

Stress Talk

Stress is universal and part and parcel of our life.

Stress is a fact of life, but you do not have to make it a way of life.

Stress can happen to anyone, and no one is immune from it.

A little stress is OK and can be a positive experience, as it may spur us, perk us up or keep us going (e.g. the stress before a deadline will ensure that you complete your assignment on time).

However, stress can be damaging and detrimental if it is prolonged and overwhelming.

Negative stress is the state of mental or emotional strain or tension, resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances, beyond the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise.

The Reasons for Stress

1. Relationship issues such as friends, BGR, family and divorce.
2. Serious illnesses such as diagnosis of cancer, a devastating heart attack or a debilitating stroke.
3. Death of a loved one or a pet.
4. Workplace stress such as an overwhelming workload; demanding and unappreciative bosses; or conflicts with colleagues. Often, it is not the work but the work environment that causes stress. People generally do not fear work, even hard work, if they operate in a conducive and supportive environment.
5. Our desire for perfection may push us to unhealthy desires and mindsets. Some have an acute black-and-white ethos whereby a situation, condition or behaviour is either white or black. For example, if an A is not achieved in an assignment, it means that they have failed. They forget that there are shades of grey in-between. You cannot be perfect in this imperfect world. On earth, you can only do your utmost best and strive for excellence, not perfection.

Do not confuse a single failure with total failure. Success is not final; failure is not fatal (Winston Churchill). Failure is not the opposite of success; it is part of success.

6. Our desire for recognition, for more accolades, medals, titles, degrees and certificates. But one day, we will all receive our biggest certificate...the death certificate!

7. Financial stress e.g. loss in shares, cryptocurrency, soccer bets.

Living beyond your means in the pursuit of wealth and materials. We accumulate more and more things to put in bigger and bigger homes.

We make unrealistic comparisons with our colleagues and friends and yearn for a bigger car, the latest i-phone. We suffer from FOMO syndrome - Fear Of Missing Out.

Don't compare your life with others. You have no idea what they are going through.

Louis C.K. an American comedian once said: "The only time you should look in your neighbour's bowl is to make sure that they have enough. You don't look in your neighbour's bowl to see if you have as much as them.

Signs and symptoms of Stress

Anxiety and tension

Insomnia – Generally if you are unable to fall asleep, it is due to anxiety; if you are able to sleep but wake up in the early morning hours like 3 – 4 am, it may be an indication of depression.

Lack of focus and concentration

Feeling tired (TATT – Tired All The Time)

Agitation, irritability and anger – Anger is just one letter short of danger,

Stress, if left unchecked, can lead to depression – low mood, loss of interest and crying uncontrollably. It is OK to cry. Crying is not a shame. It is a release of pent-up emotions and can be therapeutic.

In the worst-case scenario, depression can lead to suicide ideation.

Medical conditions that are associated with stress

Examples include:

- Mouth and throat ulcers
- Seborrheic dermatitis (red, scaly dandruff rashes on the face)
- "Lump in the throat" sensation due to spasm and tension of the throat muscles

- Gastric pain
 - Shingles (Herpes Zoster) occurring at an earlier age than usual
 - Tension headache and Migraine headache
 - Hyperventilation – abnormally fast breathing, feeling giddy and light-headed with tingling sensation in your fingers.
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Stress can be a trigger for mental disorder.

You are at risk if you have a history or family history of mental illness.

One such condition is Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

A patient suffering from OCD may fear contamination and “germs everywhere”. This can be accentuated during Covid-19. The patient enacts these intrusive thoughts through rituals like repeated washing of “dirty” hands and until the skin becomes red and inflamed.

OCD can become so pervasive that it affects the sufferer’s quality of life, and the individual is unable to function properly at work and in the home.

Seven Tips on combating stress:

1. Do not worry

Worry cannot change anything. Do not agonise over your past and fret over your future.

The past is already over and the future has yet to unfold.

Yesterday is history; tomorrow is mystery; today is present – a gift!

Panic is a higher level of worry.

Panic will turn your worry into suffering.

When you panic, you are not thinking logically. You are thinking emotionally.

When you panic, you tend to display irrational, selfish and *kiasu* behavior such as hoarding of essential groceries during the circuit breaker.

2. Reframe your thoughts

You cannot change the situation, but you can change your mindset.

