Stress management

The first thing to say is that stress in itself is not a bad thing. In fact, it's a necessary motivation for daily life.

What we generally mean by 'stress' is when the day–to–day life pressures feel out of control and we start to experience symptoms such as panic, tension and sleeplessness.

When this happens, we have triggered our primitive flight or fight response for some reason. This response was very useful when, as cave dwellers, we would have been ready to run from danger or stand and fight. Great if you are being hunted by a tiger but not so good in modern life. If you're feeling stressed, consider the following to regain a better balance in your life.

Reducing stress

One of the first things you can do if your body is in a fight or flight state is to take some slow deep breaths. When our body is having physical reaction to stress, we take short and shallow breaths high up in our chest. To simply stop and take three deep breaths can make a significant and immediate difference to how you are feeling right now. Of course, it won't in itself resolve your prob–lem but if will calm your physical responses making it easier to follow the other suggestions below.

What are you getting stressed about?

Set aside some time in your diary to work out why you're stressed.

- What are your current priorities?
- Where are you spending most of your time?
- Are you spending most of your time addressing your priorities?
- If not, what are you doing instead?
- Are you clear about what you are trying to achieve each day?

These questions will help you start to identify what is stressing you. It could be time management, or prioritising issues, boundary issues between work and home life. Whatever it is, you can't do anything about it until you find the root cause.

QUICKTIPS

What do you want instead?

The next step, and perhaps the most important one, is to work out what it is you want instead. There is no point in just focusing on the problem, you need to set yourself a target to work towards. Imagine your life working just the way you want, and identify where you would be spending your time, what priorities you would be setting and how would you be organising your life.

Sometimes just working out what you want makes what you need to change instantly clearer to you. If not, try some of our other tips and come back to this.

Learn to switch off

Sometimes we get stressed because we seem to be dealing with work issues 24/7. If this is true for you, it's time to set some clear boundaries between work and play. If you can, get a separate phone for work, so you can switch it off in your free time. Do not use push notifications on your smart phone to alert you every time there is an e-mail, and only check your e-mails at specific times, otherwise you are staying on constant alert. Make time for friends and family and other downtime opportunities. It's important to remember that you need a break and organise yourself to make sure you get one.

Question your 'have to do's'

If you feel compelled to do things because you feel you 'must', stop for a minute and consider if that is really true. Ask what would happen if you didn't? Quite often we create rules for ourselves that maybe were relevant when we originally created them, but when they became outdated, we didn't revise them to accommodate what we need to do now.

Do you have any triggers?

Are there specific triggers to you feeling stressed? If so, what can you do to anticipate and avoid them? For example, if you get stressed about being late, something simple like factoring in extra travel time can just make that stress- or disappear. Think about the stress triggers you have and whether there are steps you can take to minimise these.

Set manageable goals

If you frequently have days where you don't get every task done that you set yourself, you have probably got into the habit of assuming you can do far more than you actually can. Rather than give yourself a daily mountain to climb, which makes you feel bad when you inevitably fail, give yourself a manageable set of tasks and be pleased when you have achieved them all. You will find that your productivity will go up rather than down because you will be feeling far more motivated each day.

Spend some time in the moment

The source of most of our stress comes from worries about what went wrong in the past and/or what could go wrong in the future. Learning to spend more time in the moment can create an oasis of peace and calm in your life that allows you to gain more useful perspectives and help you to make better decisions for yourself. The easiest route to this is in practising mindfulness. Even ten minutes a day can start to make a difference across you life. There are many great resources to learn about this online including a 10-day free trial from Headspace.

Look at the facts

When we are worried about something, we often assume we know what other people are thinking. Or we imagine a chain of actions and reactions that we can't possibly know anything about. If you find yourself doing this, just sit down and focus on the facts alone, missing out all the mind reading, or imagining of dire consequences or judgements. Pretend you are a detective, and if you have no evidence for something, you have to disregard it. Then write down this fact based version of what it is you are worrying about, and you'll usually find that it will not be half as troublesome as the imaginary version you were allowing free rein in your imagination.

If you can't change it, move on

Many of us spend a lot of time thinking about things that have happened. If you do this, ask yourself if there is anything you can do about it. If not, think about what you would do differently if that same situation arose again, note anything you have learned from the process, and then forget about it. More often than not, anyone else involved in that situation will already have forgotten all about it already.

QUICKTIPS

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