

-- EMBARGOED UNTIL 1AM MONDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2004 --

IS STRESS AN ILLNESS OR A WEAKNESS?

New research released today reveals that two-thirds of people feel that stress is an illness, but at the same time just under half of Australians say stress is caused by poor coping skills.

Nine out of ten Australians have felt stressed according to the survey results, with 60 percent of those who have felt stressed saying that it has impacted their lives in some way.

In addition, the research reveals that work and finance are undoubtedly the areas causing people the most stress. One third of those surveyed said their stress is mainly caused by their job and another one third said worrying about personal finances causes them the most stress.

Four out of five Australians believe that 'highly strung' people are most affected by stress, and university students are believed to suffer the highest levels of stress.

Published in the latest issue of the Pfizer Australia Health Report, the research was conducted for the Mental Health Foundation of Australia and research-based medicines company, Pfizer Australia.

Professor Graham Burrows, AO KCSJ MB, chairman of the Mental Health Foundation of Australia, says this research highlights the urgent need for greater awareness to ensure stress is correctly understood.

The United Nations reports that stress-related anxiety and depression is the second highest cause of mortality and morbidity after heart disease.

The good news is that there is a high level of understanding about the dangers of not dealing with stress-based problems, with 85 percent of those surveyed acknowledging that stress can lead to an illness.

With such a high prevalence of stress in our community and 46 percent of Australians surveyed believing that poor coping skills cause stress, it is clear that stress is still mistakenly seen as a weakness by many.

"Stress is not a weakness. It is a feeling someone experiences when they are faced with an important challenge and feel they don't have the resources to cope."

"While a certain level of stress is needed by each of us to deal with our everyday lives, it can lead to a serious illness if not managed properly.

Ongoing and untreated stress may develop into an anxiety disorder, which can lead to a depressive illness," said Professor Burrows.

According to the Mental Health Foundation of Australia, there are different types of anxiety disorders, which include panic attacks, fear of open spaces, social phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

"People need to be aware of the signs of anxiety disorders and should seek treatment if they experience symptoms such as heart palpitations, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, chest pains or dizziness," continued Professor Burrows.

The survey asked people how they lower their stress levels; 65 percent of Australians polled say physical exercise is the most effective approach, followed by 59 percent of those surveyed, who say that spending time with family or friends helps them to relax.

"Regular exercise is a great way to manage stress – at least 20 minutes of exercise three times a week can be extremely helpful. In addition, we advise people to take time to relax, eat well and get a good night's sleep to help reduce stress levels and to consult a doctor if stress symptoms continue," said Professor Burrows.

Eating comfort food and overeating were identified as some of the most common habits of people suffering stress. This is significantly more common for women; 44 percent of women eat comfort food when stressed, compared with 22 percent of men.

At the same time, eating was also identified as the least effective method to lower stress levels.

To assist with educating the public about stress management, the Mental Health Foundation of Australia has partnered with Pfizer Australia to produce this month's edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report. Filled with useful information, free copies can be requested by phoning **1800 675 229** or by visiting www.healthreport.com.au where people can also sign-up for email alerts of future editions.

The findings on Australian attitudes and feelings towards stress are based on responses from 1,382 people aged 18 and over. The research was conducted in August 2004 by independent consultants, Stollznow Research.

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NB: INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS ARE AVAILABLE IN EACH STATE.

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