You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control what happens in you.

Think positively. Be grateful for what you have. Focus on what you have, not on what you left.

If you think your situation is bad, there are others that are less fortunate.

The man who has no shoes has been known to complain until he comes across the man who has no feet! Be thankful for the taxes you pay. It means you have a job.

Be thankful for the pile of laundry to wash. It means you have clothes to wear.

A little bird in the sky. You look up and it shits in your eye. You don't mind and you don't cry. You just thank God that cows don't fly.

3. Live Simply and Be Contented

Life is simple but we have made it complicated.

You don't need branded goods, designer clothes and the fancy trappings of a lavish lifestyle to be happy in life.

The happiest people do not have everything in life. They just make the most of everything that comes along their way.

Jim Carrey, the famous American actor once said: "I hope everybody will get rich and famous...then they will know that it is not the answer."

We lose our health trying to gain our wealth. We lose our wealth trying to gain our health.

4. Good time management

Every one of us has 24 hours a day, no more no less. It is up to us to make full and productive use of our time wisely and properly.

Prioritise your time. Do what is more important. Let go of the unimportant things.

Once you have decided to do the important stuff, go ahead, and finish them.

Do not procrastinate. Procrastination is the thief of time.

Learn to say NO graciously and explain why you said NO.

5. Avoid maladaptive behaviors to cope with your stress

Avoid alcohol. One drink is all right, two are too many and three will not be enough.

Avoid snacking. Desserts is Stressed spelt backwards.

Do not smoke. One stick is one pack away!

6. YOLO! Relax and engage in humor

Engage in healthy pursuits which can include:

- Reading
- Upgrading your skills and knowledge e.g. through online courses
- Listen to music or play a musical instrument
- Regular physical exercise
- Take a walk in the park to connect with nature and disconnect with technology.
- Do a meaningful act of kindness like baking cakes for healthcare staff to motivate them and show that you appreciate their hard work during Covid-19

Laugh and have a sense of humor.

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.

Humor is Vitamin H, a tonic for the mind and body.

A little insanity occasionally can keep you sane.

7. Family and Friend Support

No one can avoid life struggles, but we can avoid struggling alone.

Stay connected with family and friends.

Blood is thicker than water. Treasure your family members.

When there is joy and happiness in your house, it becomes a home.

Spend time cultivating friendships and investing in your friends and be a good friend yourself.

A good friend should be understanding, empathetic and non-judgmental.

A friend who sticks with you in pressure is far better than a friend who stays with you in pleasure.

If you are feeling stressful:

- Share with a friend. A good friend will walk with you and not walk away from you.
- Talk to your boss/supervisor. It is OK to tell your boss/supervisor that you are not feeling OK.
- Talk to a professional like a counsellor or a doctor. They can provide you with good coping strategies and what you shared is strictly confidential. They can also spot red flags such as a person talking about ending his life or being overly emotional.

You can utilise EAP (Employee Assistance Program) where staff who require psychological help can be referred to an external counsellor. The current service provider is Intellect. The new hotline is: 800-852-6317.

There are also Wellbeing Specialists from Health and Wellbeing unit, Office of President who conduct counselling sessions at UHC (currently Wed morning and Thursday afternoon).

- If you are feeling depressed, you may need to see a psychiatrist for some medication.
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If you are a boss or supervisor:

- Express encouraging words of affirmation such as ‘thank you’, ‘you’re awesome’, etc.
 - Hand out tokens of appreciation such as snacks or trinkets from your overseas trip.
 - A friendly gesture like a thumbs-up or a handshake for a good job done.
 - Empower your staff, entrust them with more work and do not micromanage excessively.
 - Schedule time to check-in with your staff regularly. Provide them with an open channel of communication where they can approach you freely to discuss any issues they are facing.
 - Be a visible boss. Walk the ground and walk-the-talk.
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All of us will experience trials and tribulations, from adversities to adversaries.

No one is immune from them.

But grit, determination and resilience are forged in the crucible of titanic stress.

“Today is hard, tomorrow will be worse but the day after tomorrow will be sunshine” (Jack Ma).

Every will be OK in the end. If it is not OK, it is not the end.

There is HOPE. Hope is being able to see the light despite all the darkness.

There is rainbow after the thunderstorm.

