

Pfizer Australia

HEALTH REPORT

ISSUE #11

MANAGING STRESS

This edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report looks at stress and how it can be managed.

Stress is the feeling a person experiences when faced with an important challenge that they feel they don't have the resources to meet.

According to the United Nations "Burden of Illness" report, stress-related anxiety and depression is the second-most serious cause of mortality and morbidity, after heart disease.

Yet 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, according to the latest research carried out for the Pfizer Australia Health Report.

This booklet explains what stress is, what forms it takes and how it occurs. It tells how stress may be managed and where to go for more information.

This report has been produced in conjunction with the Mental Health Foundation of Australia (MHFA), which has undertaken a lot of work in the area of managing stress, and studied its links to anxiety and depression.

Findings inside are based on research responses from 1469 people aged 16 and over in 805 households, conducted in August 2004 by independent consultants, Stollznow Research.

The Pfizer Australia Health Report is produced monthly, in partnership with health consumer organisations and medical experts, and provides information and news that you and your family need to live a healthier, happier lifestyle.

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WHAT IS STRESS?



Stress is the feeling someone experiences when they are faced with some kind of important challenge and feel that they don't have the resources to cope.

The term "stress" is used in a number of different ways and may mean different things to different people.

The best way to understand stress is not to imagine it as a thing, but to view it as a process in which something happens to you, and you react with thoughts and feelings.

This process often involves:

- A person perceiving that the situation they are in is a challenge, a threat or may be harmful to them;
- A person feeling that the outcome is important to them;
- A person feeling unsure whether they will be able to successfully meet the challenge or threat, and avoid the potential harm, often feeling overwhelmed.

A person's thoughts, feelings and reactions to this unpleasant feeling make up their "stress reaction". This can range from immediate physiological arousal and anxiety to long-term changes in the way a person thinks, feels and reacts.

Almost any event can cause a stress reaction in someone. These events are called "triggers" and we talk more about them on page 4.

Some stress can be helpful in motivating someone to marshal energy, concentration and attention so they can meet the challenge at hand.

Becoming over-aroused (or anxious) can impair all of these things and decrease performance, which, over an extended time, can result in negative physical and emotional outcomes.

Immediate physical effects might include dizziness, muscle aches, heart palpitations, tremors, headaches and skin rash. In the longer-term, cardiovascular disease, peptic ulcers, skin disorders, musculoskeletal problems and respiratory conditions may develop.



Impact of stress felt by most

Two-thirds of Australians polled feel that stress is an illness, but at the same time, just under half of Australians say stress is caused by poor coping skills.

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.

Nine out of 10 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.

"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," said 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 from 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.



The Mental Health Foundation of Australia (MHFA) raises funds to promote: mental health and wellbeing; public involvement in mental health; removal of the stigma linked to mental illness; research on mental health issues; effective prevention programs; and mental health education.

The Foundation comprises organisations, individual & corporate members throughout Australia. These include consumers and carers with experience of mental illness; members attracted by the mental health promotion and education programs, professionals attracted by the partnership programs; and others corporate supporters and sponsors. Mental Health Foundation of Australia Board of Management: Prof Graham Burrows AO, KCSJ, MD, Chairman; Mr Jack Harty, Hon. Treasurer; Mr Russell Jones, Hon. Secretary; Professor Robert Goldney; Mr Graeme Redman; Associate Professor Geoff Riley; Mr Brian Sully.

If you, or someone you know, would like information about coping with stress, contact one of the organisations on page 8. If you need emergency or after-hours information, call: Lifeline **13 11 14**



STRESS AND DEPRESSION

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

“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 Mental Health Foundation of Australia Chairman, Professor Graham Burrows.

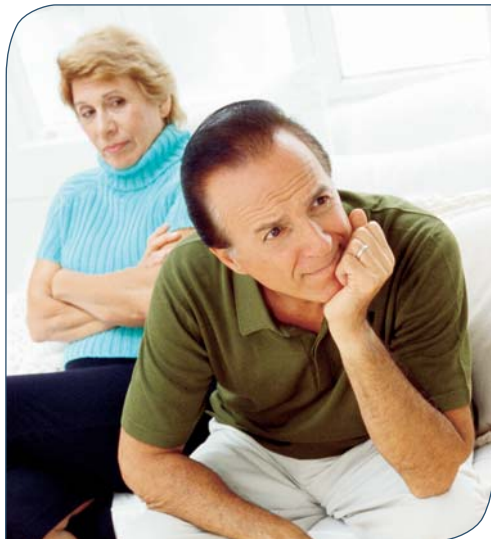
According to the Mental Health Foundation of Australia, there are different types of anxiety disorders, which include panic attacks, fear of open spaces, social phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

“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 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.

