

A woman with curly hair, wearing a white lace top, is smiling and holding a small green plant in her hand. In the background, a man is also smiling, and the scene is set in a sunlit forest with many trees and dappled light.

GUIDE TO EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Looking after your well-being

Together, all the way.SM



MENTAL HEALTH

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.¹

One way for us to think about mental health is by looking at how effectively and successfully a person functions. Feeling capable and competent, being able to handle normal levels of stress, maintaining satisfying relationships, leading an independent life and being able to recover from difficult situations are all signs of mental health.

On the other hand the terms 'mental health problems' and 'mental illness' describe a broad range of psychological, emotional or behavioural disorders and a state of being in which an individual has difficulty handling everyday situations and feelings.

There are a wide variety of mental health illnesses. This leaflet will discuss some of them but further information can be found on the internet. You should talk over any concerns you have with your family doctor in the first instance.



STRESS

Defining stress

There's no agreed medical definition of stress, and arguments about the word's meaning stem at least partly from the fact that it can refer both to stressful events or circumstances and to our reactions to them.

What adds to the confusion is that not all of us find the same things stressful. Some of us will tense up at the thought of speaking in public while others might find flying to be far more stressful.

Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response. It can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, nervous or anxious.

A little stress is thought to be good for us and fuels our need for achievement. Constant exposure to stress though can lead to a wide range of signs and symptoms.

Common signs and symptoms of stress

Stress can manifest itself in many different ways, but these generally fall into four categories:²



Physical: fatigue, headache, insomnia, muscle aches/stiffness, heart palpitations, chest pains, abdominal cramps, nausea, trembling, cold extremities, flushing or sweating and frequent colds.



Mental: decrease in concentration and memory, indecisiveness, mind racing or going blank, confusion, loss of sense of humour.



Emotional: anxiety, nervousness, depression, anger, frustration, worry, fear, irritability, impatience, short temper, tearfulness, over reaction to certain situations.



Behavioural: pacing, fidgeting, nervous habits, increased eating, smoking, drinking, crying, yelling, swearing, blaming and even throwing things or hitting.

What causes stress?

Stress is difficult to measure and the causes of stress can vary. It may build up as a result of a particular circumstance or it can arise as a result of an ongoing situation or it may be an accumulation of home and work issues colliding.

External stressors include:³

- › Physical environment: noise, bright lights, heat, confined spaces.
- › Social rudeness: bossiness or aggressiveness on the part of someone else.
- › Organisational: rules, regulations, “red tape”, deadlines.
- › Major life events: death of a relative, lost job, promotion, new baby.
- › Daily hassles: commuting, misplacing keys, mechanical breakdowns.

Internal stressors include:³

- › Lifestyle choices: caffeine, not enough sleep, overloaded schedule.
- › Negative self-talk: pessimistic thinking, self-criticism, over-analysing.
- › Mind traps: unrealistic expectations, taking things personally, all-or-nothing thinking, exaggerating, rigid thinking.



- › Stressful personality traits: perfectionist, workaholic, pleaser.

It is important to remember that most of the stress we have is self-generated. Recognising that we create most of our own upsets is an important first step to dealing with them.

Work related stress

Work related stress develops because a person is unable to cope with the demands being placed on them. Stress, including work related stress, can be a significant cause of illness and is known to be linked with high levels of sickness absence, staff turnover and other issues such as errors.

Stress can affect anyone at any level of the business and recent research shows that work related stress is widespread and is not confined to particular sectors, jobs or industries. That is why a population-wide approach is necessary to tackle it. If you believe you are suffering work related stress then you should talk to your line manager or your human resources team in the first instance.

MASTERING STRESS

The following can be helpful in mastering stress:⁴

1

Change lifestyle habits

- › Decrease caffeine
- › Have a well-balanced diet
- › Eat slowly
- › Exercise regularly (at least 30 minutes, three times per week)
- › Make sure you have adequate sleep
- › Enjoy leisure time
- › Try relaxation exercises

2

Change stressful situations

- › Improve time and money management
- › Build assertiveness
- › Enhance problem-solving skills
- › Possibly leave a job or a relationship

3

Change your thinking

- › Look at things more positively
- › See problems as opportunities
- › Refute negative thoughts
- › Keep a sense of humour

Diversion and distraction are also good methods so take time out (anything from a short walk to a holiday) to get away from the things that are bothering you. This will not necessarily resolve the problem, but it gives you a break and a chance for your stress levels to decrease. Then, you can return to deal with issues feeling more rested and in a better frame of mind.

ANXIETY

Defining anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, apprehension or worry, often accompanied by physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, palpitations or shortness of breath. Everybody will feel anxious from time to time and anxiety is a natural reaction to a stressful situation. In some cases it can even improve performance.

For others, though, anxiety can become severe or prolonged. In fact, for one in 10 people in the UK, anxiety interferes with everyday life.⁵ This is called an anxiety disorder and is considered a mental health problem.

