

EXCERPT FROM NO MORE STRESS

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WHAT IS STRESS?

Too much of a good thing – The Stress Response

Biologically, our bodies produce a range of stress hormones such as adrenaline that encourage changes in your physical and mental state, helping you either to escape from the situation or face it head-on. This is called the “Stress Response” and you may have heard it called “Fight or Flight”. The three key players that come into play when it comes to the Stress Hormones are Adrenaline (associated with flight), Noradrenalin (associated with fight) and Cortisol (a kind of on/off switch).

When you experience this type of reaction you often feel muscle tension and an increase in heart rate, breathing and blood pressure. You may sweat and experience changes in your digestive system such as “butterflies” in the stomach. Your thinking can become more focused on the task ahead and you may be able to do things that you would not normally be able to. You may have

heard stories of people who have undertaken superhuman feats to save a loved one. For example, a colleague is trapped in a fire under a cabinet that has fallen on him and a friend is able to lift cabinet to free him – something that under normal circumstances would seem impossible as it would be far too heavy to lift.

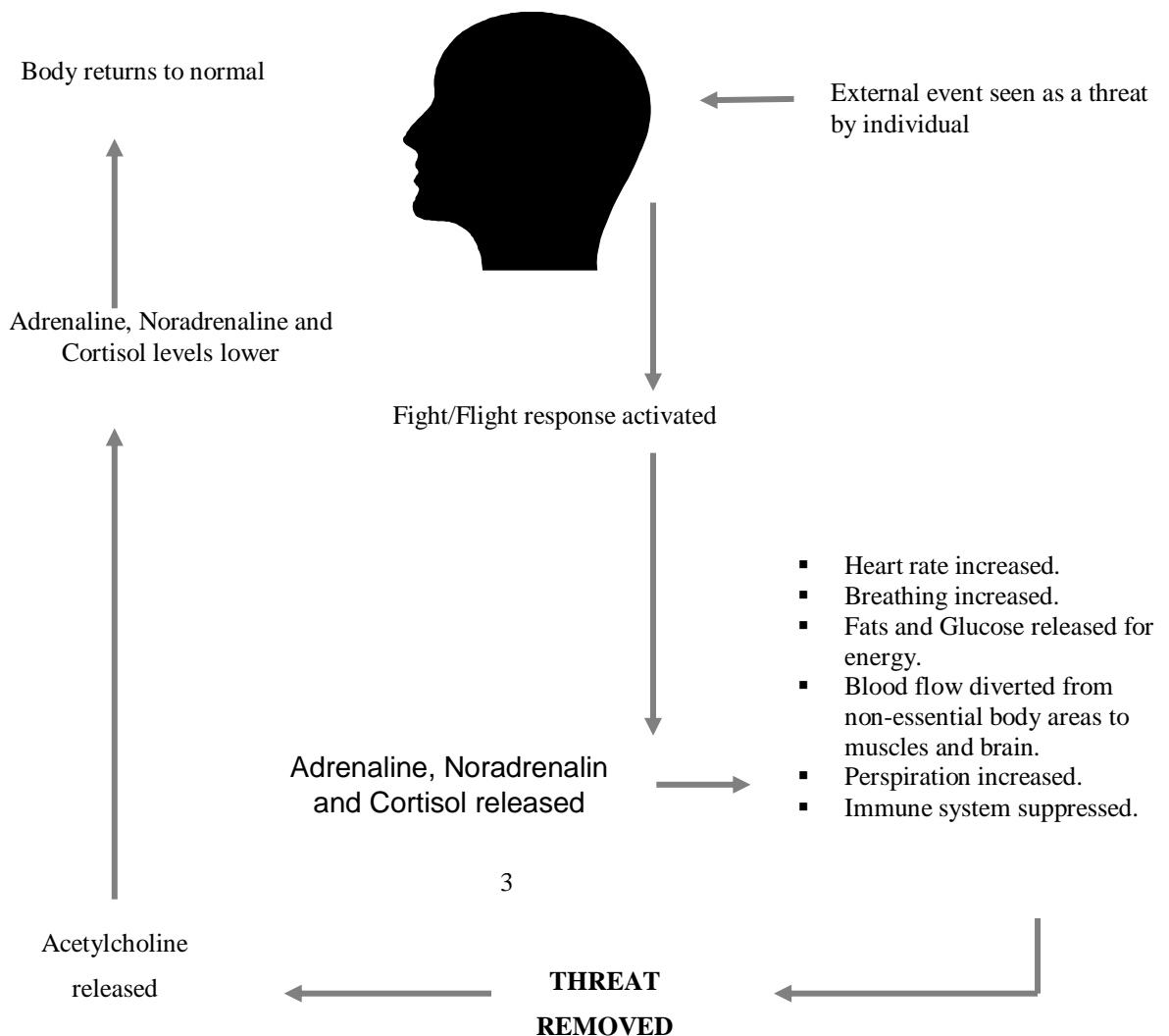
There is a third response that can be triggered and this is the “Freeze” response where the person stops and becomes very still and is unable to move. Although this is a less common response, it can be very effective in the right circumstances – for example, if you were hiding from an attacker.

