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Stress and anxiety: what are they and how might they affect you?

TOGETHERALL IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE RESCUE BENEVOLENT FUND

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress seems to be part and parcel of modern life. There are financial worries, social pressures, living up to the expectations of others (and ourselves), relationship difficulties — the list is endless. They all make demands on our mental and physical resources — and sometimes that's fine. It's when these demands feel more than we can cope with that we become stressed.

A degree of stress is present amongst all the anxiety disorders. Stress is extremely prevalent; over 70% of people in various studies across multiple continents state that they have regularly experienced mental distress and overwhelm that may lead to poor coping (APA 2017, YouGov UK 2018, NZ Health Monitor 2018).

FIGHT OR FLIGHT? PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

The physical and mental changes we experience when we're under stress evolved as a way of dealing with life-threatening situations: like coming face to face with a wild animal. Within seconds, our ancestors had to decide whether to stay and fight it — or run away — and their bodies produced the hormones to prepare it for either. Our bodies still go into 'fight or flight' mode when we're faced with a threat or challenge.

Within seconds of sensing a threatening situation, your body releases adrenaline and noradrenaline to increase your blood pressure and heart rate to get oxygen and fuel-filled blood to the brain, muscles, heart and lungs. Noradrenalin sharpens your

senses so you're more alert, causing tensing of the facial muscles, clenching of the teeth and your hair to stand more on end.

Cortisol converts fat stores into energy to power the muscles. But too much cortisol can weaken your immune system — which is why people suffering from chronic stress get a lot of colds and infections.

WHAT YOU CAN DO IN TIMES OF EXTREME STRESS

The first thing is to recognise the warning signs of stress and the second is to accept that you need to do something about it. However much your life feels like it's spiralling out of control, there is plenty you can do to reduce your stress levels. You can:

- Think about what's causing the stress — and how you respond to it

- Take steps to prevent or reduce stress
- Understand how your mindset affects how you deal with potentially stressful situations or people
- Develop healthy ways to deal with stress.

RECOGNISING ANXIETY

If anxiety is messing up your life, you are not alone. The Office for National Statistics estimates that nearly 5% of us have what's known as generalised anxiety disorder at any one time — and there are lots of other common anxiety-related disorders. The good news is: there is plenty you can do to

manage your anxiety and get your life back on track.

Anxiety comes in different forms, though the roots are the same. As many as 70% of people with an anxiety disorder have more than one type because suffering from one makes us more prone to others. Anxiety problems can also make us more susceptible to other conditions such as depression.

Generalised anxiety: you feel anxious most of the time without really knowing why. This can be tough because your feelings are not linked to a specific event, which means it's hard to see an end to it.

Phobia: you have an intense and persistent fear of something that poses no real danger. The most common phobias involve something specific, such as cats or heights. Most of us with specific phobias manage by avoiding situations that set them off. But if the fear gets very intense, or is triggered by something that's hard to avoid, it becomes more of a problem.

Panic attack: a sudden surge of inexplicable anxiety and fear, which one in three of us will experience at some time in our lives.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): your life is taken over by ritualistic tasks or compulsions, such as washing or checking, to seek relief from obsession-related anxiety. Common obsessions triggering this reaction may include fear of dirt and germs or fear of acting out upsetting and irrational thoughts such as harming people you love.

The biggest problem with anxiety is our response to it. It's very tempting to avoid nerve-wracking situations because we think we can't cope. We might call in sick, put off that dreaded meeting with our boss, stay away from parties or avoid going out altogether because we find it too daunting. Or we might devise safety strategies, such as sticking close to friends at social events or leaving when it starts to feel too much. But these are short-term fixes that only feed our anxiety. We convince ourselves they are our only way of avoiding disaster, and this makes it even harder to face similar situations in the future.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Think about what's causing the anxiety — and how you respond to it
- Understand how your mindset affects how you deal with anxiety-provoking situations or people
- Develop healthy ways to deal with anxiety.

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Togetherall offers a range of activities that allow you to work through what's troubling you. Share your thoughts and join a Talkabout with fellow members to share and discuss what's on your mind, gain support and advice. You can do this with the whole community or form your own groups or one-to-one chats. Alternatively, make a 'brick' to express yourself and your feelings creatively through drawing or by uploading your own images.

In addition to Togetherall's online community, you will have access to a wealth of useful resources. Join our self-guided support courses covering topics such as anxiety, sleep and depression to assertiveness training and problem solving. Take self-assessments to help you understand more about yourself.

Find a library of information within resources which can help you understand more about yourself, how you are feeling, set goals and track your progress.

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