

Coping with Stress

Learning how to cope with stress can help alleviate the negative impact it has on health.

It is a well-documented fact that many people in Hong Kong appear to be suffering ill health as a result of stress brought on by heavy workloads.

A discussion paper by Dr Bernard W K Lau published last year found stress to be behind a whole range of negative health trends such as eating too much or too little, sleep disorders, anxiety and depression.

A survey of work life balance by the University of Hong Kong in 2008 found that 82.5 per cent of the workers interviewed were stressed due to working long hours (Welford R 2008).

Stress is an emotionally and mentally disruptive condition that occurs in response to outside influences. It usually happens when we feel unable to cope with high demands that are placed upon us. Unexpected events and challenges of everyday living – in work, relationships, health and finance – can cause stress.

Some people thrive on it, while others find it difficult to cope with. Giving a presentation in front of a large crowd could be stressful to some people, while for others it can provide a lot of enjoyment and a sense of achievement.

But it is how a person deals with stress which can have a significant impact on general health. A mild degree of stress can be a good thing as it can help a person focus and concentrate on an assignment. However, when stress becomes overwhelming, its negative effects begin to appear.

Physiologically, it can cause an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, palpitations and gastrointestinal discomfort. Psychologically, it may result in anxiety, depression, feelings of hopelessness and impending doom.

It may also cause insomnia or trigger harmful and unhealthy behaviour such as, smoking, drug abuse, over eating (leading to obesity), excessive alcohol intake and lack of regular physical activity.

In the long-term these may indirectly contribute to chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease and some cancers.

Identifying and tackling the source of your stress and making some simple lifestyle changes can help you cope and reduce the effects on your body.

Getting support by talking to family members or friends about the things you find stressful can help. In some cases, it may be necessary to seek professional help for time management advice, assertiveness training and stress management.

Knowing your own limits and learning to say “no” when you are overburdened is also crucial.

Likewise, it is important to prioritize and make time for rest and relaxation, eat well and drink plenty of water, exercise regularly and cut down on alcohol and smoking.

Changing your lifestyle in these ways can make you feel more physically fit and better able to cope.

Practicing relaxation techniques can help alleviate some of the physical and mental symptoms such as high blood pressure, insomnia and help increase well-being and boost the sense of feeling in control.

The Heart Centre at the Hong Kong Adventist hospital offers a relaxation program which teaches two useful techniques.

The first, called diaphragmatic breathing, involves the expansion of the abdomen rather than the chest walls and is useful in reducing anxiety. It is considered a healthier and better way to ingest more oxygen.

The second method, called progressive muscle relaxation, consists of sequentially tensing and relaxing muscles. This technique, practised in many cardiac rehabilitation programs, helps develop body awareness on how to release tension.

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