

# Reducing stress



## FACT SHEET 6

### STRESS AND DEPRESSION

It is important to note that stress is not depression. However, acute distress associated with tough times can occur and may be a risk factor for depression if it persists.

### STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is a response to an event or situation. It can be positive or negative. Stress is common in daily life and may be associated with work, family or personal relationships. It usually means that something is happening that's causing worry and affecting how we are thinking and feeling.

Think about what you've been doing and how you've been feeling over the last two weeks. Have you:

1. Found it hard to relax most of the time?  YES  NO
2. Felt stressed and overwhelmed most of the time?  YES  NO
3. Felt panicky and anxious most of the time?  YES  NO

If you've answered YES to one or more of these questions, it might be helpful to use the information in this fact sheet to reduce your stress.

Stress management teaches you about:

- Managing stress and anxiety symptoms
- Breathing exercises to decrease your stress and anxiety
- Relaxing and the importance of physical activity.

### WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS

Stress is common in daily life and may be associated with work, family or personal relationships. Whatever the cause, there are some simple steps that can help you to reduce stress.

#### Postpone major life changes

- Making major changes in your life can be stressful at any time. If you're feeling stressed or anxious, it's probably a good idea to try to avoid moving house or changing jobs. Leave them to a time when you're feeling better.

#### Resolve personal conflicts

- Stress in personal relationships often contributes to depression. Talk to a counsellor or psychologist who can help you find ways to address your problems.

#### Do the things you enjoy

- You may find you are enjoying yourself less and spending

more time worrying. In order to relax effectively, you need to allocate time to do the things you enjoy, such as exercising, meditating, reading, gardening or listening to music.

#### Control your work

- Take control of your work by avoiding long hours and additional responsibilities. This can be difficult, but small changes can make a difference.
- Learn to say 'No' more often. Create a balance between work and the things you enjoy doing. Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by new commitments.
- Make sure you have enough time to rest, relax and exercise.
- Part of learning to relax requires you to set aside some time in the day to do the things you enjoy.

#### Exercise regularly

- Physical exercise such as walking, swimming, dancing, playing golf or going to the gym can help relieve the tension in your muscles and relax your mind.
- Try to do some physical exercise every day, even if it's just going for a walk.

#### Seek help

- Talking to a friend, doctor, counsellor or someone else you trust, can help to relieve your stress. Asking for help and support at home, at work or in your other activities can also reduce stress.

### SLOW BREATHING EXERCISE

Have you noticed that you're breathing too fast? Stress and anxiety can affect your heart rate and breathing patterns. A relaxed breathing rate is usually 10 to 12 breaths per minute.

Practise this exercise three to four times a day when you're feeling stressed or anxious so that you can use this as a short-term coping strategy.

1. Time the number of breaths you take in one minute. Breathing in, then out is counted as one breath.
2. Breathe in, hold your breath and count to five. Then breathe out and say the word 'relax' to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
3. Start breathing in through your nose and out slowly through your mouth, in a six-second cycle. Breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. In the beginning, it can be helpful to time your breathing using the second hand of a watch or clock.

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- Count to yourself.
- Continue breathing in a six-second cycle for at least five minutes or until the symptoms of overbreathing have settled.

After practising this exercise, time the number of breaths you take in one minute. Practise the slow breathing exercise each day before breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime. Use the technique whenever you feel anxious. Gradually, you'll be familiar enough with the exercise to stop timing yourself.

**Practise this exercise three to four times each day, so that it becomes easy to use as a short-term coping strategy when you feel anxious.**

### MUSCLE TENSION EXERCISE

When you are feeling anxious, your muscles become tense. When your muscles remain tense for long periods, you can start to develop aches and pains, fatigue, headaches and difficulty breathing.

Take a few minutes to do this exercise. It will help you understand how muscle tension can cause pain and fatigue.

- Hold a piece of paper in your hand and stretch your arm out in front of you.
- Keep holding the paper for a few minutes without moving your arm.

You will probably notice that your arm feels tired after only a few minutes and may even start to ache in some places. Imagine how your arm would feel if you continued to hold that piece of paper for a number of hours. Although the paper is not heavy, keeping your muscles tense for any length of time can cause pain.

### MUSCLE RELAXATION EXERCISE

This exercise helps to reduce physical and mental tension. Practise this exercise regularly and at the first signs of muscle tension.

- Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room
- Put your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands in your lap
- Close your eyes
- Do the slow breathing exercise for three minutes

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- After three minutes of slow breathing, start the muscle relaxation exercise below
- Tense each of your muscle groups for 10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds, in the following order:
  - **Hands:** clench your hands into fists, then relax
  - **Lower arms:** bend your hands up at the wrists, then relax
  - **Upper arms:** bend your arms up at the elbow, then relax
  - **Shoulders:** lift your shoulders up, then relax
  - **Neck:** stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then backwards in a slow rolling motion, then relax
  - **Forehead and scalp:** raise your eyebrows, then relax
  - **Eyes:** close your eyes tightly, then relax
  - **Jaw:** clench your teeth, then relax
  - **Chest:** breathe in deeply, then breathe out and relax
  - **Stomach:** pull your tummy in, then relax
  - **Upper back:** pull your shoulders forward, then relax
  - **Lower back:** while sitting, roll your back into a smooth arc, then relax
  - **Buttocks:** tighten your buttocks, then relax
  - **Thighs:** push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax
  - **Calves:** lift your toes off the ground, then relax and
  - **Feet:** gently curl your toes down, then relax.
- Continue slow breathing for five more minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation
- As you become better at relaxation, it can be more interesting to combine these exercises with memories of relaxing situations eg. lying on a beach or doing a favourite activity.

A full session of relaxation takes about 15 to 20 minutes. Once you are good at relaxing your muscles, start relaxing tense parts of your body during the day while you are going about your daily activities.

### MORE INFORMATION

#### **Coping strategies for depression and anxiety:**

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 7: Sleeping well

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 8: Keeping active

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 9: Reducing alcohol and other drugs

#### **Other treatments for depression and anxiety:**

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 10: Changing your thinking

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 11: Antidepressant medication

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 14: What other treatments are available for depression and anxiety?