The Stress Response is a survival strategy and is your body’s way of providing you with a biological mechanism to deal with life threatening situations. When you step into the road and suddenly see a car speeding towards you that is unlikely to stop, you want to be able to move as quickly as possible to get out of the way. It is just this type of situation that the Stress Response is designed to help you with. However, many people become severely stressed over situations that are far from life threatening and it is when this happens that problems occur.

Like anything in life, too much of a good thing can become a problem. The Stress Response is essential and yet for many it has become a burden rather than a blessing.

The following diagram shows you what happens to your body when it experiences the Stress Response.

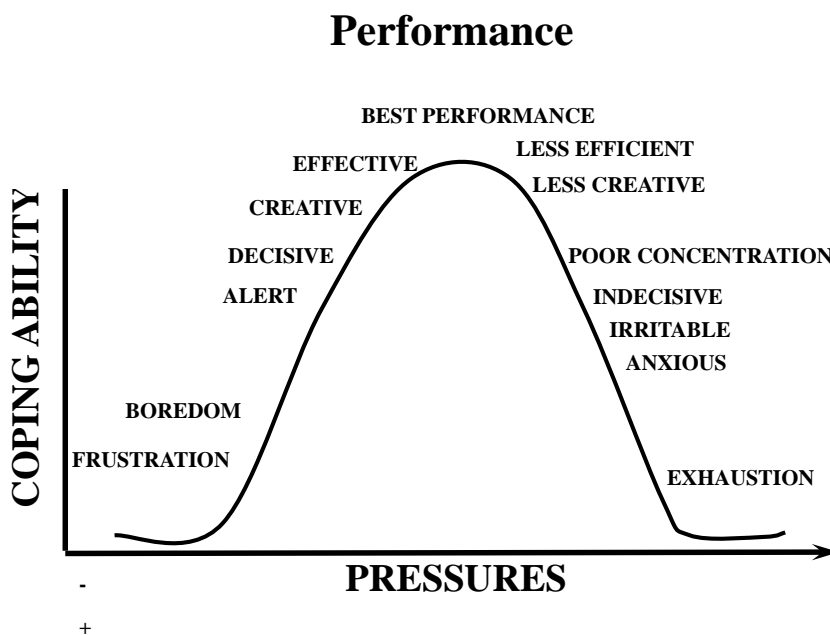
The Stress Response:





The stress response is your body's natural defence system for dealing with danger. If activated for short periods the stress response will not cause you undue harm. If activated and sustained over long periods of time, you are likely to experience both psychological and physical damage.

The Stress Response can also have an impact on personal performance. The following diagram shows how your ability to cope is affected by Stress when it is experienced over longer periods of time. At first, your performance may well improve but as time goes on you become exhausted and your performance decreases.



The physical, mental and behavioural sensations associated with “Fight or Flight” that are essential for managing those life threatening crisis situations. However, it can turn into something quite different when the Stress Response is not turned off.

A list of stress related symptoms are outlined below.

