



Stress and Relaxation

What is stress?

Stress is the reaction of the body to a demand – such as a threat, a challenge or any kind of change. The response is automatic and immediate. Stress can be helpful, in that it helps us to deal with a situation better, but stress can also cause problems.

As a result of stress, the body's level of adrenaline (a stimulant hormone) increases. This adrenaline helps the body deal with a difficult situation, because it provides the strength and energy to either fight or run away from danger (the 'fight-or-flight' response).

The changes that increased adrenaline cause include:

- ✦ increase in heart rate and blood pressure (to get more blood to the muscles, brain and heart);
- ✦ faster breathing (to take in more oxygen);
- ✦ tensing of muscles (to prepare for action);
- ✦ increased mental alertness and sensitivity of sense organs (to assess the situation and act quickly);
- ✦ increased blood flow to the brain, heart and muscles (the organs that are most important in dealing with danger);
- ✦ less blood to the skin, digestive tract, kidneys and liver (where it is least needed in times of crisis);
- ✦ increase in blood sugar, fats and cholesterol (for extra energy) and a rise in platelets and blood clotting factors (to prevent haemorrhage in case of injury).



What are the common symptoms of stress?

Symptoms can be physical, mental, emotional or behavioural:

- ✦ *Physical:* tiredness, headache, difficulty sleeping, muscle aches, chest pains, stomach cramps, nausea, trembling, feeling cold, flushing or sweating, and frequent colds.
- ✦ *Mental:* difficulty concentrating, poor memory, confusion, and loss of sense of humour.
- ✦ *Emotional:* anxiety, nervousness, depression, anger, frustration, worry, fear, irritability, impatience, or short temper.
- ✦ *Behavioural:* pacing, fidgeting, increased eating, smoking, drinking, crying, or yelling.

Problems of stress

Stress has been linked to all the leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide. Strong evidence shows that people who are stressed (frequently or for long periods) are more likely to develop all these problems.

In the Pacific we already have high rates of all the lifestyle diseases; the addition of another risk factor, such as stress, can only make things worse. Many places also seem to be experiencing high rates of suicide – again another indicator of stress overload.

What causes stress?

There are many possible causes, and they affect us individually – one situation may make one person stressed but have no effect on someone else. Some common causes are:

- ✦ Environment: noise, bright lights, heat, overcrowded or confined spaces;
- ✦ Other people's attitude or behaviour to you;
- ✦ Work: too much pressure may cause a worker to become a 'workaholic';
- ✦ Major life events: death of a relative, loss of a job, promotion, a new baby;
- ✦ Daily life problems, e.g. breaking a cup;
- ✦ Lifestyle: too much caffeine, not enough sleep, too many things to do;
- ✦ Self-criticism, taking things too personally.

Much of stress is related to our reaction to an issue or problem and our ability to cope with problems and issues.

How can we reduce stress?

Some ideas:

- ✦ Use less caffeine (coffee, tea, colas, chocolate);
- ✦ Eat a well-balanced diet;
- ✦ Practise regular exercise or physical activity;

- ✦ Have enough sleep;
- ✦ Take time to relax;
- ✦ Make an effort to manage your time better;
- ✦ Look at things more positively;
- ✦ Keep a sense of humour;
- ✦ Talk to someone who has time to listen.

Traditionally in the Pacific, communities were very close-knit, with strong community leaders and, more recently, the church playing a major role in helping people. As times change, the close communities are becoming less common. Individuals who are in trouble or stressed have fewer people to talk to in times of need.

We all need support; it is not a sign of weakness to need help or want to talk to someone. Family, friends, teachers and church members can all help to support others.

To help someone who is having troubles, you need to be supportive, non-judgmental, open, and, most importantly, you need to listen a lot.

Relaxing with family and friends and discussing all aspects of our daily lives can help us to see that problems are not impossible to solve, and that we do not need to become stressed by these problems.

**Take
time to relax - for your health,
for your family, for you.**