According to the Mental Health Foundation of Australia, people living in metropolitan cities are far more likely to report stress-related problems than those living in country areas, mainly due to wider access to health professionals.

Seventy percent of Australians polled believe a sea change would help them feel less stressed. An overwhelming 90 percent of people from the Australian Capital Territory have considered a sea change, followed by Queensland at 63 percent.



South Australia was identified as the state where people are most happy with their lifestyle whilst Australia's most 'stressed out' states were shown to be Queensland and Western Australia.

Three-quarters of Australians would consult a General Practitioner for stress management treatment. This is significant given nine out of 10 Australians were identified in the survey as having felt stress in their lives.

Three-quarters of those surveyed would also advise others to consult a General Practitioner about stress.

Other sources of information about stress management were identified as mental health organisations, Internet, and family and friends.

“Attitudes might not be changing as fast as we would hope, but at least people realise the potential hazards of stress,” said Professor Burrows.



Triggers may be controlled

Typically, stress comes from external or internal "triggers". The best way to categorise triggers is by severity, novelty, a person's ability to control them and their duration.

The most severe external triggers for stress are those events affecting many people that are serious in their potential for harm. These are called cataclysmic triggers.

Sociologists have pinpointed the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre as one such event where the impact was probably felt around the world.

Personal triggers are events that have the same degree of seriousness as cataclysmic triggers, but only impact on a few people.

These are no less serious for the people involved, and may include major bereavement, a motor vehicle accident, losing a job and getting married or divorced.

Background triggers are daily problems like working in a noisy environment, job dissatisfaction or a difficult commute to work each day.

These may not have the same seriousness as cataclysmic or personal triggers but, if persistent, may have a cumulative effect.

Internal triggers usually stem from unrealistic self-beliefs or self-expectations.

The more control we think we have over a situation, the less stressful we will think it is. Similarly, the less novel an external trigger is, the less confronting it will be.

Long-term problems may be the result of prolonged periods of stress.



These problems may be emotional (anxiety and tension, depression or anger); cognitive, which means connected to learning (poor concentration, forgetfulness, indecisiveness or apathy); or behavioural (smoking, increased alcohol consumption or drug usage, insomnia, weight problems, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive behaviour or nervousness).



STRATEGIES TO COPE

People responding to stress can choose a wide range of what are termed 'coping strategies' to help manage their situation.

These are best described as an individual's constantly changing thoughts and behaviours, designed to manage specific stresses they are feeling.

Some coping strategies may help motivate people to deal with social and environmental demands. These are called problem-focussed coping strategies.

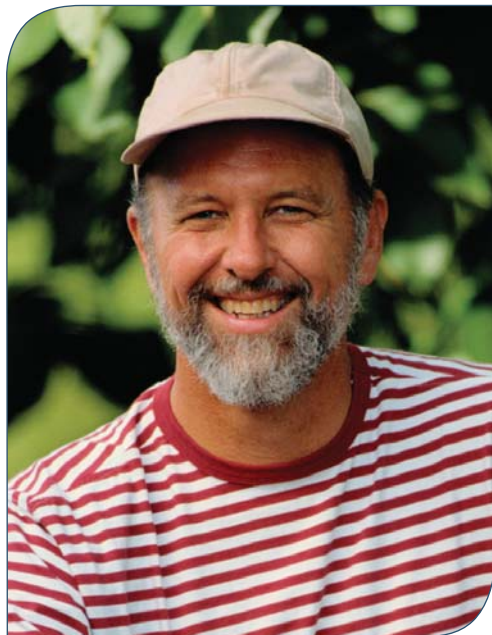
Others may assist controlling situations before they become stressful, or even after that has occurred. These are termed emotion-focussed strategies.

No two people will try and cope with stress in the same way, but most strategies can be broadly grouped:

Direct Action Coping Strategies – Where a person tries to do something about the stressor. This might include making a plan to get out of or avoid a stressful situation or confronting the person causing it;

Action Inhibition Coping Strategies – Action inhibition is a response to stress in which someone does nothing or refrains from doing anything which might make the situation worse. This may involve waiting for more information, waiting for others to help or not responding impulsively;

Information Seeking Coping Strategies – Information seeking is often an appropriate response to situations that are novel or ambiguous. Depending on the nature of any new facts obtained, a person's emotional response may be heightened or lowered and;



Intrapsychic Coping Strategies - These involve thinking about stressful situations to reduce their emotional impact. This could produce a realisation in a person that they are placing too much importance on a stressor or stress outcome, devaluing its actual or potential impact.