Stress Related Symptoms

Physical

Emotional Signs

Tightness in chest

Mood swings

Chest pain and /or palpitations

Feeling anxious/worrying more

Indigestion

Feeling tense

Breathlessness

Feeling angry

Nausea

Feeling guilty

Muscle twitches

Feelings of shame

Aches and pains

Having no enthusiasm

Headaches

Becoming more cynical

Skin conditions

Feeling out of control

Recurrence of previous illnesses

Feeling helpless

/allergies

Constipation/diarrhoea

Decrease in

Weight loss or weight gain

confidence/self-esteem

Change in menstrual cycle for women

Poor concentration

Fainting

Tiredness

Behaviour

Cognitive Aspects

Drop in work performance

“I am a failure”

More inclined to become

“I should be able to cope”

accident-prone

Drinking and smoking more

“Why is everyone getting at me”

Overeating/loss of appetite

“No one understands”

Change in sleeping patterns

“I don't know what to do”

Poor time management

“I can't cope”

Too busy to relax

Loss of judgement

Stuttering

Withdrawing from family

And friends

Loss of interest in sex

Poor judgement

Inability to express feelings,

a sense of being on a kind of
'automatic pilot'

Emotional outbursts and over-reactions

Nervous habits such as drumming fingers

So, what exactly happens to my body when I become stressed?

Stress is experienced in your body as well as in your mind and there are a complex series of physiological changes that occurs as you become stressed.

Emotions begin inside two almond-shaped structures in your brain that are called the Amygdala. The Amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for identifying threats to our well-being, and for sending out an alarm when threats are identified so that you can take steps to protect yourself. The Amygdala is so good at sending you warning signals about possible threats, that you may often react before the part of the brain responsible for thought and judgment (the Cortex) is able to check on whether your actions are reasonable or not. This could be seen as a case of 'act first and think later' which means that you do not have time to consider the consequences of your behaviour.

As you become stressed your body's muscles tense up. Inside your brain, neurotransmitter chemicals known as Catecholamine's get released so that you experience a spurt of energy lasting up to several minutes and your body

releases a series of Stress Hormones as mentioned above. This energy is behind the desire to take immediate protective action. Your heart rate accelerates, your blood pressure rises, and your rate of breathing increases. Your blood flow increases as you prepare for physical action and your body release fatty acids to give you more energy. Additional brain neurotransmitters and hormones (like adrenaline and Noradrenaline) are released which trigger a state of arousal and you are now ready to either stay in the situation and defend yourself (fight) or else get away as quickly as possible (flight).

Some statistics about Stress

In 2007, the Health and Safety Commission estimated that workplace stress cost the UK £530 million pounds in the associated problems associated with individuals suffering from workplace stress. The 2009 Psychosocial Working Conditions (PWC) survey indicated that around 16.7% of all working individuals thought their job was very or extremely stressful. Between 2006 and 2008, surveillance data from General Practitioners indicated that 30.9% of all diagnoses of work-related ill-health are cases of mental ill-health. Sleep problems, depression and anxiety are the most commonly experienced problems associated with stress. Weight management issues also come into play as Cortisol has been linked with an increase in appetite, which is why when you become stressed you may turn towards high calorie foods such as fats and sugar as it is your body's way of trying to get as much energy as possible, as

quickly as possible, into your system to keep you ready for action. If you were running a marathon this would be a good idea. However, as most people are just going about their daily lives and not using up the energy from these foods this usually means putting on weight. In addition, if you are already predisposed to conditions such as eczema or psoriasis you may find that these get worse or re-occur even if you have not experienced them since childhood.

So, just how stressed am I?

Although you are already aware that you have some difficulty with stress (otherwise you would not be reading this book) the following provides you with a check-list of the signs and symptoms signs that outline just how much difficulty you really have. The more ticks you have the more difficulty you are likely to experience.

Place a tick against any of the following statements that you believe apply to you.

Signs that you have difficulties with your stress

Actions	Place a tick in this box for all the signs that apply to you
I don't seem to be able to stop worrying these days	
I feel drained	
I find it hard to sleep	
I seem to be more irritable these days	
I seem to have more headaches and feelings of tension	
I am not really interested in people these days	
I find it hard to focus on the task in hand	
Thoughts	
What's the point everything seems too much	
I'll do it later can't be bothered now	
I just can't get through everything	
I wish people would stop asking things of me	

It's just one thing after another	
Feelings	
Irritability	
Sadness	
Feeling tense and uptight	
Psychological Factors	
Loss of concentration	
My life seems like one big problem	
I can't think straight	
Bodily Sensations	
Tight chest	
Heart pounding	
Stomach gets churned up	
Muscles tense	
Feeling hot	
Craving sugar and foods I don't normally eat	
Aches and pains	

Getting more minor colds and flu bugs than normal	
Feeling more tired than usual	

Are some people more susceptible?

