Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Stress Management- Occupational Therapy

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Stress Management

Patient Information

Long Term Conditions - Occupational Therapy Service

The Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website is available on the link: https://www.wwl.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets or scan the QR code.



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What is Stress?

Stress is a process where you feel unable to cope with the demands being made of you.

Stress is a normal and healthy reaction; we need a certain amount of stress to motivate us. High levels of stress can cause anxiety, and this is when it becomes a problem.

In stressful situations where you feel overwhelmed by the demands being made of you; a primitive, physical reaction occurs, this is known as “fight or flight”.

This response was developed millions of years ago when cavemen were facing life-threatening situations.

For them it was a matter of survival so the “fight or flight” response ensured their body was prepared for action. It gave them the ability to fight or run away, and in that situation the response was appropriate.

Since then human behaviour and society has evolved, but the “fight or flight”

response has not changed.

The physical response the cavemen experienced when faced with a threat is the same response we experience when faced with a stressful situation. The response worked brilliantly for our ancestors as they burnt off adrenaline (the stress hormone) by running or fighting.

The difficulty now is that we don't physically burn off the adrenaline and as a result we experience a variety of unpleasant physical and mental symptoms. Our bodies cannot tell the difference between an emotional threat and a physical threat, fight or flight still occurs!

What happens to the body when the 'fight or flight' response is triggered?

Adrenaline is released into the blood stream.

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Adrenaline acts on the heart making it beat faster.

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Blood pressure rises to rush blood away from non-essential organs, to those, needing increased blood flow for emergency action (i.e. limbs and trunk)

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To ensure the heart continues to beat faster, it requires more oxygen. The breathing rate increases to provide more oxygen into the blood stream for energy.

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The large muscle groups tense (i.e. arms and legs) ready for action.

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Levels of sugar and fat (including cholesterol) increase in

the blood to supply more energy to active muscles.

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Arteries constrict so that less blood is lost if you are injured.

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Perspiration increases to cool down the muscles.

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Digestion is halted as blood is diverted away from the stomach to provide energy to fighting muscles in the limbs.

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Saliva dries up and your mouth feels dry.

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Adrenaline also affects your mind, leading to confused thoughts, irritability and panic

When the “fight or flight” response is triggered you experience a variety of symptoms. Although it may feel like your body is working against you, it is actually trying to keep you alive!

What are the symptoms of stress?

It is important to be aware of these symptoms in order to acknowledge when you are experiencing a stressful situation and to be aware of how to challenge the symptoms.

The symptoms that you experience as a result of stress (when the “fight or flight” response is triggered) can be divided into three categories:

- **Physical**
- **Emotional**
- **Behavioural**

Think about the symptoms you experience and write them down to begin to recognise when you are in a stressful situation and how your body deals with this.

Your Symptoms

What are the sources of stress?

We all have different triggers that cause us stress, and it is important to be able to acknowledge your individual triggers.

There are many external sources of stress that we encounter throughout our lives. These can be external factors such as:

Work increased pressure at work, tedium of routine, colleagues, finances,

redundancy, inability to work.

Leisure feel obliged to attend, supporting a friend, inability to maintain social activities.

Home moving house, change in living conditions, holidays, Christmas, birthdays.

Relationships family; friends; spouse; children; roles; sexual difficulties; separation; divorce; death.

There are also internal factors such as:

(a) Personality type

Our personality type is intrinsically linked to our response to stress. There are two distinct personality types – A and B.

Type A:

This personality type is more likely to experience difficulties with stress and anxiety. They are also prone to other illnesses as a result of adrenaline being in their systems more frequently.

- Competitive - overriding need to achieve
- Hurry sickness - an intense sense of time and urgency
- Joyless striving - always on the go, with many projects at once
- Inability to relax - difficulty turning off

Type B:

This personality trait tends to lead to the individual being more relaxed, less hurried and less inclined to compete.

(b) Unhelpful thinking

It is possible to increase the stress in a situation by experiencing unhelpful thoughts. It is important to try to recognize and then challenge these thoughts. As a result we can relearn to think in a more helpful and positive way. For example:

Instead of - “What is the point of trying?”

