

# Could Counselling Help?

*Counsellor Yvonne Miller looks at the role of Counselling in times of Stress, and how to find a counsellor who is qualified to help.*

**A universally accepted definition for stress has yet to be found. Each profession uses the word differently, from psychologists to engineers, to biologists to counsellors - and each highlights different aspects of this complex subject.**

Indeed, the significant factor in any situation is how an individual responds to perceived demands. For some people it is more than they can cope with to cross the road without help; others thrive on crossing countries on their own. **Stress lies in the reaction of the perceiver.** For clients, Stress is about a pattern of responses to a pattern of challenge, and each will be perceived differently by different individuals. As long as someone feels there is nothing that can be done and, in particular, that nothing can be done about what comes at him or her from 'outside', there is a sense of being trapped and helpless. Clients often talk of their horror at not being able to cope.

Excessive stress can affect the total living and behaviour of the client or simply show itself in an occasional and uncharacteristic display of bad temper. Stress can produce stress signs at opposite ends of many normal functions. For instance, in different people the effects can be seen in over excitability or in withdrawal, or it may result in either compensatory over-eating or in punishing under-eating.

## COUNSELLING AND STRESS

Managing stress consists of enabling the individual to recognise their own response to stress, and to harness skills and attitudes which put them in charge of their choices. Counsellors can use questionnaires where cardiologists use electronic and chemical tests to gauge heart and circulatory activity these contribute to the object calculation of effects of stress. With that in mind, the most commonly cited stress signs are of the –

- Body – headaches that persist, sleeplessness, skin problems, breathing problems
- The Mind – taking too much on, confusion, reduced concentration and memory
- Emotions – Irritability, over dependency on others or external substances
- Spirit – coldness, difficulty with authority, lack of purpose of meaning

An important first step in dealing with anyone under stress is to listen to their description of how they see their situation. It may well be that at first they insist their difficulties are due to something outside themselves; lack of money, impossible working conditions, the scheming workers, a difficult relationship, housing and reoccurring illness. All of these, and more, are initially seen as bearing the



blame for the person's predicament.

Indeed they can all play a part. But, if the Counsellor merely colludes with the idea that external factors are the total cause, this will reduce the opportunity for the client to see that it is the response made to these stressors that is largely in their control. Instead, the Counsellor can help the Client to see that they can modify their response to Stress, and this is much easier than having to modify the whole world outside! Progress can then be made.

Recovering the skills to deal with these contributing factors starts by identifying the specific stress signs, shown on page 2. The client then must decide whether to undertake some change and development in their own behaviour, or whether they stay at the place where they are.

People suffering from the effects of Stress must always take Medical symptoms to their GP. In fact, the GP is a good place to start and s/he may refer you to their Practice Counsellor. Typically, Practice Counsellors work with a patient in short term counselling, usually for 6-10 sessions, with each session lasting up to 50 minutes. When working with short-term counselling, I usually ask the patient what their aim in coming to counselling is and, if it is to understand their contributing factors to stress, we would explore possible reoccurring

triggers. A tool that can be adapted to stress work is something called a 'life graph' which facilitates the Counsellor and patient/client in identifying triggers. Once identified we can look at skills the patient/client may need to adopt in order to effect change, and we may use some of the 'Stress Management Practices' (shown right) which are known to be helpful and effective.

The patient/client and Counsellor work together in effecting change, and the 'work' can encompass assertiveness training, self-esteem building, and changing communication patterns, among other skills.

### CONSULTING A COUNSELLOR PRIVATELY

Some clients may wish to see a Counsellor privately as waiting lists within Doctors Surgeries are now quite lengthy. If you decide to take this course of action it is important to ensure that the Counsellor belongs to a recognised Association, such as BACP<sup>1</sup> or UKCP<sup>2</sup>.

My advice would be to speak with one or two prospective Counsellors first, enquire as to their qualifications and experience, and to ask for an assessment appointment. This will allow both the prospective Counsellor and Client to decide whether they are able to work towards building the therapeutic relationship.

### SOME SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

There are many signs and symptoms of stress. The following list may prove helpful in recognizing the changes in behaviour in ourselves and others that may signify that stress is present, and needs to be recognized and addressed. Often, it is a sudden realization that we are not reacting to problems as we would have done in the past that causes us to understand that we may be suffering from stress.

- Unusual or misplaced aggression – snapping at people
- Withdrawal or refusal to get interested or involved
- Day dreaming thoughts, wandering off
- Increased projection – blaming other people for everything
- Undue prejudice against people or ideas
- Denial of the obvious, or of simple logic
- Susceptibility to rumour and suspicion
- Impulsive, highly irrational behaviour
- Short term thinking – ignoring longer term implications
- Seeing only a very limited range of alternatives
- Indecision, procrastinating, postponing action
- Capriciousness, being subject to whims and fancies
- Making unreasonable complaints and demands
- Inability to switch off or relax for a while
- Holding on to dogmatic and rigid views in the face of contrary evidence
- Regression to the past or to less mature behaviour
- Anxiety which may not be linked to a particular source
- Confusing dates or times, double booking appointments

### STRESS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Sometimes, our hectic lifestyle can contribute to stress. When busy, we can neglect our health as we

'eat on the go', drink more coffee or smoke more than is good for us, get too little sleep and allow ourselves little time for relaxation. The following list contains suggestions for positive changes that can help to redress the balance and to allow the body to rest and recover from stress. Making small, incremental changes can be very beneficial, and actually makes us feel we are doing something positive to help ourselves.

- Eat three meals a day, including breakfast
- Avoid sugar, salt, animal fat and processed white flour in your diet
- Pursue a regular programme of physical exercise
- Form new friendships and maintain old ones
- Get enough sleep each night
- Practice relaxation
- Stop smoking
- Limit your alcohol and caffeine intake
- Pace yourself and allow for an even flow of demands
- Identify and accept emotional needs
- Recognise and heed the early warning signs of stress
- Allocate time and energy to allow for outside interests and stimulation
- Avoid self medication
- Take one thing at a time
- Give in once in a while
- Talk out your worries
- Learn to accept the things you cannot change
- Be sure to have family time, occupation time and personal time

**Today we are all bent on finding instant solutions for our problems, but the management of stress can be a long-term process. It is just as well that we have been given a lifetime to tackle it.**

**YVONNE MILLER**



Yvonne trained for four years at Leicester University and is a member of the **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**. Yvonne has a wealth of experience, providing counselling for stress, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, trauma, low self-esteem, marital difficulties, and bereavement. Yvonne currently works for the NHS and Northamptonshire Police, as well as running her own thriving private practice in Northampton. Yvonne is also a Counselling Supervisor and Tutor and provides Stress Management courses to industry and assists CABA in the training of their YouCount Confidantes

<sup>1</sup> British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy ([www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk))

<sup>2</sup> United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy ([www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk))