

Is your stress taking over? Here's how to find out, and fix it.



Thousands of Irish people are suffering from elevated and dangerous levels of stress as a result of the economic crisis are in danger of developing anxiety or depression. The dangers of stress are not widely enough understood – people need to monitor the changes stress is wreaking on their lives and behaviours, and become proactive about addressing the issue through stress management, and/or seeking assistance, if they feel it has become unmanageable.

For every one of us who have lost a job, or fear losing a job, or who struggle with mortgages, debt, or simply holding our families and lives together, stress is an

every day occurrence. In a recession as deep as this one, the stress of battling through on a daily basis – dreading the postman and his bills, praying that the children don't come home needing money for school tours or books – can become unbearable.

The World Health Organisation says that one in every four of us will suffer from an actual mental illness at some point in our lives – but that two thirds of us will never seek the help we need. Often, people become stressed to the point where it is actually debilitating, but don't realise what is happening to them. They write it off as an inevitable consequence of the changes this downturn is bringing them, or say that they are just a 'worrier' or that it's 'just how they are', or they might put it down to a physical illness that has them feeling 'run down'.

A survey recently for the HSF health plan in Ireland found that more than 50% of us feel more stressed than we did a year ago. 58% of those said that they couldn't afford help to deal with it. Four in ten of us know somebody who has had to take time out from work in the last 12 months because of stress. Stress is real, it exists, it has negative effects, and too often, we ignore it.

Do you wonder if your stress has become a disorder? Ask yourself the following questions:

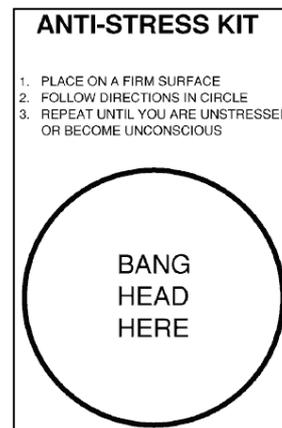
- Are you tired most of the time?
- Do you get emotionally upset more often?
- Do you often have a sick feeling in your stomach?
- Do you often feel dizzy when contemplating how you're going to manage your situation?
- Do you get ill more than you used to, with headaches, or cold sores, for example?
- Are you constantly worrying?
- Are you prone to self criticism?
- Do you often feel helpless and hopeless and unable to cope?
- Do you feel kind of afraid a lot of the time?

If the answer to most of those was yes, it might be time to take the situation seriously and take steps to nip it in the bud and even reverse it – before it takes over. Take a trip to your GP and have a chat about it if you feel you need professional help. It's not 'just you'. You're almost certainly suffering the effects of stress, but it's totally fixable – and you don't need to feel ashamed – there are a lot of people in the same boat. Let's take a look at what the effects are, and how you can combat them...

Stress Management – things to do... (um, no, don't bang your head).

So – earlier in the workbook we examined Fight or Flight, and we know this causes a lot of physical damage - the fatigue, illness, headaches, all of it..

Recap: when we perceive a situation as a danger or hazard to us, our bodies immediately go into Fight or Flight, which was designed during evolution to help humans survive. It's an immediate pumping up of the body to handle a physical emergency (developed because a sabre toothed tiger about to tear you apart was an occupational hazard of Neanderthal man's hunting and gathering – you'd need to either fight hard or run fast to survive, and Fight or Flight primed the body for just that).



Fight or Flight is a primal process that we're stuck with for good or ill – and the anxious person will view many things as a 'tiger' inappropriately.. but the body doesn't distinguish between a physical or psychological threat, it will, within nanoseconds, pump you up by releasing the stress hormones Adrenaline and Cortisol, which speed up the bloods circulation (thumping heart), flood the lungs with oxygen (restricted breathing/hyperventilating) and temporarily shut down systems not needed to fight or run (namely your digestive system and your immune system). That's not good, right? And if we're constantly perceiving events as if they are an invisible tiger – we're going to cause massive physical and mental wear and tear as our bodies stay in a simmering process of Fight or Flight. The cortisol is the most dangerous hormone – shutting down the systems gives you the sick feeling in your stomach, maybe irritable bowel syndrome, maybe diarrhoea. and compromising the immune system makes you vulnerable to colds etc – it's also blamed for strokes, heart attacks, depositing fat around the middle, and even premature aging (it breaks down muscle). And the whole thing will have you in a *permanent* state of fatigue! These things you're feeling are very real.

