems
- a 'fluttery' or churning stomach accompanied by loss of appetite
- headaches/migraine
- tension in our big muscles
- shortness of breath/palpitations
- feeling irritated and 'on edge'
- a narrow focus (an inability to see the 'bigger picture')

In freeze mode (fawn or flop are other similar reactions) our parasympathetic system takes dominance and we become more passive or avoidant. This means we might experience:

- fatigue
- a desire to 'hide away'
- trembling
- comfort eating or use of alcohol or other substances to avoid what's going on
- 'brain fog'/lack of focus
- feeling disconnected
- feeling immobilised

In short-term stressful situations these responses might help us feel energised or keep us safe. However, modern life tends to present us with long-term low-level stressors (for example, the pressures of a demanding job, tensions within a difficult relationship, or constant exposure to news stories and messages on our mobiles and other devices). If we respond by staying in fight, flight, freeze for lengthy periods of time we risk drawing too heavily on our system, depleting our resources and experiencing physical problems.

With long-term stress the following physical and psychological signs might therefore become apparent:

- *increased vulnerability to health issues such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or digestive difficulties, heart problems, insomnia, headaches, high blood pressure, skin flare-ups, colds and infections*
- *moodiness, self-isolation, irritability and breakdowns within interpersonal relationships*
- *self-doubt and self-critical thinking*
- *poorer performance at the tasks we used to do well*

Self-help tips for those experiencing Stress

- One of the best ways of addressing stress is learning your most common *stress triggers*. What tends to make you feel stressed? Try to be as specific as you can when thinking about this and remember that what makes you stressed may be different to what makes others stressed. Once we are more familiar with our stress triggers, we're better equipped to deal with them or, at least, feel less overwhelmed when they arise.

Once you're familiar with your triggers move on to thinking about your personal stress signs – i.e. what you notice within yourself (or what other people might notice) when you're feeling stressed.

- It can help to use the following categories to identify your *personal stress signs*:

- *physical* (eg. unsettled stomach),
- *thoughts* (eg. 'I can't cope'),
- *feelings* (eg. despair) *and*
- *behaviours* (eg. self-isolation).

If you can identify your *early stress warning signs* this is when to take action and utilise your stress resources (see below) to prevent symptoms becoming more severe.

- Use the **RESPECT Resilience Model (Dunkley, 2018)** to think about and maintain your resilience and build resources of support:
 - **R stands for relaxation.** What do you already do, or can you bring into your life, to help you relax? Breathing and mindfulness exercises can be especially useful here (there are many guided breathing exercises and meditations you can access online or via apps), as might taking a bath, making time to read a novel, or simply being intentional about winding down and turning off your tech at the end of the day.
 - **E stands for education.** This covers learning about your own stress triggers and responses, and also finding out more about the general nature of stress. Discovering that many stress reactions are natural, automatic and make physiological sense can help remove some of the shame and stigma that is sometimes felt around stress.
 - **S stands for social.** Maintaining connections with others protects against the isolation we can easily slip into when we're feeling stressed. Friends, family members and colleagues can help us to lighten up and have a laugh, thus pulling us out of the narrow and 'blinkered' state we often find ourselves in when under stress. Even if it's just via text or a quick phone call, try to keep in touch with people who are important to you, or to engage in some social activity.

- **P stands for *physical***. It's important to stay connected to our bodies and physical surroundings when stressed. This may mean tending to your physical needs with good nutrition, staying well hydrated, or stepping away from your desk from time to time to have a stretch. Watch out for the desire to manage stress with alcohol, sugar, nicotine and caffeine, as these will heighten the stress cycle.
- **E stands for *exercise***, which does a lot to mitigate against stress. Moving your body, particularly if you're able to do so outdoors, will help to release tension and transmit 'feel-good' hormones such as serotonin and endorphins, which counteract the hormones that are released when we're stressed (cortisol and noradrenaline).
- **C stands for *creativity***. Doing a creative activity has the opposite impact on our brain than stress does. Art, music, cookery, puzzles, quizzes, writing and gardening are just a few activities that fall into this category. If you're feeling stuck in a rut, it may be helpful to learn a new activity, such as a language, instrument, dance or other creative arts.
- **T stands for *thinking***. Negative and self-critical thinking (eg. 'I can't cope', 'I'm a failure') can easily flourish when we're feeling stressed so it's important to try to catch these thoughts and see if you can reframe them more realistically and kindly. How might it feel to tell yourself 'I'm coping as best I can', or 'I'm doing well enough given the circumstances'? Thinking about what you take in and mentally absorb each day may also help. If you're feeling stressed and overwhelmed, limiting your exposure to the news or social media will likely make a difference, or writing down a couple of things that you feel grateful for at the end of each day can help.

Professional resources for Stress

- MIND www.mind.org.uk is the UK's main mental health charity. This link provides information on stress and other common mental health issues.
- NHS www.nhs.uk main website features information on stress.
- The Royal College of Psychiatrists www.rcpsych.ac.uk produces a leaflet on feeling stressed, which can be accessed in different languages.
- FD Consultants www.FDconsultants.net shares lots of resources and mindfulness exercises to manage stress.

Professional resources for Stress

- Stress Management Society www.stress.org.uk – information and resources around stress and stress management.

References

Dunkley, F. (2018) *Psychosocial Support for Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Roadmap of Trauma and Critical Incident Care*. London. Routledge.

FD Consultants

Individual support

At FD Consultants we can help individuals manage their stress levels. We are a network of accredited therapists. We specialise in stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and trauma care.

Organisational support

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the well-being service who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant's team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.