

Lifeline's stress awareness and management tool kit will provide some practical information about:

- Understanding what stress is
- Understanding the causes of stress
- Understanding why managing stress is important
- Monitoring your health and resilience
- Recognising the signs of stress
- Developing some strategies to manage stress

What is stress?

Stress is the body's way of dealing with pressure.

It is a human reaction to life's demands.

When we experience a high level of pressure due to situations occurring around us (life, work or social), it can trigger an increase in energy and alertness.

In many cases this is a healthy human reaction as it helps us to cope and get through the event or situation in the best possible way. However, too much stress can affect our health, so it needs to be managed appropriately.

Everyone experiences stress of some kind in varying levels of intensity during their lives. The important issue is how people are affected by stress and how they react or respond to the situation.

What causes stress?

There are many different causes of stress (stressors).

Some stressors are external pressures from outside sources, such as the death of a relative or friend. Other stressors are said to be internal, based on how a person responds to life situations.



Responses to stress may be determined by personality, cultural background, social circumstances, support networks and the current situation in which you may find yourself. These responses may also vary depending on life stage and previous experiences. Everyone will respond and react differently to stress in their lives.



What are the signs of stress?

There are many signs that may indicate you or someone you know is experiencing stress.

Signs of stress are usually experienced as physical, mental, emotional or behavioural changes from what's normal for us. Some of these signs may include:

- Lack of motivation
- Moodiness, increased or erratic emotions
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Inability to sleep or too much sleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Headaches
- Anxiousness or feeling overwhelmed
- Not coping with demands and responsibilities
- Reliance on alcohol or other substances to cope
- Increased eating, drinking or nervous habits.

There are many life experiences and stressors that contribute to our stress responses and impact on our resilience and wellbeing. Some of these include:

- Interpersonal relationship problems
- Personal or family illness
- Conflict e.g. bullying, harassment
- Work pressures
- Traumatic events
- Financial problems
- Concerns about life direction
- Job loss
- Pressures from competing demands or a combination of the above



Why is managing stress important?

Our lives are becoming more hectic than ever before.

Life is full of change, which affects us as individuals, family members, friends, employees, and in community life and society generally.

Everyone reacts differently to different circumstances and challenges. A situation that may bring about a positive stress response for one person, may have a negative impact for someone else. For example, flying on a plane can be a pleasurable activity for one person, but terrifying for someone else.

Too much stress over an extended period of time can be harmful to physical and mental wellbeing and impact on your ability to function and live productively.

Monitoring our health and resilience

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges and adversity, to cope with the ups and downs of life.

There are practical strategies available that can help you to learn how to manage and even reduce the level of stress in your life. These strategies will help anyone maintain a healthy life balance and build resilience.

Firstly, it is important to be aware of any stress building up, and to find out what may be the cause and whether the stressors are causing negative or positive reactions to occur.

By acknowledging the stress, it is then possible to do something to take control and action before becoming overwhelmed. It is important to recognise the signals that things are not going so well. Ignoring these signals can put wellness and resilience at risk.

By learning to recognise what is normal stress and when something is abnormal, action can be taken to manage the changes needed.

Learning how to respond appropriately will help to 'stress down', build personal resilience and improve health.

Help me! I'm "stressed"

The first step in managing stress is to acknowledge that it exists.

If possible, remove yourself from the stressful situation or location and find a quiet place. Take a deep slow breath, take another one, and another one. Try to clear your mind of all thoughts, and bring yourself to the moment.

This can be helpful in stopping the overwhelming feelings in their tracks. Emotions pass, stressful or painful feelings may at times feel like they will take over and will never leave, but they do and will.

A clear mind can help you identify what is causing your stress, which will help you to manage the feelings, reactions and the situation. Experiencing the feelings when they occur and telling yourself that they will pass may also be helpful.

Thinking positive thoughts is also important.



Here are some practical tips for managing stress and maintaining your health and staying resilient:

1 Talk to someone you trust (partner, friend, colleague or helpline)

Talking is a great way to let off steam or get some perspective, and helps release negative or upsetting feelings from remaining hidden inside. Talking can help you or someone you know feel much better. Having someone to listen to you, or you to them, reinforces that you are cared for and are valued. As humans it's important for us to feel a connectedness with others, especially when at times we may feel isolated and alone. It won't necessarily fix the problem, but will help start the process of identifying the problem and make you feel better knowing someone has listened to you.

2 Have a health check with your General Practitioner

Knowing that your body is in sync is an important step in maintaining good health and resilience. Your GP can check your physical health and general wellbeing for any negative signs that stress may be causing. Your health professional's perspective can help you understand what you need to look out for and nurture more.

Seek urgent medical assistance if you are experiencing lack of sleep, loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, loss of energy, distress or any other negative physical symptoms over a period of two weeks, and your ability to function normally is impacted.

3 Take up regular physical exercise

Evidence suggests that physical exercise will help you feel good about yourself. Regular physical exercise produces a chemical response that triggers positive feelings. As well as helping your body to stay healthy, you will also help your emotional wellbeing. You can share time and yourself with others or do this on your own as a way to help clear your mind. Physical activity may even help to vent your frustrations from a situation or person, and may help promote better sleeping habits.

4 Try to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet

Diet can play a big part in your emotional wellbeing. Certain foods and consuming too much or not enough can impact on your health and wellbeing. Different foods can contribute to our mood states, so talk with a dietician for advice. Try to limit alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, as these can contribute to feelings of anxiousness and discourage sleep, and may adversely impact on your overall health.

5 Find time to do activities you enjoy such as:

- Spending time with friends and family
- Participating in sports, games or hobbies
- Writing, listening to music, reading
- Going out, travelling, sight seeing
- Practicing relaxation techniques

Doing the things you enjoy can help remind you of the wonderful things in life, as well as helping you to recharge your body and mind. These are important for achieving balance at times when life may appear to be getting out of balance. Whether the activities are with other people or solitary, they will encourage self-discovery, create times when you can escape your problems, help you engage with others or simply be in the moment. Their importance in building your resilience and wellbeing cannot be underestimated, and will help you be more productive in the areas of your life that you may find less enjoyable but need to do.