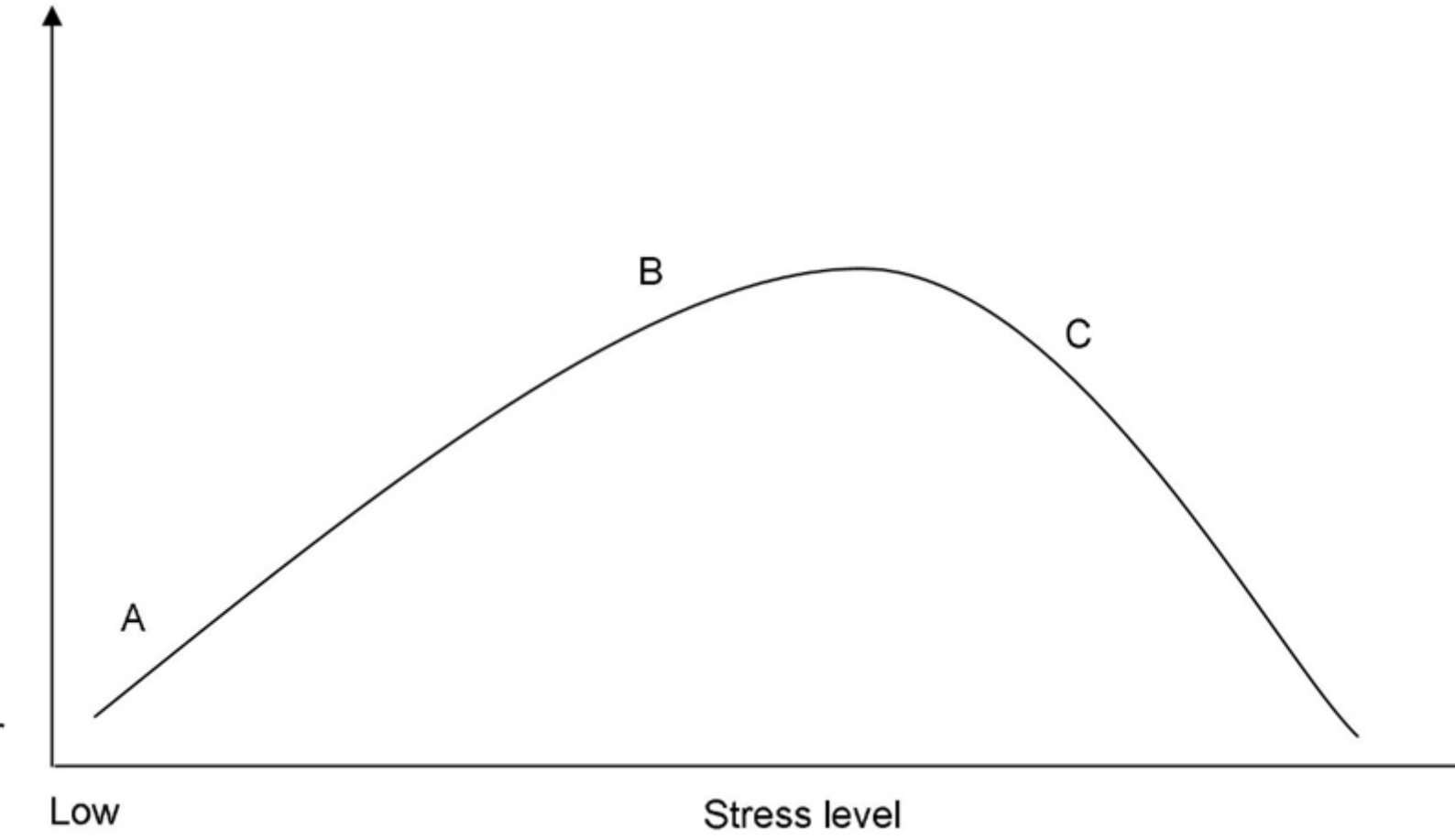
Try - “If I don’t try, I won’t know. Trying in itself will broaden my experience.”

Or

Instead of - “What if I make a mistake? - it would be awful.”

Try - “Everybody makes mistakes. Learning from mistakes widens our experience and develops skills. Nobody is perfect.”

How does stress affect my performance?



On the graph above you can see how the level of stress you experience affects your performance of activities.

A = You can cope but you're under stimulated

B = Optimal level of stress, improves your memory, concentration and as a result your efficiency in your life.

C = Stress increases and performance decreases. Concentration and memory become impaired and you may become agitated and irritable.

What strategies can I use to cope with stress?

Everyone has their own coping strategies, some positive and some negative, even if you are not consciously aware that is what they are. There are a variety of coping strategies that can be utilised but you need to decide which ones you find beneficial and that tackle the problems you experience.

Escape it

Ensure you have some personal space every day where you are free from distractions and interruptions. Find a private retreat and relax!

Physically do something

Take up a sport, start a hobby, have a bath, walk the dog, tend to the garden or go shopping.

Talk it out

Share it with someone else. Find someone who is willing to listen. A problem shared is often a problem halved.

Write it out

It is easier to see problems in perspective and prioritise them when they are put down on paper.

Sort it out

List practical solutions; weigh them up, decide what to do and then act.

Delay it

Put aside some time to sort worries out. Manage your time effectively.

Laugh it off

Lighten it with humour - **smile**!

Reverse it

Consider taking an opposite approach by exploring alternatives.

Distance it

Imagine the problem in a few weeks or months from now – how much will it matter then?

Reflect

Look back at the end of the day and find something enjoyable about it.

20 Point Help Strategy

- Learn to recognise when you are tired, and do something about it.
- Eat sensibly and exercise as able.
- Do not put off relaxing – take time out for yourself.

- Keep things in perspective.
- Learn to delegate responsibility.
- Be realistic about perfection and avoid perfectionism.
- Do not run yourself down – watch out for negative or critical thoughts.
- Work off stress – physical activity is beneficial.
- Talk to someone you really trust – or use a confidential helpline e.g. The Samaritans
- Learn to accept you cannot change and accept your own limitations.
- Avoid self-medication with alcohol, nicotine, coffee etc.
- Get enough sleep and rest - medication (sleeping tablets) will rarely be necessary if you change your lifestyle
- Be more assertive.
- Say “No”. If you do so early enough you may prevent pressure building up in the future and you are then taking control of your life.
- Take one thing at a time and plan ahead.
- Agree with somebody – avoid conflict
- Manage your time better – get a system that works for you, not against you

- Be realistic about your goals and ambitions.

- If you are ill, do not try to carry on as if you are not.

- Participate in a hobby or interest – you need to do activities you enjoy as well as working.

Remember! The best coping strategies are the ones that make you feel better and solve the problem.

Useful Information

Local Pharmacy - Your local pharmacies offer a wide range of services including information and general advice on symptom relief medicines as well as a prescription collection and delivery service.



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