Some people may use a combination of strategies to deal with a particular stressor. Coping strategies can frequently help in both problem and emotion-focused efforts to reduce feelings of stress.

Of course, if stress becomes a serious problem and a person feels unable to cope, calling a phone counselling service and/or seeking the assistance of a health professional may be the most appropriate course of action.



Healthy Lifestyle Can Assist

Just as there are innumerable stress triggers and a host of coping strategies to deal with them, so too are there many ways for people to manage their general stress levels.

We tend to feel less prone to becoming stressed (and less stressed if triggers do occur) when we're feeling good about the world and ourselves.

Also important is maintaining a healthy diet and regular exercise. These may mean different things to different people, but a balanced diet comprising items from the four main food groups (cereals and grains, fruit and vegetables, dairy products and meats) may help, as well as avoiding fatty foods and those high in carbohydrates.

Limiting the intake of stimulants (like coffee) and indulging in three weekly 20-minute sessions of exercise, sufficient to raise a light sweat, are generally recommended.

Did you know that 28 percent of Australians recently surveyed for the national tourism body, Tourism Australia, said they had no plans to take a holiday in the next three months?

Taking even a short break from everyday routine plays an important part in managing stress.

Consciously avoiding negativity in what we say to ourselves is another strategy. Generalisations that over-emphasize negative feelings should not be applied to life experiences in general.

Re-evaluating the meaning of a trigger can go a long way to helping a person cope with events. This could be done by



listing possible outcomes, and thinking through solutions.

Experts say looking on a present problem as a repeat of the past is an inappropriate reaction to stress. It's preferable to examine past coping strategies, and ask if they could be applied now.

It may sound simplistic but looking forward with confidence is better than looking back with regret.



USEFUL LINKS

Mental Health Foundation of Australia: www.mhfa.org.au email: mentalh@mira.net
270 Church Street, RICHMOND VIC 3121. Ph: (03) 9427 0407 Fax: (03) 9427 1294

Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Vic): www.mentalhealthvic.org.au email: mhfvic@pacific.net.au
270 Church Street, RICHMOND VIC 3121. Ph: (03) 9427 0406 Fax: (03) 9427 1294

Mental Health Foundation ACT Inc: www.mhf.org.au email: info@mhf.org.au
PO Box 78, WODEN ACT 2606. Ph: (02) 6282 6658 Fax: (02) 6282 6674

West Australian Association for Mental Health: www.waamh.org.au email: waamh@waamh.org.au
2 Delhi Street, WEST PERTH WA 6005. Ph: (08) 9420 7277 Fax: (08) 9420 7280

Mental Health Association (Qld) Inc: www.mentalhealth.org.au email: susan@mentalhealth.org.au
Fleming House, PO Box 475, SUMNER PARK QLD 4074. Ph: (07) 3271 5544

Tasmanian Association for Mental Health: www.tamh.com.au email: tamh@iprimus.com.au
97 Campbell Street, HOBART TAS 7000. Ph: (03) 6236 9529 Fax: (03) 6236 9301

Mental Health Association of NSW: www.mentalhealth.asn email: koff@mentalhealth.asn.au
60-62 Victoria Road, GLADESVILLE NSW 2111. Ph: (02) 9816 1611 Fax: (02) 9816 4056

Top End Association for Mental Health: www.teamhealth.asn.au email: teamhealth@teamhealth.asn.au
Suite 2, 7 Bishop Street, STUART PARK NT 0820. Ph: (08) 8981 4128 Fax: (08) 8981 4933

Mental Health Association: www.mhaca.com.au
11 Stewart Terrace, ALICE SPRINGS NT 0871. Ph: (08) 8952 3311

Embrace the Future - Young Australian's Mental Health & Wellbeing: www.embracethefuture.org.au
270 Church Street, RICHMOND VIC 3121. Ph: (03) 9427 0407 email: yamhw@pacific.net.au

Partnerships in Health Promotion (PIHP): email: pihp@pacific.net.au
270 Church Street, Richmond VIC 3121. Ph: (03) 9427 0421

Mental Health Legal Centre: www.communitylaw.org.au/mentalhealth

Carers choice: www.infoxchange.net.au/cc/about.html

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