



Managing general and exam stress

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Introduction

Stress is a physical, mental or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. It is a normal part of life that can be beneficial by increasing alertness and improving performance, but only if it is short-lived. Excessive or prolonged stress can lead to illness such as heart disease and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. According to the World Health Organization, between 50% and 80% of all visits to the general practitioner are rooted in a stress-related illness.

The experience of stress is highly individualised and what constitutes overwhelming stress for one person may not be perceived as stress by another. Likewise, excess stress can manifest itself in a variety of emotional, behavioural, and even physical symptoms, and the symptoms and intensity of stress vary enormously among different individuals. Stress is related to both external factors (the causes of stress) and internal factors (the body's ability to handle the stress).

What causes stress?

Some of the external factors that can cause stress (stressors) include:

- School or work-related factors
- Tests, exams, and other projects or challenges
- Relationships with others
- Financial difficulties
- Situations, challenges, difficulties and expectations encountered on a daily basis

- Major upheavals and life events such as moving to a new house, getting married, a new baby, unemployment, divorce or bereavement

The internal factors that determine how a person handles stress include nutritional status, overall health and fitness levels, emotional well-being, and the amount of quality sleep and rest a person gets.

What are the signs and symptoms of stress?

Although stress affects everyone differently, there are some common signs and symptoms to look out for. These may include physical as well as emotional and behavioural symptoms such as:

Physical symptoms	Emotional or behavioural symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in sleeping habits – insomnia or sleeping too much • Muscle tension • Muscle aches and pains • Headaches • Gastrointestinal problems such as, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation • Fatigue • Clammy hands or feeling of butterflies in the stomach • Racing heartbeat (tachycardia) • Fidgeting, nail biting or teeth grinding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant feelings of worry or anxiety • Difficulty concentrating • Difficulty making decisions • Difficulty relaxing • Difficulty getting motivated to start studying or start a new task • Feelings of being overwhelmed • Feeling confused or having the mind go blank during tests or exams • Nervousness • Mood swings or changes in mood such as irritability or depression • Low self-esteem • Changes in eating habits, eating more or less, resulting in weight gain or weight loss • Loss of enthusiasm or energy • Loss of sex drive

It is also known that people under stress have a greater tendency to engage in unhealthy behaviours, such as excessive use or abuse of alcohol and drugs, smoking and

making poor nutritional and exercise choices. Although these unhealthy behaviours may cause feelings of relaxation and reduce feelings of anxiety temporarily, they further increase the severity of symptoms related to stress in the long run, often leading to a vicious cycle of symptoms and unhealthy behaviours.

Stress can affect virtually any organ system and evidence points to abnormal stress being associated with conditions as diverse as skin rashes or hives, increased healing times, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, certain gastrointestinal diseases, some cancers and even the process of aging. Stress also seems to increase the severity and frequency of blood sugar fluctuations in patients with diabetes, migraine headaches and episodes of asthma. Overwhelming psychological stress, also known as trauma, can cause both temporary and chronic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

How to manage stress

While there are promising treatments for stress, the management of stress is mostly dependent on the ability and willingness of a person to make the changes necessary for a healthy lifestyle. Research has identified some tools that have been shown to reduce anxiety and implementation of these strategies may assist in managing stress. Stress sufferers may be advised to:

- Improve daily planning. Start making daily checklists, use planners and take action by organising activities on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. Remember to schedule time for fun activities.
- Set goals. Break tasks down into smaller tasks with short-term achievable goals. Setting goals results in a positive sense of commitment, a feeling of being in control and an overall sense of optimism.
- Look for ways to replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
- Avoid stressful situations when possible. This includes identifying situations that cannot be changed and accepting them. For example, alleviate driving during rush hour by finding ways to relax during the commute such as listening to a podcast or a book.
- Get sufficient good quality sleep – aim for about seven to nine hours per night.
- Maintain a healthy balanced diet. Avoid junk-food, high sugar snacks, nicotine, caffeine and alcohol and consume more fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, low-fat or non-fat dairy and lean proteins.
- Exercise regularly – walking, swimming, cycling or dancing for at least 30 minutes per day on most days may be recommended. Exercise helps reduce the hormones and nervous energy produced during stress and increases the blood flow around the body to improve clear thinking.
- Learn and practise some relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, yoga, meditation or tai chi or relax by spending time on a hobby.

Additional measures to help reduce exam stress may include:

- Remaining focused on studying and avoiding distractions.
- Taking regular short breaks of about five minutes to have a drink or something to eat. Use mealtimes to relax rather than trying to continue with work.
- Planning and organising everything needed for the exam (such as calculators, pens, pencils) well ahead of exam day.
- Eating a light breakfast to help with energy and concentration.
- Making sure of the exam venue and planning sufficient time for traveling and possible delays.
- Avoiding contact with people who may aggravate feelings of anxiety on the day of the exam.
- Taking time to relax before starting the exam.
- Reading through the exam paper carefully, allocating adequate time for each question. It may help to start the exam by answering easier questions first.
- Allowing time to re-read answers and make changes or additions.

Nutritional supplements and medication

Various nutritional supplements have been used as stress and anxiety remedies and include kava, valerian, passionflower, 5-HTP (5-Hydroxytryptphan), and the herbs chamomile, hops, lavender and lemon balm. Limited data show that short-term use of chamomile, valerian and passionflower is generally considered safe and can be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and stress. However, even though most of these substances occur naturally, it does not mean that they are harmless. Kava may cause liver damage, even with short-term use and the US Food and Drug Administration has issued warnings about the safety of supplements containing kava. Valerian can cause side-effects such as headaches, dizziness and drowsiness, while passionflower can cause drowsiness, dizziness and confusion. Chamomile can increase the risk of bleeding when used with blood-thinning drugs and may also cause allergic reactions in patients sensitive to the family of plants that includes chamomile. It is therefore important to speak to the pharmacist before recommending any nutritional or herbal treatment options to reduce stress and anxiety.

Patients with stress or anxiety that interferes with daily activities should be referred to a doctor.

Conclusion

Although stress can be beneficial and improve function if short-lived, excessive or prolonged stress can lead to physical and mental disorders. The effective management of stress mainly depends on the willingness and ability of a person to make lifestyle changes and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Although some supplements have been used to relieve stress, they may have side-effects or interact with other medication and it is best to speak to a pharmacist before using any herbal or nutritional supplements to manage stress.

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