

Stress

Stress is an area in our life that we all need to keep under control. If stress is allowed to increase, unchecked, the impact on one's physical and mental health can be severe.

Stress is a normal response to lifestyle and work, and the general challenge of living.

Stress is not always negative. Without the action of positive stress, many people would not attempt to reach their full potential. There is an optimal level of stress at which a person is likely to be most productive.

However, when pressure is ongoing and when the feeling that you are not in control stays with you over a long period of time, you're probably suffering the negative effects of stress. When this happens you may feel overworked but will actually be contributing less and less. Too much stress not only affects the quality of your day-to-day life, but can also be a health hazard.

There are a number of areas in our lives where we can take action to control our levels of stress.

Symptoms of stress

Some typical symptoms of stress include: insomnia; headache; neck, shoulder and back pain; heart palpitations; fatigue; irritability; panic attacks; loss of concentration; and low self-esteem. There is often a change in appetite and perhaps an increase in the use of drugs, alcohol or cigarette smoking.

Other symptoms of stress may include diarrhoea, abdominal cramps, urinary infrequency and trembling.

To date, surprisingly little long-term research has been done on the effects of stress. However, stress has been linked to ulcers, infertility, heart disease, mental health and cancer.

Stress and hepatitis C

Living with a chronic illness can be stressful. A chronic illness like hepatitis C can add physical and emotional demands to your life. You may have to adjust to the physical demands of the illness and cope with negative feelings about your hepatitis C.

Feeling informed and in control may help you manage any stress you may feel about living with hepatitis C. Finding out information about hepatitis C and establishing a trusting relationship with your health care team can help you to feel informed and in control. Emotional support from others (family, friends, or others dealing with the same issues) can help you explore your feelings and give meaning to what is happening in your life.

Managing stress and maintaining emotional balance

There are a range of different techniques for managing stress. Different people find different techniques work best for them. Below are some common techniques for managing stress in your life.

Exercise: Physical exercise can often help to release tension and improves your overall level of health. Moderate and regular exercise is advised. For people living with a chronic illness like hepatitis C, it may be helpful to discuss exercise with your doctor before embarking on a new exercise regime. For information on ways you can introduce moderate exercise to your day-to-day life download the **Hepatitis C: be active factsheet** on this site.

Choose your attitude: Take some control over the thoughts that go through your mind. Talk yourself out of repeating negative or unhelpful self thoughts. See section below for more hints about developing a healthy attitude.

Relax: Relaxation means letting go of tension. For you this may mean spending time in the garden, listening to music, reading a book or pursuing a hobby.

Talk about how you feel: We all live and interact with other people and often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking and sharing our feelings with other people. This can be as simple as talking with a neighbour or a friend. Many people also choose to see a trained counsellor, social worker or therapist to discuss how they are feeling and to get extra support.

Massage: Whether done by a trained professional or just a friend, a massage is a simple and inexpensive way of releasing tension from our bodies.

Meditation: Meditation is a technique that offers a structured way to reduce tension and stress. Although it may not provide an immediate release of stress, over time a meditation program will prepare you to handle physical and mental problems and recharge your system. Structured exercise and concentration programs such as Tai Chi and yoga are also very effective in reducing stress.

Diet and nutrition: When we experience stress and nervous tension our bodies use up large amounts of nutrients (vitamins and minerals). This can cause dietary deficiencies which in turn leave us tired, run down, irritable and less able to cope with stress. Maintaining a balanced diet is important to maintaining good health. For further information on diet and nutrition download the **Hepatitis C: eating well factsheet** on this site.

Change stressful circumstances: Often it isn't possible to change the circumstances of your life that result in stress. However, it is sometimes possible to manage circumstances in ways that can make them less stressful for you or to avoid some situations altogether. Think about alternative ways family, work or daily routines could be managed so they produce less stress for you. Try developing an action plan of small changes you could make to family, work or daily routines that might make them less stressful. Talk to those involved in stressful family or work-related situations about how these situations could be managed to reduce pressure.

Developing a healthy attitude

Developing and maintaining a positive outlook on life, though often easier said than done, can help you deal with negative thoughts, manage stress and enhance your enjoyment of life.

Having a healthy attitude doesn't mean you must always feel happy or only see the good aspects of life. Sometimes it is important to allow ourselves to feel sad, disappointed or 'down.' Having a healthy attitude means being honest and realistic about your life and trying to maintain an optimistic outlook most of the time.

Hints for developing a healthy attitude

Be honest and realistic. Do not build your attitude on thinking things are worse than they are or better than they are:

- live in the present. Acknowledge the past and potential futures but try not to be overly focused on them;
- try to make positive thinking a habit. Practise turning negative thoughts into positive messages. Positive thinking is a learned skill;
- learn what you can control and what you cannot. There are things you cannot control, such as the fact that you have hepatitis C. However, there are things you can control, such as your attitude and what you say to yourself about having hepatitis C; and
- remember to see the humorous side of life and to laugh.

Things to remember about stress:

- be aware of physical and mental stress and recognise the signs. Stress is a problem if it is excessive or if you are not handling it properly;

- you are not the only one who experiences the problems that lead to stress. These problems are a normal part of everyday life;
- identify situations that are stressful for you. Plan ways to deal with these situations or try to limit them in your life;
- take time out to do something you enjoy and find relaxing;
- talk to others about how you are feeling;
- practise relaxation techniques; and
- try to maintain a healthy attitude and practise positive thinking.

For more information

For further information on hepatitis C please contact the national infoline 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222). The infoline diverts to information and support lines at your local state or territory hepatitis council.

Some of the information on hepatitis C above has been abridged from various resources, these resources include:

Stress and hepatitis C fact sheet (Hepatitis C Council of NSW)—Download PDF from www.hepatitisc.org.au/quickref/factsheet.html

A guide to healthy living fact sheet (HCV Advocate)—Download PDF from www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/healthy_Living.pdf