

Stress Management

Overview

In this entry, information is provided on what stress is, the difference between stress and worry, the signs of stress, types of stress, general coping strategies. Questions to facilitate private self-reflection are provided.

Key Points

- Stress is something we all experience and it is triggered by different factors (stressors) in our lives.
- Understanding what stress means for us, the triggers and reviewing our coping strategies will be helpful.

Description

What is Stress?

Stress is a state of psychological and physical arousal, which is initiated as a result of a threat, challenge or change in your environment. To understand yourself, it is important to appreciate what you see as threats and challenges and to recognize how you become stressed. Your reactions after a critical incident are likely to be increased.

Reactions to stress can be positive or negative. We all have positive and negative coping mechanisms.

The Signs of Stress

Here is the list of possible symptoms (signs) that people can demonstrate. Which ones do you show?

Physical Signs

- Tension: aches, pains; trembling, poor coordination
- Jumpiness: startle at sudden sounds or movement
- Cold sweat; dry mouth; pale skin; eyes hard to focus
- Feeling out of breath; hyperventilating until fingers and toes going numb or cramp
- Upset stomach; vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, frequent urination
- Fatigue: feel tired, drained; takes effort to move

Cognitive Signs

- Difficulty making decisions
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Poor concentration
- Being forgetful
- Unable to perform multiple tasks

Emotional Signs

- Grief
- Guilt
- Depression
- Anger
- Resentment
- Anxiety/fear
- Feelings of numbness
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Constant second guessing/self-doubt
- Feeling detached from reality
- Spiritual issues

Behavioral Signs

- Decreased job performance
- Withdrawn from friend/colleagues/family
- Outbursts (either crying or laughing)
- Changes in normal humor patterns
- Excessive talkativeness or silence
- Hyperactive behavior

Stressors (Triggers)

These are the issues, either internal or external that trigger/lead to a stress reaction. Internal stressors can include physical health, mood, amount of sleep a person has had. External stressors can include the security situation, the weather and the food that is available.

Types of Stress

There are different types of stress:

- **Day to day stress** – We all experience this. We need to find healthy ways of managing stress effectively as it occurs, otherwise it accumulates and you are at risk of becoming cumulatively stressed.
- **Cumulative stress** – Symptoms include tiredness, frustration and could lead to burnout. People develop cumulative stress if they have been in a very stressful situation for a while or if they have many stressors in their current life and they don't have healthy coping mechanisms.
- **Critical incident stress** happens when a person has been in a difficult incident such as a car accident or having been in a building that was bombed or lost their house. It is normal to feel unusual, e.g., forgetful, not thinking clearly, emotional after a critical incident. These symptoms will decrease with support in two-three weeks. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal event (Goldfarb).
- **Compassion fatigue** (also known as vicarious trauma) is a reaction to the 'ongoing demands of being compassionate in helping those who are suffering' (Downs, 2013). This includes listening to or hearing about stories of people who are experiencing much hardship and suffering. These experiences can lead to changes in our psychological, physical and spiritual well-being. Common effects include shifts in identity, poor decision making, working too much. Protective factors such as making sure people live a healthy lifestyle with good emotional support can help.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** can be experienced by people who have been in war and conflict zones if they have been exposed to one or more traumatic events. They will need a lot of professional and family support to deal with their symptoms (e.g. flashbacks, hypervigilance, flashbacks) and resume an ordinary lifestyle.

Key Considerations

General Coping Strategies

Here is a table depicting coping strategies that we all use. Some will be positive and some negative. Please complete the table for yourself.

Coping Strategies	Positive (e.g. exercising regularly)	Negative (e.g. not talking to anyone about your problems)
Day-to-day		
Social / Emotional: who supports you? How do you solve problems?		
Healthy living: eating, drinking habits, physical exercise		
Work: what is your work pattern? How many hours do you work?		
Emergencies / Critical incidents		
What are your coping mechanisms as a leader of critical incidents? What are your coping mechanisms as an individual in a critical incident?		

Reflection Exercise

Please re-read this section and reflect on the following: What are your signs of stress? What are your internal and external stressors?

What are your positive and negative coping strategies? What changes do you need to make?

Please take a look at the Induction Manual (available soon) which contains a more in-depth exercise and recommendations for coping strategies.

Contacts

If you have any questions, please contact the Staff Welfare Officer, Elizabeth Openshaw at eopenshaw@iom.int.

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