HELP COMBAT THE SIMMERING OF FLIGHT OR FLIGHT WITH THE FOLLOWING CHANGES:

Exercise gives an outlet for the extreme physical priming of fight or flight –Regular exercise is **CRUCIAL** for body balance. It will stop the production of the stress hormones and will elevate your serotonin/dopamine levels for the 'feel good' high people talk about. It will also reactivate your immune system and your digestive system, returning your body to 'homeostasis' (balance). Studies indicate that exercise is a potent anti-depressant / anti-anxiety, and is a great sleep aid. The major results only last for a few hours though, which is why regular (maybe 5 times a week) exercise is the way to go. It doesn't have to be a gym – brisk walking is fine. Make it a habit and a routine, get an iPod and enjoy the journey.

Examining exercise in our lives task:

On a separate piece of paper, chart two columns, title one 'What exercise do I do?', title the other 'What exercise could I realistically work into my daily routine?' (walking briskly is a great place to start!!)

Diet/nutrition! it is important that you make efforts to put in place a good nutritious diet – yes, that means fruit and vegetables – you need your basic vitamins. Oily fish is a great idea (for the Omega 3). Less white carbs and sugars, more protein, more whole-wheat... Go easy on the coffee and fizzy drinks. Are you drinking a lot? Smoking a lot? Depressants!! Come on, you know what you need to do there.

Examining our nutritional diet task:

On a separate piece of paper, chart two columns, title one 'What convenient familiar foods do I routinely have that are unhealthy?', title the other 'What could I realistically replace some of these with?' (Cutting down on the 'whites', the potatoes, breads and pastas, and replacing them with wholewheat is a good start! More meat and veg and less carbs!)

Grooming and hygiene and routine – one of the first things to go when we're down and feeling kind of hopeless is taking care of ourselves. We think 'what's the point?'. We're broke so we can't all buy gorgeous toiletries and have perfect hair and lovely perfumes or aftershave. And we're not going anywhere fancy so WHAT'S THE POINT? There's every point! And "there's no point in going out and 'doing things' really, so why not just watch daytime TV in your trackies or pyjamas?" - BECAUSE IT WILL MAKE YOU FEEL WORSE PSYCHOLOGICALLY, THAT'S WHY NOT!

Take a moment – think how you feel when you haven't bothered to take care of yourself, and you don't do anything with your day. Close your eyes – think.... You feel lousy, right? It confirms your low self worth, right?. Now – think how you feel when you've put effort in – think.... You feel better, right? It's a very simple truth. You must value yourself, because you're worth it. You really are valuable – so start treating yourself well. Care about your appearance, for you as well as everybody around you. Set yourself a routine – whether you're in the mood or not... shower, shave, do your hair, brush your teeth, wear clean clothes, get out of the house for a bit. EVERY SINGLE DAY. Do it.

Examining our 'grooming and getting out and doing things' routine task

On a separate piece of paper, chart two columns, title one 'What way do I feel when I just don't bother showering and dressing and doing anything with my day?', title the other 'What way do I feel when I get up and ready and out instead?'

Relaxation – when we truly relax, we release relaxation hormones that neutralise the stress hormones, and return us to homeostasis (body balance). So you should make regular efforts to indulge in pursuits that you know relax you – a candlelit bath, a massage, yoga, a movie, meditation... *whatever* relaxes you. You should also learn breathing exercises, as the body overloads on oxygen when it is fearful which causes physical distress – in fact the adrenaline stimulus and oxygen overload causes our scatty 'dizziness' and disconnected feeling.

Examining how we relax task.

List the things you can do that will kickstart your relaxation hormones

Socialising: Studies show that those who have a good network of family and friends weather life's storms more easily – anxiety and depression tends to cause avoidance/isolating behaviour, make efforts to avoid this. If you do not have a large social network, join a club! This need not necessarily cost big bucks, or any bucks at all – have a look at www.meetup.com and check out what's happening in your city. (No it's not a dating site! It's a global social networking site with meetup groups for all sorts of things – coffee meetups, bookclubs, hiking, walking, salsa, snooker, women's groups etc. Though hey, nothing wrong with dating sites either!).

Examining new social networks task

List the things you can start doing that will increase interaction with other people. What local resources might there be available to you that you've never thought of using?

The not so obvious – and the most important - **CBT of course!!!** – change your thinking, change your life! You can strengthen your 'coping skills' by recognising how stress causes us to develop unhealthy automatic negative thinking that is the cause of much of our own extreme emotional 'upsetness'. CBT will help you to adjust the way you interpret and process events so that not everything is a 'tiger' that will immediately launch you into flight or flight.