There is still much research required to assess whether some people are truly genetically predisposed to Stress and if so by how much. There is some evidence to suggest that this may be the case as, for example, research demonstrates that mothers who experience extreme stress while pregnant pass on an excess of stress hormones to their unborn child which, in turn, makes the child less tolerant to withstanding stress. Therefore, it does seem reasonable to make the assumption that there may well be additional genetic components that have not yet come to light.

However, there are a number of factors associated with the unhelpful experience of stress. These are family history, stressful life events, thinking style, poor coping skills, individual personality and lack of social support. Even if the geneticists go on to discover other biological factors that predispose an individual towards Stress it is important to understand that a predisposition does not have to be a life sentence. For example, an individual could be predisposed towards a condition like heart problems. However, if that person eats well, exercises and leads a healthy lifestyle they may never go on to get the disease.

Therefore, it is important to recognise that even if some people are more predisposed towards Stress this does not necessarily mean they have to automatically be a victim of their predisposition.

It is interesting to note that Sonya Lyubomirsky and colleagues at the University of California did a study where they looked at all the available research on genetic predisposition. At the end of the study they concluded that in the worst possible case it was only possible to inherit 50 per cent from genetic predisposition and 10 per cent of difficulties could be put down to life events. Even if you take this 60 per cent as a true figure, it would mean that there is 40 per cent within the individual's control. I stress that the 50 per cent would be the worst possible case scenario. Looking at it this way, most people are not going to fall into the worst case scenario and therefore you are more likely to have 60, 70 or even 80 per cent going for you and that the genetic component is much smaller than anyone would think. I don't know about you but if I were a betting person I would be very happy with these odds as they would suggest that far more is within my control than not.

Family History

Research tends to show that stress and the inability to deal with stress often runs in families. As yet, no one really knows how much this is due to genetic influences and how much is down to learning unhelpful behaviours and self-

defeating thinking styles from family members. Even if you are born into a family who are predisposed to stress, it does not automatically mean that you are doomed for life to become a stressed person. Much of our behaviour is learnt and, if a behaviour or way of thinking can be learnt, it can be unlearnt and new behaviours developed if the individual is prepared to put some work in.

Stressful Life Events

Everyone experiences stressful periods from time to time. Sometimes these events take the form of bereavement, job loss or relationship problems. Any event where we feel threatened is likely to induce some kind of stressful feelings. Psychologists discovered that even pleasant experiences such as having a child or gaining a promotion could be stressful as they also contain change; - too much change, even positive change, requires a degree of emotional re-adjustment.

Thinking Style

People who think in certain ways are more likely to feel stressed. Such thinking styles include the ability to discount the positive (always putting down or dismissing anything positive that is said) or maximising negative events by being overly pessimistic and dramatic. In particular, beliefs about justice and fairness and whether we see people as basically benevolent or out to get us

are likely to trigger stressful feelings. There will be more about this type of negative thinking and the relevant antidotes later in this book. Research has shown that there is a strong link between what you think and the mood you feel. The more negative your thinking the more stressed you are likely to feel, particularly when the thoughts are based on perceptions of threat or on injustice.

For example, Jane worked hard and was doing well in her job. She put in more hours than her colleagues but had recently been promoted. Everyone viewed her as being very fair and approachable. Her new manager was someone with a reputation of being difficult and it seemed to Jane that she could never do anything right to please her new manager however hard she tried. She found herself putting in even more hours and never getting any recognition or praise. After a year, Jane found that she was exhausted and experienced intense feelings of stress based on her sense that what was happening was just not fair. Many people may feel that Jane had a point; she was working hard and doing a good job. However, had Jane stood back and assessed the situation and not expected her manager to be the same as her, she would have realised that her manager had a completely different personality and that the best way to deal with the situation was to depersonalise it and not keep on trying to gain her manager's approval but continue to do a good job and become more assertive in her communications and more realistic in her attitudes.

Poor Coping Skills

Many of you will have some excellent coping skills that you can call on when you need them. For example, you may have learnt that dealing with things that need to be done rather than just thinking about them decreases your feelings of stress as it gives you a sense of control over the situation. However, most people have some coping strategies that are unhelpful such as drinking, smoking or eating too much as a way of comforting themselves.

