

Managing Stress

For many of us stress is a regular factor in our lives and we shouldn't underestimate the toll it takes on our mental and physical health.

Eliminating stress from our lives is often difficult or impossible but there are a few steps you can take to minimise its impact:

- Pay particular attention to your diet. Often our instinctual response is to reach for caffeine or sugar to keep us going and/or alcohol to help us wind down when in reality these are the worst possible things we can be consuming as they will just stress our bodies further. In addition when we're feeling stressed we often find it difficult to set aside time to eat properly and tend to resort to takeaways and snacks which are often high in salt, sugar and saturated fats and offer very little nutritional value. Instead support your body by providing it with good whole foods, particularly lots of vegetables and fruits, and make sure you are drinking plenty of water.
- Use your "down time" wisely. As tempting as collapsing in front of the TV might be, it won't actually provide you with meaningful rest or relaxation. Instead use the time to get some exercise (particularly if your stress comes from a job where most of your day is spent sitting at a desk), meditate or just spend some quiet time in nature. Find something that is calming for you, whether it is a run to clear your head or boxing session to release some of the frustrations of the day or some gentle yoga to stretch out knotted muscles and calm the mind. Remember that meditation can be as simple as sitting quietly for 5 minutes focusing on your breathing. The point is just to quieten your mind and give it a break from the endless stream of thoughts of the day.
- Sleep! Sleep is frequently adversely affected by stress, but is also one of the most critical factors in managing the impacts of stress. Attention to diet and the relaxation suggestions above should help. It's tempting to think when you're late getting to bed and feeling so shattered that you're struggling to stay awake that you don't need to worry about taking time to relax and calm your mind and you just need to get straight to sleep. Unfortunately that will often result in you waking up only a few short hours later, as soon as your brain has had the bare minimum rest and feels like it can try and struggle on some more. Taking an extra 15 minutes on your way to bed to do some gentle stretching and meditation will help calm your mind and body and give you a much better chance of staying asleep for a good night's rest.

Long term "chronic" stress is incredibly damaging to our minds and bodies. Make it a priority to do whatever you can to reduce or eliminate the sources of stress in your life and then use the steps above to help minimising the damaging effect of any that is left.