

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa is eager to reach into your community. Please feel free to publish this information in your company newsletter on your intranet or pin it up on a notice board. All we ask in return is to credit the information as coming from the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA.

Beat Stress the Heart Smart Way

I'm so stressed, I can't deal with this anymore! I'm just not coping!

Sound familiar? For those of you that can identify with these statements, have you ever stopped to think about what stress is doing to your heart and overall well being? Unidentified and untreated causes of pressure, tension or strain can leave you feeling 'burnt out' impacting negatively on your emotional, physical, social and professional life. We all need a certain amount of *positive* stress in our lives in order to function - but the problem arises when *negative* stress creeps in trying to take control! According to the American Heart Association, "stress is defined as the process that results from a person's response to physical, chemical, emotional or environmental factors". Unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, excessive alcohol intake, disordered eating patterns and/or lack of physical activity can be the result of the body's inability to deal with 'stressful situations'. These negative behaviours are risk factors for the development of chronic diseases of lifestyle i.e. heart attacks, stroke, hypertension, diabetes and hyperlipidaemia (high blood fats). So how do you know when you are stressed out and more importantly what can you do to ensure a lifestyle free of negative stress?

Recognising Negative Stress

- Headaches
- Odd aches and pains
- Feeling sweaty or shivery
- Pounding heart or palpitations
- Exhaustion
- Smoking or drinking more
- Constantly feeling irritable
- Eating too much or too little
- Tearfulness
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Disturbed sleep
- Waking up unusually early
- No time for hobbies anymore

If you exhibit 5 or more of the above conditions, you may already be suffering from stress. There's no need to panic further as there are many things you can do to help yourself feel and cope better.

Practical Stress Management Tips

Recognise the signs and symptoms

You can only help yourself if you are able to recognise the signs and symptoms of negative stress - if you notice that something is not quite the same as before, it's time you do something about it.

Follow a healthy lifestyle

A balanced diet together with regular physical activity will help you manage better as it will increase your energy levels, self-confidence and self esteem. In addition to this it will also lower your risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke and cancer. Focus on consuming regular meals and snacks (low fat, high fibre), plenty of water, vegetables and fruit and limit

your intake of salt, sugar and caffeine. Include moderate intensity cardiovascular exercise for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. You can also incorporate yoga or pilates as relaxation exercises.

Control your alcohol intake

Excessive alcohol intake can cause:

- a disturbance in regular sleeping patterns
- misjudgment thus preventing you from identifying negative stress
- dehydration
- hypertension
- heart muscle damage or heart rhythm disturbances
- elevated triglyceride levels
- fatal liver damage
- a stroke

It is best to stick to the recommended daily intake limit of no more than 1 unit for women and 2 for men. 1 unit is equivalent to 120ml wine, 25ml spirits, 60ml sherry, 25ml liqueur or 340ml beer.

Don't smoke

Smoking is the single most preventable cause of Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)! If you are a non-smoker, now is not the time to start. If you have already tried to quit and started again, chat to your doctor or pharmacist about cessation aids to help you quit.

Take time out

Do something that you really enjoy, it might just bring you the relief that you need - be it a weekend (or weekday) getaway, a hobby, a relaxing bath or a good book.

Practice relaxation

Every day should include some form of relaxation activity. For you this might come in the form of yoga, meditation, listening to music, gardening, walking the dog or getting a massage.

Lean on a comfortable shoulder

A trouble shared is a trouble halved! Talking your worries over with a close friend, partner, parents or counsellor might help you to handle things better. So stay in touch and allow them to provide support, love and guidance.

Sleep

Getting enough sleep (5-10 hours per night) can ensure that you are more able to deal with day-to-day events in an appropriate way. If you find difficulty falling asleep, exercise or meditation may help to promote a good restful sleep.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa recommends following a healthy balanced lifestyle that includes heart healthy eating practices, regular physical activity, managing stress and other risk factors in order to prevent/delay the onset of non-communicable diseases (CVD, hypertension, diabetes and hyperlipidaemia).

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