Individual Personality

Your basic personality type is likely to either help or hinder you when it comes to dealing with stress. In the late 1960's, cardiologists discovered what have become to be known as Type A and Type B personalities and, more recently, a third group has been added called the Hardy Personality. Type A's are ambitious, competitive, hard driving and more likely to ignore stress symptoms. Although Type A's have a tremendous capacity when it comes to energy and drive and are often seen as highly productive by those around them they tend to go down rather spectacularly when they become overloaded. Type B's are more laid back and find it easier to keep matters in perspective, whereas the Hardy Personality type seem to have all the attributes of a Type A but without the susceptibility to stress.

One of the classic symptoms of a stressed Type A is irritability and anger and even the most charismatic and normally stable Type A character can be prone to angry outbursts over the smallest of issues when they are stressed. Having said that, this does not mean that the Type B or Hardy Personality characters don't get irritable and angry – they do. However, they are less likely to be so and more likely to take action earlier to deal with whatever is getting on top of them.

Another personality factor is whether you believe that your actions can make a difference. Are you the kind of person who sees yourself as having a choice and some control over what you do, or do you see yourself as always having to deal with forces outside your control?.

This type of approach to life is known as your "locus of control". Studies dates back to the 1960s. The term locus of control describes the degree to which you believe that outcomes result your own behaviors, or from forces that are external. People who develop an internal locus of control believe that they are responsible for their own success. Those with an external locus of control believe that external forces, like luck, determine their outcomes. Typically in life either extreme end of the spectrum will cause problems. If an individual believes that everything is within their control then when faced with a situation that no one could control or influence s/he may find it difficult to accept the reality experiencing extreme distress as any attempts to change a situation fail. However, if you believe that everything is outside of your control then you may not take actions to help yourself when you could and put events down to "fate".

When we are stressed as with anything else in life, it is important to appreciate and recognize what we can and what we cannot control. It is helpful to take action that will be helpful. However, sometimes there is nothing that can be done and, on these occasions, it is important to ride out the storm.

Social Support

Over the years research has demonstrated that people with good support systems in the form of family and friends are far more likely to ward off the effects of stressful situations. The more people you have to talk to the more you are protected from the full effect of dealing with stress on our own. A lack of a social network really shows itself in times of crisis. Very often simply letting off a little steam to a friend or loved one early on can prevent the build up of pent up emotion that can later lead to an increase in stress related symptoms.

Other Forms of Support

In addition to social support, during times of crisis or when we are experiencing stress it is not uncommon for individuals to find it difficult to think clearly. Even when help is available an individual may be too busy trying to cope on a daily basis and not always seek help early enough. There are a number of categories that help could fall into.

Physical Help: For example financial advice, physical help such as a home helper or carer and/or the provision of useful resources.

Political Help: For example, finding those individuals with influence who can use this on your behalf.

Information: For example, others may have personal experience that can help you as they have experienced the same problem or have helped people who have.

Could I have learnt to be stressed?

It is certainly possible that you could have learnt to be stressed. If one of your parents found life hard to cope with and tended towards getting stressed over the smallest of incidents, you would learn that stress is a natural response. After all, as a child, your parents are the people you look up to and learn from. In certain situations you would have learned that life is hard to handle.

It might be helpful to think of childhood as a type of training course where those who look after you are the trainers. If the trainers are well trained and able to pass on the life skills needed you will go on to develop these skills. However, if through no fault of the trainers they do not have the skills or are going through a bad time that stops them from being able to pass on the skills, then it is likely you will not develop the skills you need.

Is all stress bad?

There is a big difference between 'pressure' and 'Stress'. Pressure is healthy and provides the opportunity for individuals to work hard stretching their abilities and many people thrive on it. Stress is only ever experienced when the body's Stress Response kicks in depleting your ability to perform effectively. One of the key differences between pressure and stress is whether you feel a sense of personal control over your day to day activities.

When someone becomes stressed the body does not rid itself of the effects of producing too many Stress Hormones. It is one thing experiencing a one-off event or short-term difficulties and it is another if you are constantly being stretched beyond your physical, emotional, psychological and behavioural capabilities. In such circumstances, your body never manages to clear the debilitating side effects of the Stress Hormones and it is this build- up of these that undermine your physical state and performance.

For example, when produced consistently, Adrenalin associated with both excitement and fear can cause problems with the body's Adrenal System as it is associated with tiredness and sleeplessness. Excessive production of Cortisol can destroy brain cells leading to short-term memory problems.

