



Stress to a certain degree is necessary in that it keeps one alert and motivated. However, as the stress level builds, it can have detrimental effects on wellbeing.

What is stress?

Stress is not easy to define. Nor is it easy to determine the point at which it becomes a problem. One definition of stress is; mental, emotional or physical strain or tension. It can also be regarded as excessive when external demands become overwhelming and compromise one's ability to cope. In research investigating stress and health, such external demands are broadly termed psychosocial factors. These include personal, work, home, social and environmental factors – (amongst others).

The stress mechanism

When faced with a stressful situation, hormones including adrenaline, are secreted into the bloodstream. This causes the heart rate to increase, raises blood pressure, increases blood flow to the muscles and allows more air to enter the lungs. This reaction has been termed the 'fight or flight' response. It refers to more primitive times when humans encountered threats to their survival, which they either confronted or fled from. In present times such reactions to stressful situations may not be appropriate. Thus the body is preparing itself for events that do not occur.

How stress can affect health

Stress affects everyone in different ways, both physically and mentally. Examples of common occurrences include disturbed sleep patterns, headaches, chest discomfort, irritability, restlessness, diarrhoea or nausea. Stress can aggravate existing conditions such as cardiovascular, respiratory or digestive disorders. It can also influence health indirectly by altering lifestyle behaviours including smoking, drinking, diet and exercise.

How can stress be reduced?

During periods of acute stress, seeking professional counselling may be a helpful measure. Drawing from a support network of family and friends is also valuable. It may be a good time to learn strategies for coping, such as relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, meditation, yoga or massage.

Engaging in leisure activities and hobbies is another stress-reducing tactic. This can be anything from reading a book, listening to music, having a hot bath to stroking a pet. An excellent means of combating stress is through physical activity. In addition to its cardiovascular benefits, exercise can improve mood and increase one's psychological and physical capacity to deal with life's demands.

Achieving wellbeing

The above suggestions are but a sample of methods one can use to minimise stress. It may require experimentation to find those strategies most suitable. Regardless of approach, gaining a sense of control when faced with adverse circumstances is a vital step towards wellbeing.

H-E-A-R-T UK's recommendations for reducing stress

- Build a social support network of friends, relatives or groups.
- Learn stress reduction techniques, such as breathing exercises for meditation.
- Take regular moderate exercise.
- Engage in enjoyable hobbies.

Further information

For further information regarding stress we would recommend the following websites:

International Stress Management Association

www.isma.org.uk

Stress in the Workplace

www.hse.gov.uk/stress

Depression Alliance

www.depressionalliance.org.uk

The Samaritans (Tel: 08457 909090)

www.samaritans.org.uk

References

Source: Brunner E. Is stress a factor in coronary heart disease? Family Heart Digest 1996; 46: 4-5