

Stress, depression and anxiety

Many of us experience periods of stress, anxiety and depression. Remember **be kind to yourself** in these situations. Treat yourself as you would treat a friend or loved one. In fact, 1 in 4 in the UK will experience a period mental unrest in their lifetime.

We have heard about work place stress, anxiety and depression but when do normal feelings and emotions become a concern?

What is Stress?

The body's stress response is a natural physiological reaction to anything in the environment perceived as a threat which leads to the 'fight or flight' response. The nervous system responds by releasing stress hormones into the body (adrenaline and cortisol).

Some stress is beneficial, it increases energy, activity levels and concentration which can help you perform better at work (McEwen 1998; Sapolsky 2004). However chronic or long term stress affects both physical and mental health for the worse. For example, the long term effects of stress increase heart disease, lower immune functioning and impair memory and cognitive functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles & Glaser 2002; McEwen 2006). A cycle of poor health is activated when we experience long term stress which is detrimental to overall wellbeing.

Symptoms of stress vary across individuals and the symptoms you experience are likely to influence your behaviour.

Physical symptoms	Cognitive symptoms	Emotional symptoms
include: low energy, headaches, upset stomach, aches pains and tense muscles, chest pain and high blood pressure, insomnia, excessive sweating and frequent colds or infections.	include: memory problems, inability to concentrate and poor judgement.	include: psychological dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, worthlessness, feeling overwhelmed, constant worry and an inability to relax and rest.

Stress itself is not a behaviour, **stress is a label which describes a set of emotional and behavioural responses** including: temperament change (irritability, angry outbursts), avoidance and withdrawal from others, changes to diet (eating more/less), sleeping more/less and lifestyle changes like reduced exercise and increased smoking or drinking which are often used to help people relax.

The causes of stress vary across individuals, they are known as 'stressors'. Common **external stressors** are both positive and negative events e.g. high work load, marriage, house buying or starting a new job. Common **internal** (cognitive) **stressors** are any repetitive thoughts or excessive worrying.

Alice has been experiencing symptoms of stress as a result of constant changes in the work place (external stressor). She has negative and irrational repetitive thoughts about work and her ability to do her job (internal stressor). She has experienced physical symptoms: low energy, headaches, aches and pains and emotional symptoms: she is easily agitated, frustrated and occasionally moody. As a result she often avoids others and has become withdrawn (behavioural response).*

Robert had an argument with a work colleague (external stressor), he experienced shortness of breath, increased blood pressure and excessive sweating (physical symptoms). He found it difficult to relax (emotional symptoms) following the argument and he is worried about the consequences (cognitive symptoms) of the argument at work he has increased his smoking habits to help him relax (behavioural response).*

What is Anxiety? (to see text click on link)

As with stress anxiety is a common feeling that we will all experience daily and across our life span and at low levels does not cause emotional or physical harm. As with stress, low levels of anxiety can actually boost work performance and alertness. However, if it becomes persistent, reoccurring and problematic then it's best to seek help and learn skills to help. Too much anxiety can cause difficulties in sleeping, concentration, tearfulness and may often leave you unable to relax. It is also linked to poor health and high blood pressure.

Both anxiety and stress lead your body to produce stress hormones (Cortisol and adrenaline) that are linked to other systems in the body. These hormones are responsible for the physical symptoms experienced during periods of anxiety. For example feeling faint, sweating and chest pains.

The NHS has further information on anxiety which you may wish to read:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/understanding-panic.aspx>

What is Depression? (to see text click on link)

Depression is characterised by low mood, but it is more than feelings of sadness. Depression persists over weeks and months. There are many causes of clinical

depression and many treatments available including psychological therapies and medication.

The symptoms of depression vary see here for a detailed list and further information depression and NHS resources available to help:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Depression/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

There are physical and social symptoms as well as psychological ones like hopelessness, anxiety, irritability and lack of motivation and energy.

Anxiety and depression can be caused or exacerbated by stress.

ACT

Suggests that stress, anxiety and depression are not problems in and of themselves, but that they become problematic when we try not to have them i.e. we often do things that are not in line with our values in order not to feel something. By being open to and accepting of the difficult thoughts and unwanted feelings we can accept the discomfort and move towards our values and goals.