

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a condition or a feeling experienced when a person perceives that "demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise."

In short, it's what we feel when we think we've lost control of events, especially unexpected events. The stress response inside us is, therefore, part instinct and part to do with the way we think. Everyone experiences stress.

Some of the early research on stress (back in the early 30's) established the existence of the well-known "fight-or-flight" response. The research showed that when humans experience a shock or perceive a threat, they quickly release hormones that help them to survive.

These hormones help us to run faster and fight harder. They increase heart rate and blood pressure, delivering more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. They increase sweating in an effort to cool these muscles, and help them stay efficient. They divert blood away from the skin to the core of our bodies, reducing blood loss if we are damaged. As well as this, these hormones focus our attention on the threat, to the exclusion of everything else. All of this significantly improves our ability to survive life-threatening events.

Not only life-threatening events trigger this response: we experience it almost any time we come across something unexpected or something that frustrates our goals. When the threat is small, our response is small and we often do not notice it among the many other distractions of a stressful situation.

Unfortunately, this mobilisation of the body for survival also has negative consequences. In this state, we are excitable, anxious, jumpy and irritable. This is not ideal, limiting our capacity to connect effectively with other people, limiting our ability to make quality judgements by accessing all available information and hence not making the best decisions.

There are very few situations in modern life where this response is useful. Most situations benefit from a calm, rational, controlled and socially sensitive approach.

Colossians 3:15 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS

Studies show that regular exercise can help reduce anxiety and build your tolerance for stress. Exercise also offers many other benefits, such as better health, a greater sense of well-being and happiness, increased focus and productivity, better sleep, and weight loss.

Even small amounts of exercise will lessen feelings of stress. A short walk at lunchtime, standing is also a form of exercise so consider standing while you're on the phone.

1) Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is especially effective for managing short-term anxiety. For example, if you begin to feel anxious, take 10 or 20 slow, deep breaths to calm down. Breathe in as deeply as you can, hold the air in your lungs for several seconds, and let each breath out slowly.

2) Healthy Lifestyle Habits – good sleep, exercise, a daily routine and balanced diet.

Try to go to bed and get up at the same time each day.

Go for a walk/run, do online exercises, ride a bike, get creative and build a gym at home (plenty of ideas for this on the net).

When working from home have a daily routine that includes small breaks. Structure your day and get dressed as if going to the office.

Eat well with lots of fruit and vegetables – there are no queues for these! We can't all survive on comfort food for the next 6 months!

3) Develop Gratitude

Recognise every day what you are thankful for. Develop the habit of always seeing the good from the past, in a current situation or possibilities for the future. Share your perspective of specific gratitude to God and others a few times a day.

1 Chronicles 16:34 "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his love endures forever."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

4) Affirm Others

Look for good character traits demonstrated by those around you and tell them what you have noticed and valued. Set a goal of three character affirmations to different people every day. Character traits you notice could be – love, peace, patience, goodness, joyfulness, self-control, generosity, kindness, thoughtfulness, etc.

1 Corinthians 1:4 "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."

Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

5) Focus on Truth

Recognise what you are thinking and then compare it to God's word. Then meditate, does your thoughts match God's word? Soak into your thinking what God says – Truth in our thoughts. Become aware of the thoughts that you are having that are subtly impacting on you, causing your stress response and then challenge them. Acknowledge to God the lies that have been influencing your stress response and state God's truth. Remember, God brings us peace. Claim the truth of God's word in your thinking.

2 Corinthians 10:5 "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

1 Peter 5:6-7 "Humble yourselves then under God's mighty hand, so that he will lift you up in his own good time. Leave all your worries with him because he cares for you."

6) Talk to God and Others

Thank God for all his blessings that you are aware of, and also - not aware of.

Confirm to God your understanding that you are not alone, that he has you covered through his Holy Spirit. Ask for power from the Holy Spirit to change your thinking and to empower you to follow through with changes in behaviour – exercise? diet? relationships? affirmations?

The same power that rose Jesus from the grave is what we have access to – Hallelujah!!!

Use the phone, email or online chat to share with others, who you trust, how you are feeling and how you can be accountable with them for what you can do to manage your stress response.

Speak to your Connect group leader, staff member or trusted Christian relative/friend so they can support you through prayer and fellowship – connecting 'virtually' is better than not connecting at all.

Colossians 4:2 "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."

Galatians 6:2 "Carry each other burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

1 Thessalonians 5: 11 "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."