

STRESS – Be Kind To Yourself

We all suffer from stress from time to time. Indeed, a small amount of stress can give us a competitive edge and allow us to perform at our best, but long-term stress can produce low self-esteem and high levels of self-criticism. Keeping everything in perspective at this time and seeking ways of securing help and support are vital to your wellbeing.

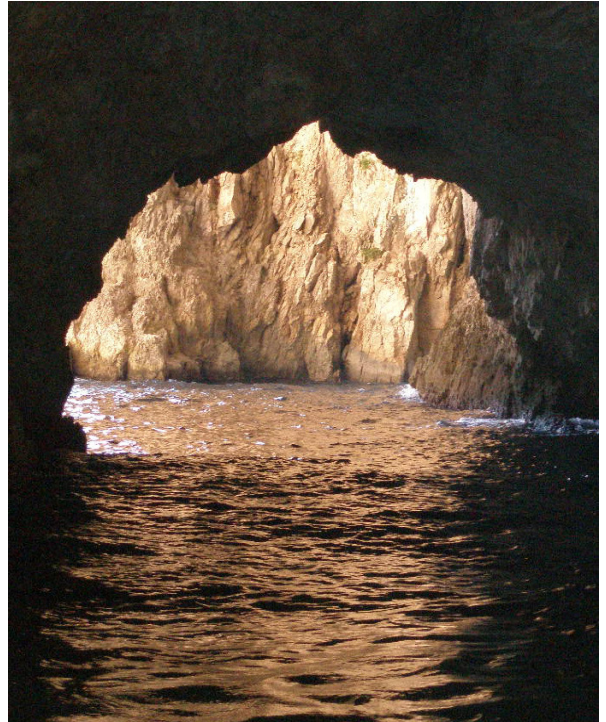
We all experience episodes of stress from time to time, at work, at home and whilst we are out and about.

At work, there may be too much to do, too many deadlines and constant interruptions. At home, family members can be difficult or demanding, the ill-health of a loved one can cause concern as can major repairs or maintenance to the home. Simply getting to work, driving or doing the weekly shop can become stressful as people get in our way or delay us through irresponsible or inconsiderate behaviour.

We recognise the impact short term stress has on us, both physically and emotionally. We may rush everywhere, trying to catch up on those valuable lost minutes. We take risks in the car, barge into people on the street or underground, bang and crash about in the office or at home and shout and snap at people who interrupt or delay us. We can cope for short periods of time under this level of pressure by making sure we relax, talking about incidents or issues with family, colleagues and friends and – by apologising to those we have snapped at when under pressure.

Constant or long-term stress can be more insidious. We may no longer recognise or realise that we are experiencing stress – it has gone on for so long, this is just how life is and how we feel all the time. We may criticise ourselves and blame others for putting us under this pressure. We begin to feel inadequate, it's our age, we can't concentrate as we used to, we feel lethargic, there is simply too much to cope with and more and more to do. This can be especially difficult if life at home is also stressed. This is the time when our symptoms and ability to cope may indicate that we are becoming clinically depressed.

It is especially important at this time, that you really take the time to take care of yourself. You do have choices; life doesn't have to continue like this. Some decisions only you can make, with others you may need help and support from professionals, family or friends. If you have always been seen as a 'coper', reliable, dependable, the one everyone goes to for advice and support, this may be incredibly difficult. You may find it almost impossible to ask for help, to let others know that you are struggling or to show that you are vulnerable.



But you do have choices!

STRUGGLE ON ALONE? THINGS MIGHT GET BETTER?

But they might not. You could become seriously ill with depression, resulting in an inability to cope at all with work, home life or relationships.

1. GET SOME HELP OR SUPPORT

Try talking to trusted **family members, colleagues or friends**. You may be surprised at how supportive they can be – helping to share some of the work-load and relieve you of some of the pressures. They may also be relieved that you have asked for help and pleased that you trust them sufficiently to share this with them. (As 1 in 3 of us is likely to experience some sort of mental ill-health at some time, most people have some personal experience of depression or mental ill-health within their own family or circle of friends.)

