

Managing stress

Some ideas from the Counselling Service

This leaflet has some ideas about how to identify when you are under too much stress and some suggestions for how to improve your situation. Stress can have positive aspects – it motivates us and helps us to realise our priorities and manage our lives. But being under too much stress, however we define it, can be exhausting and bad for our mental and physical health.

What do we mean by stress?

“Stress” is more than feeling overworked or under pressure. Stress is a result of a complex reaction between external factors – things happening in the outside world – and our own internal world – how we look at things. Sometimes crises and our reaction to them can make us feel upset and ill. There are some personal crises or life events that would affect anybody adversely, but it is still true that the way we react can make things better or worse.

Common signs of stress

Stress can affect us in three main ways – physically, emotionally and the way we behave

- physical effects include nausea, palpitations, fast respiration, sweating, stomach ache, headache, tense muscles, sleeplessness
- emotional effects include feelings of depression and hopelessness, fear, anxiety and panic, tearfulness, loneliness and isolation
- effects on behaviour include irritability and bad temper, being unreasonable, repetitive patterns of thinking and worrying, hyperactivity, accident proneness, withdrawing/ isolating yourself, excessive drinking smoking or eating.

Things you can do which may help

It is very difficult when things are going badly either at home or work, to imagine that there is anything positive you can do about them. The following ideas may help you get a started in breaking the pattern of feeling overwhelmed, and prevent a difficult situation becoming worse.

1. The way you think can make a difference

Being aware of the way you think under stress can help you be more realistic about stressful events, and you may be able to stop your thoughts getting out of hand.

Some common, but unhelpful, reactions to stress

- thinking you have no choice, being passive
- wanting instant solutions!
- blaming yourself or others
- being unrealistic about what you or others can achieve (wanting everything perfect)
- panicking, to the extent you cannot think at all.

When you feel under stress, try to stop and consider:

- you may find you have more choice than you think about what you take on
- be aware of the extent of negative thoughts about yourself or others. Are they realistic?
- think about your perception of the situation – is it accurate? Try not to “catastrophise”
- set yourself realistic priorities and goals
- recognise you can’t please everyone or avoid all conflict!
- try not to avoid difficult decisions or “block out” your worries. It doesn’t help in the long run
- a change of activity can help to break patterns of circular thoughts.

2. Understanding

Although it is not always easy when you are under pressure, it often helps to take a step back and reflect on aspects of the situation.

For example, there are pressures, which are related to the nature and volume of work or the balance of work with the rest of your life – you may find others feel the same way.

The ability to cope can vary from one person to another. It may be that the way you respond to pressure can make matters more difficult.

Understanding where the pressures come from can help you to access appropriate help and support

3. Suggestions for action

- where stress seems to come from “external” circumstances, talking situations through with friends or in a work situation with colleagues informally can often be the first stage in making constructive changes
- there may be practical things you could do to reduce the stress you are facing. This can vary from needing to prioritise your tasks, or managing your time at work differently, to looking at your work/life balance or taking exercise or using relaxation techniques
- don't forget that the Counselling Service offers confidential consultations – individual or group – for anyone who wants an opportunity to reflect on work pressures or difficulties
- check out the workshops available at Middlesex – some of them run by the Counselling Service – on how to cope with different sorts of stress, and book yourself a place, learn to know your own responses and assess when anxiety is mounting (see section above on “Common signs of stress”)
- be aware of what you find most helpful – some people need time to themselves when pressures mount while others find it useful to talk, to friends, colleagues or family at the risk of stating the obvious, it helps to eat well, and get enough sleep. See also our leaflet on “Relaxation”.

SilverCloud – Online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

SilverCloud is available to all registered students and staff, a free online self-help service to help anyone experiencing a variety of emotional challenges.

SilverCloud offers secure, immediate access to online CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) programmes tailored to your

specific needs to support you in setting yourself goals, problem solving and building up your life skills. These programmes have demonstrated high improvement rates for depression and anxiety.

There are currently four programmes available to students and staff:

- Anxious thoughts and feelings
- Depression and low mood
- Stress
- Body image

Sign up to SilverCloud today at:

mdxwellbeing.silvercloudhealth.com/signup

If stress at work or in the rest of your life is making you feel acutely anxious or depressed and hopeless, it is time to seek specialist help.

The counsellors at Middlesex will be happy to see you and, if necessary, refer you to sources of help outside the University. You could also see your GP.

How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:
<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling service or you can contact us at:
cmh@mdx.ac.uk

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