It has been argued that producing Stress Hormones on a short-term basis can make an individual more effective given the boost in energy. This is certainly true, many people talk about an 'adrenaline buzz' when they have had to deal with a pretty full-on period and have said they actually enjoyed the experience. In this sense the individual is rising to the short-term need to deliver more and the pleasant effects and sense of alertness that adrenalin can bring are experienced as pleasurable. However, the key is in the word 'short-term'. Many people love theme parks and enjoy what are called 'white knuckle rides' dropping from vast heights or being turned up-side down. Even if you are someone who truly enjoys this experience and gets a sense of excitement and fun from it imagine if you were strapped into your seat for days on end as the pleasurable experience would soon change.

Whilst the sense of pleasure and increased performance of short-term boosts in stress hormones brought about through an increase in pressure is a valid argument it falls down given the debilitating effects of long term Stress Hormone production. Individuals either don't know when to stop or feel unable to do so because of the demands being made.

Therefore, it is important to make the distinction between "stress" and "pressure". One way that you can do this is to consider the demands that are made of you in everyday life. Those demands can be internal or external.

Internal demands are the ones you make of yourself, for example if you are a perfectionist then you make the demands of yourself and if you make excessive demands of yourself you are the only person who causes the stress in your life. However, some demands are external, for example the demands that are made at work or by your family. In this case these are external demands made of you that you have to deal with.

If the demands whether external or internal or matched by your resources to cope with these then you are unlikely to feel stressed and these are likely to fall into the domain of healthy pressure because you can deal with them. Personal resources also fall into the categories of internal and external. Internal resources relate to the way you support yourself. For example, having a healthy diet, taking regular exercise, engaging in relaxation and a healthy thinking style will help you deal with the demands that are made of you. External resources are those that relate to the support you get from family, friends and colleagues or the pleasant working environment you experience. These are things that happen to you rather than things you have control over.

It would therefore be fair to say that whilst pressure is good and can be a pleasurable experience, you are in control of it and you have the internal and external resources to deal with it, stress however is never good. Stress means that in some way you feel you are out of control and don't have the resources

you need to cope. When you are pressured you can still feel tired but it is a healthy tiredness just as you might feel if you undertook a ten mile walk. You are happy to have a bath and go to bed but you sleep well and have enjoyed the experience even if your muscles are a little sore the next day. However, stress is more akin to walking 26 miles, in the wrong shoes and finding yourself laid up in bed for a week with all sorts of strained muscles feeling as if the experience was far from pleasurable.

The Bus Journey

I have often described stress as a bus journey. You are standing at the bus stop and get on the first bus that comes along and after a couple of stops you realise you are on the wrong bus, so you get off and then have a short walk back to your original bus stop. However, the longer you stay on the bus the farther the walk back is to where you began and if you end up at the bus terminus you are literally miles away. So it is with stress. Once you realise that you are experiencing stress rather than pressure then you have a choice about what you chose to do about it and the sooner you take action, the sooner you get back to normal. However, if you just decide to stay on the bus or if life circumstances make it difficult for you to get off the bus then the longer it will take you to return to normal.

WAYS THAT STRESS CAN SHOW ITSELF

Psychological Conditions that have stress associated with them

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post Traumatic Stress is often experienced following what is often termed a traumatic incident. A traumatic incident is one where the person was involved in or witnessed an event that involved serious threat of death to a loved one or self. PTSD often happens when a person feels intense fear, helplessness or a sense of horror. For many people the feelings following a traumatic event pass within the first 4-6 weeks, often without any help. However, for some, the feelings do not pass and may even get worse. For these people the sense of fear leads them to avoid people, places and things that remind them of the event. In addition, people may also experience “flashbacks” of some aspect of the traumatic event. It is not unusual for people with PTSD to suffer from other anxiety conditions and also to experience irritability and anger.

Depression

Depression is one of the most severe of the stress related symptoms and usually only kicks in once an individual has been experiencing stress for a considerably period of time. Most people assume that when someone is depressed they are quiet and sad and, although this is true, there are many

states associated with Depression. By the time someone is so low that they may not even be able to get out of bed they will have gone through a number of emotional stages and depressed people can often manifest signs of irritability and anger before they become fully depressed.

