

Stress

When you are stressed, your body produces more of the so-called 'fight or flight' chemicals, which prepare your body for an emergency. Adrenaline and noradrenaline raise your blood pressure, increase the rate at which your heart beats and increase the rate at which you perspire. They can also reduce blood flow to your skin and reduce your stomach activity. Over time these chemicals and the changes they produce can damage your physical and mental health.

These changes can include:

- constant tiredness
- constipation or diarrhoea
- cramps or muscle spasms
- craving for food
- dizziness
- fainting spells
- lack of appetite
- nail biting
- chest pains
- feeling sick
- frequent crying
- nervous twitches or muscle spasms
- pins and needles
- restlessness
- sleeping problems

In the longer term you may be putting yourself at risk from high blood pressure, heart attacks and possibly strokes.

When you are stressed you may experience many different feelings, including anxiety, fear, anger, frustration and depression. These feelings can feed on each other and can themselves produce physical symptoms - making you feel even worse. The extreme anxiety can cause giddiness, heart palpitations, headaches or stomach disorders.

Behavioural changes

When you are stressed you may behave differently. For example, you may become withdrawn, indecisive or inflexible. You may not be able to sleep properly. You may be irritable or tearful all the time. There may be a change in your sexual habits, and even if you were previously mild-mannered you may suddenly become verbally or physically aggressive.

How can you help yourself?

An important step in tackling stress is to realise that it is causing you a problem. You need to make the connection between feeling tired or ill with the pressures you are faced with. Do not ignore your physical problems, for examples headaches and tiredness.

If you find yourself becoming angry or upset you may find it helpful to take time out, take yourself away from the problem, have a walk until you feel calmer.

Physical exercise can be very effective in relieving stress, as well as depression.

Sleeping problems are common when you're suffering from stress, although this can be a problem, try and get lots of rest.

Try to identify what is making you stressed, sort these problems out.

Sometimes you may need to call on outside help from an organisation with trained counsellors.

If you feel you are becoming stressed, calm yourself down by slow breathing.

Review your lifestyle, prioritise things, for example, are you taking too much on? Could you do things differently?

Try to keep smoking and drinking to a minimum, although you may think this reduces tension, it can make your problems worse.

Take time out and relax. Try and spend more time on leisure activities such as sports, hobbies or evening classes.

Treat yourself. Try and enjoy yourself, bring fun into your life by giving yourself rewards.