If you would prefer talking to someone completely impartial, you can call the YouCount 24 hour telephone helpline on 0800 107 6163 (UK callers) +44 (0)1455 255038 (Overseas callers) and speak to a professional counsellor in complete confidence.

Your **doctor** may refer you to a counsellor or therapist for a “talking therapy” or help with medication to help you sleep and alleviate some of the symptoms of anxiety.

2. RELAX

Find an activity that really helps you to relax. It's your brain that needs to relax – you need an activity that really helps you to 'switch off'. For some, physical activity helps, a really good work-out in the gym or some other physically demanding activity. An activity which needs your concentration is the best. For others, a soak in the bath, reading a good book etc., can be the solution.

Don't collapse onto the sofa when you get home and stay glued to 'the box' or log on and spend hours on the computer. Although these activities help you to avoid thinking about your problems, either activity for prolonged periods of time is not healthy for either your mind or your body.

3. LEARN TO SAY 'NO'

Don't put yourself under constant pressure by responding to every request, whether from colleagues or family. A polite refusal with a simple explanation that you cannot do 'such and such' is sufficient. In many circumstances, the request is not urgent or someone else can help.

Some of us find it very difficult to say 'No'. This might be as a result of our upbringing or because we feel, subconsciously, that people will not like us or will not be able to cope with us saying 'No' to them. They will – try it.

Reply in response to your 'gut' reaction. If the request makes your heart sink, that is usually a good indication that you should be refusing. Think for a moment and then respond. You could even suggest that you have time to 'think about' the request. One of the best reasons for saying 'No' is simply that you do not want to do it. (Although it's probably best not to give that as the reason.) If you are at work, you need to think about whether this really is your responsibility and if you do take it on, which tasks will have to slip in order for you to do it.

4. VALUE YOUR TIME AND YOURSELF

If you don't, no-one else will. Learning to say 'No' appropriately lets other people know that you have your own commitments and that you are not prepared to drop everything in order to deal with theirs.

- Can you improve on your management of time?
- Can you afford some help in the home to give you more quality free time? A cleaner, ironing service, gardener, on-line shopping etc.
- Can you **Delegate** – at work and at home?

5. BE KIND TO YOURSELF

When we are under a great deal of constant pressure, we can become very negative, particularly about ourselves. We may lose confidence in our abilities because we are finding it so difficult to cope – our old coping methods are not working any longer.

Don't lose sight of your past success

Though it may be difficult when you feel things are not going well for you, try to remind yourself of your success stories – even small things - rather than dwell on what did not turn out as well as you would have liked.

Learn to pace yourself

If today is a particularly bad day and you feel really low, decide that you will do the best you can with the inner resources you have today. You may not do as well as you did yesterday and you may be able to do more tomorrow. Your inner resources are probably very low and some quite minor incident might reduce them even further – you really don't know how things are going to be from one day to the next at the moment, so don't make unnecessary commitments.

Try to break your day or your tasks into manageable, achievable portions. If your concentration is poor try to work in short bursts of approximately 20 minutes and then have a short break and move around. You may feel overwhelmed by the amount of outstanding work you have to do and find you are spending too much time on tasks that are not really important – simply because they are the easiest. Alternating between two tasks might be beneficial; one which needs a lot of concentration and you know is going to be difficult, and the other which is less taxing but will give you a sense of achievement – one less task on the list!

Don't ignore the signs!

Stress is a symptom, and depression is an illness. They are both invisible. We all sympathise when a colleague has a dreadfully sore throat or is limping with a sprained knee or ankle. We expect them to take time off work to recover and offer help if someone is in obvious pain and struggling physically.

No-one 'sees' the pain of chronic stress or depression. Too often we neither acknowledge that it is an illness nor consider that we actually need to take care of ourselves in order to recover. We struggle on feeling angry with ourselves and with the world and very often it is others that point out to us that we need some time at home as we are obviously 'not well'.

So – before it gets to that point:

- Learn to say 'No'
- Delegate and manage your time
- Relax and spoil yourself – you deserve it!
- Don't be too proud to ask for help
- Don't beat yourself up – do what you can today with the resources you have today.

But above all – Be Kind to Yourself