Burn-Out

Burn-out is the term used to describe someone who is suffering from extreme stress that tends to be built up over a period of time. As you will be aware from the Stress Response discussed earlier, when we perceive a threat we produce stress hormones to deal with the situation. If a person finds him or herself exposed to stressful life situations for a prolonged period of time a condition called Burn-Out can occur. Depression, anxiety and anger are the most common emotional and psychological symptoms associated with this condition.

Life Events

We all experience periods in our life when things become difficult and we face sad and stressful situations. For example, bereavement, issues surrounding infertility, financial insecurity, redundancy etc. Such events are likely to have a whole host of challenges associated with them and, in turn, depending on our personal circumstance a degree of stress. These situations may last for shorter or longer periods of time. However, they all pass and life continues. No one can get to their death bed without experiencing stressful life experiences.

However, the key is to find ways of turning what are stressful situations into situations where we may experience pressure wherever possible. It would be unrealistic not to experience concerns if you found yourself made redundant with a mortgage and no money in the bank. However, how you deal with the situation can help change it from a crisis to a period of pressure.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can my Stress harm me?

Stress is itself is only a term that relates to the biological Stress Response experienced when our brain perceives a threatening situation. This in itself is not harmful. However, what can be harmful is the longer term physical, emotional and psychological effects that continuous stress that bring about. For example, even at the milder end, Cortisol as mentioned earlier has been associated with increased appetite and it can be a contributory reason as to why individuals experiencing stress often turn to comfort food such as chocolate. If an individual overeats and especially on those food with little or no nutritional value but which are high in calories, weight gain is likely to take place. Depending on the amount of weight gain this can have a negative effect on health. Additionally, there is also some research that suggests that long-term exposure can lead to organ damage due to the effects of the stress hormones themselves. Hypertension can be associated with stress and high

blood pressure is associated with strokes and again and add to this an individual's physical predisposition to particular medical conditions and stress could bring about health problems.

Therefore short-term exposure to stress is unlikely to cause much harm. However, long-term exposure is a different matter and will depend, to some extent, on an individual's own physical predispositions.

Will I have a nervous breakdown?

Stress does not cause problems like nervous breakdowns. However, if an individual goes on to develop conditions such as Depression or Anxiety and fails to cope with the demands being made then it is possible in extreme cases that this could lead to such a breakdown.

Why do I feel so tired?

Being stressed is a tiring experience. Your body is working hard producing and coping with a range of stress hormones and their effects. It is hard to cope with life when you are stressed for any length of time. Once you are able to manage your stress you have more energy. Although you may feel energised when you begin your stress journey the surge of stress hormones that you produce at the time and your subsequent behaviours tire the body and it is therefore not surprising that you may feel drained following periods of stress.

Additionally, even when the stress is removed it is not uncommon for individuals to require a period of time to recover. It is often something that surprises people. They cope with a stressful time and then when it passes and life returns to normal, they may feel unwell, get more colds/flu and feel generally under the weather.

Stress hormones deplete the immune system and when our immune system is run down we are far more likely to be susceptible to common ailments. When our body relaxes and begins to clear out the effects of the stress hormones it would be naive not to appreciate that there will be some after effects. However, in time these will pass as the body fully recovers.

Can I really learn to control my stress?

Yes, it is possible to learn to control your stress and even to eradicate it. Once you have practised your stress management techniques you will gain more control over your feelings, your body and your life. Although, having said that, some people find it harder than others, and have to work harder to get their stress under control.

What about medication – isn't there a pill that will cure me?

The only real way to deal effectively in the long-term with your stress is to learn to live your life differently. Some people believe that medication will help.

However, apart from the fact that doctors do not prescribe tranquillizers or antidepressants for long-term use given that they can be addictive the problem with taking medication is that if you do not deal with the cause and change this then the medication does not cure anything. All it does is help you manage the symptoms and provide a temporary decrease in stressful feelings which fades once the medication is stopped.

Can alcohol help calm me?

Using Alcohol to try and calm down is counter-productive. Alcohol often exaggerates the feelings you have and can also act as a de-inhibitor. How often have people told stories about something they said to another person that they thought better of when they were sober? Alcohol is a drug and when we take it we alter our body and our mind. Often when people are stressed they turn to alcohol, cigarettes, other drugs or food as a way of coping. However, each of these can make the situation worse rather than better. As a general rule people who are experiencing stress related difficulties should steer well clear of alcohol or other mood altering drugs.