Anxiety is 'abnormal' if it:

- › is out of proportion to the stressful situation
- › persists when a stressful situation has gone, or the stress is minor
- › appears for no apparent reason when there is no stressful situation

Anxiety disorders include:⁵

Panic disorder: This involves recurring panic attacks - a severe attack of anxiety and fear which occurs suddenly, often without warning and for no apparent reason.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): OCD consists of recurring obsessions, compulsions, or both. Obsessions are recurring thoughts, images, or urges that cause you anxiety or disgust.

Post-traumatic stress disorder: This condition may follow a severe trauma such as a serious assault or a life-threatening accident.

Social phobia: This is possibly the most common phobia. It is where you become very anxious about what other people may think of you, or how they may judge you.

Specific phobias: Many people are phobic about specific things or situations such as claustrophobia or a fear of injections.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD): A long-term condition causing the sufferer to have feelings of anxiety on most days. It is characterised by chronic, excessive, unrealistic worry accompanied by feeling "wound up" or on edge, poor concentration, irritability, sleep disturbances, muscle tension and fatigue.

Common symptoms of anxiety

Psychological symptoms can include:⁵

- › insomnia
- › feeling worried or uneasy all the time
- › feeling tired
- › being irritable or quick to anger
- › an inability to concentrate
- › a fear that you are going “mad”
- › feeling unreal and not in control of your actions
- › detachment from your surroundings
- › concern about competence at work

It's also possible to experience a range of physical symptoms such as:

- › abdominal discomfort
- › diarrhoea
- › dry mouth
- › rapid heartbeat or palpitations
- › tightness or pain in the chest
- › shortness of breath
- › dizziness
- › frequent urination
- › difficulty swallowing
- › uncontrolled shaking

What causes anxiety disorders?

Anxiety may be a symptom of other mental health problems, such as depression or alcohol dependence. It can also be caused by substances such as ecstasy or caffeine or by withdrawal from long-term drugs like tranquillisers.

Sometimes anxiety can be associated with a physical illness, such as thyroid disorder. For this reason it's advisable to see your family doctor to rule out a medical cause.



Treatment

The main aim of treatment is to help you to reduce symptoms so that anxiety no longer affects your day-to-day life. The treatment options depend on what condition you have and how severely you are affected. They may include one or more of the following:⁶

Non-medication

- › self-help courses
- › understanding
- › counselling
- › anxiety management courses
- › cognitive behaviour therapy
- › mindfulness

Medication

Antidepressant medicines or SSRI's such as:

- › sertraline
- › escitalopram
- › paroxetine

In some cases a combination of treatments such as cognitive therapy and an antidepressant has been shown to be more effective than either treatment on its own.



DEPRESSION

Defining depression

Depression is an illness that involves the body, mood and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way they feel about themselves, and the way they think about things.

A depressive disorder is not a sign of personal weakness and people with a depressive disease cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better.

Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months or years. Appropriate treatment, can help most people with depression.



Common symptoms

As with many mental health problems, there are a number of symptoms of depression. The severity of the symptoms can vary from mild to severe. In general the more symptoms you have the more severe the depression.

Symptoms include:⁷

- › low mood for most of the day, nearly every day
- › loss of enjoyment and interest in life
- › abnormal sadness, often with weepiness
- › feelings of guilt, worthlessness or uselessness
- › poor motivation with even simple tasks seeming difficult
- › poor concentration
- › sleeping problems
- › lack of energy, always tired
- › difficulty with affection, including going off sex
- › poor appetite and weight loss or the reverse with comfort eating and weight gain
- › irritability, agitation, or restlessness
- › physical symptoms such as headaches, palpitations, chest pains, and general aches
- › recurrent thoughts of death

This presents a very bleak picture. It's important to remember that depression isn't an absolute - it's not simply a case of either you're depressed or you're not. There's a progression from feeling low in mood to the full clinical illness described above. Even then, you won't suffer from every symptom.

What causes depression?

The exact cause is not known. Anyone can become depressed and it can develop for no apparent reason. It can also be triggered by a traumatic event such as childhood abuse or being attacked, relationship problems, bereavement, redundancy or illness. In many people it is a combination of a low mood with some life problem that leads to a spiral down into depression. The severity, duration, and presence of other symptoms are factors that distinguish normal sadness from a depressive disorder.

Women tend to develop depression more often than men. Particularly common times for women to become depressed are after childbirth (post-natal depression) and the menopause.

A chemical imbalance in the brain might be a factor. This is not fully understood. However, an alteration in some chemicals in the brain is thought to be the reason why antidepressants work in treating depression.

Treatment

Regular exercise such as a daily brisk walk, jog or swim is thought to help ease symptoms. Treatment with one or more of the following is also often advised:⁷

- › talking through feelings
- › antidepressant medicines
- › cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)
- › self-help groups
- › well-being groups

In some severe cases specialist medicines or electrical treatment (ECT) are options.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

WHO Mental Health information and resources:

https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_1

REFERENCES

1. www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/
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3. www.stressbusting.co.uk
4. www.hse.gov.uk/stress
5. www.anxietyuk.org.uk
6. www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Treatment
7. www.depressionalliance.org



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