

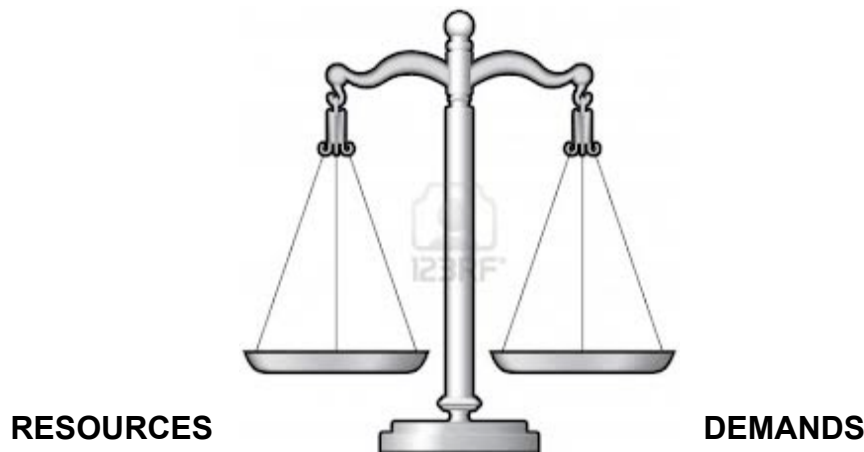
Recognising and dealing with stress

Hand-out

Definition of stress: “The demands being made on you exceed the resources you have to deal with them”

On the other hand, stress can also result from boredom or from decreased demands being made on you (think about caged animals in a zoo).

Think of stress as a set of scales with demands on one side and resources on the other. You might feel stressed if there is an imbalance on either side.



How to recognise when you are under stress

Stress not only causes muscle tension, it also alters how we think, how we feel and how we behave.

Mental / emotional (thoughts and feelings) symptoms can include:

- Inability to concentrate,
- Loss of self confidence,
- Undue tiredness,
- Muddled thinking and
- Tendency to lose perspective.

When we are stressed, simple worries can seem overwhelming.

Emotional symptoms can include:

Anger or irritability, anxiety, panic, feeling hopeless, hostile or resentful. You may also feel angry or cry more than usual.

Physical symptoms can include:

Tense muscles, especially aching shoulders, neck pain and increased back pain. Breathing may be shallow or erratic,



Dry mouth,
Upset stomach/ butterflies/indigestion
Clenched jaw or fists,
Sweating

(You may be able to add several more to this list as you become more aware of how stress affects you.)

Behaviors and habits may include:
increased smoking or alcohol intake,
Increased or decreased appetite,
Increased or decreased sleep,
Nail biting or mannerisms such as finger tapping, fidgeting etc.

It is helpful to make a list of how stress affects you personally. When you begin to recognise that you are under stress, you will then be better able to prevent or minimise its effect.

My stress profile

My mental and emotional symptoms (thoughts and feelings)

My physical symptoms (the feelings in my body)

My behavioural symptoms (ask you family/friends how they can tell if you are stressed)

Quick relaxation techniques

Quick tense/relax

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart.

As you slowly breathe in, hunch your shoulders, clench your fists, tighten your buttocks and screw up your face.

Now, as you gently and slowly breathe out, let everything go, hang forwards so that your arms are dangling. Allow all the tension to flow out of the ends of your fingertips.

Breathing awareness

Either lying or sitting, become aware of your breathing and focus on it for a minute. Let one hand rest on your upper chest and one hand rest on your belly (just below your rib cage).

Imagine a balloon in your stomach. Each time you breathe in, the balloon fills with air, as you breathe out - the balloon deflates. Feel your belly rising and falling slowly with each breath. Your upper chest should be still and calm.

Each time you notice your mind wandering, just gently bring your attention back to your breathing.

(Practice this calm breathing as often as you remember throughout the day. Also practice calm slow breathing when changing position or exercising. Breathe with pain - don't hold your breath and tense up. Movement will feel easier.)

Quick panic-fixer - This technique may help reduce feelings of panic in less than one minute.

Take a normal breath in and then - breathe out slowly while you count 5 seconds (think - one...and.... two...and ...three....and.... four ...and ...five).

As your breathing slows down, gently count 6 seconds as you slowly breathe out, then 7 seconds. **Or hum a tune / sing. Or suck a sweet - it's hard to over-breathe with your mouth shut.**

(There's no need to take "deep breaths", breathing in will take of itself!!)

Quick imagery

If you close your eyes and think of the word “calm” - what do you see?

See your calm scene in your mind’s eye.

As you slow down your breathing, with each out breath, think the word “calm” and imagine your calm place.

Distancing - another quick imagery method of helping you to feel calm when you are feeling anxious or if your mind is over-active.

If you like imagery, you may find these useful.

Gently close your eyes, focus on your slow breathing and then imagine the following:

A leaf falling from a tree and then floating slowly downstream

Clouds moving across the sky

Helium filled balloons slowly rising - watch until they disappear from view