Workplace and Personal Stress

What is stress?
Stress can be defined as forces from the outside world impinging on the individual. Stress is a normal part of life that can help us learn and grow if channelled effectively. Conversely, stress can cause us significant short and long term problems. Stress releases powerful neurochemicals and hormones that prepare us for action (to fight or flee). If we don’t take affirmative action, the stress response can lead to physical and emotional health problems. Prolonged, unexpected, and unmanageable stresses are the most damaging types and have the potential to impact negatively on both professional and personal spheres.

There are four stages of stress that one may go through:
• In the first stage, you may find yourself overworked and reluctant to take time off work to recharge and reenergise.
• In the second stage, you may find yourself unduly tired, irritable and feeling like you are under achieving. You may also be skipping meals and generally not taking the best care of yourself or your relationships.
• In the third stage, you may feel resentful or guilty, you do not get as much enjoyment out of spending time with family and friends and you may not be enjoying work at all.
• Finally, you may withdraw completely, succumb to illness, feel like you have failed in some way and you may even break down both emotionally and physically.

Unmanaged, stress can lead to mental health problems, including family and work problems, and the presence of physical illness or health concerns. In turn, these health problems can lead to medical complications; especially of concern is the possibility of suffering heart disease, which is a leading cause of death and disability in Australia.

Stress and heart disease
Being under constant stress both at home and at work increases your risk of dying from heart disease. When stressed, the body releases the hormone noradrenaline which increases your blood pressure and, therefore, your risk of heart disease.

According to research undertaken in the UK, when a high risk factor is combined with smoking and a high blood cholesterol level you will have the three highest risk factors for contracting heart disease (www.lawcare.org.uk)

Symptoms to look out for include coughing and shortness of breath, pain in the chest, neck, arms or jaw, tiredness and dizziness. You can cut your risk by giving up smoking, losing weight and eating healthily. If in doubt, ask your general practitioner for advice about how to make yourself less susceptible to heart disease. Also speak to your general practitioner should you wish to start exercising after a prolonged break from physical activity to ensure your body will be able to cope with the extra demands exercise can have on the body.
Working with a stressed person

Although easier said than done at times, remember the following tips when dealing with stressed individuals at work or home:

People under stress lose their perspective: It is important that you aim to keep your perspective even if people around you are failing to do so!

People under stress make those around them ill too: It is important to use stress relief techniques to stop you from getting caught up in the stress. These may include using meditation or relaxation techniques to remain positive and in control of any situation.

People under stress cause rows: Refrain from getting involved in office politics, instead use assertiveness techniques to cope with the situation at hand.

People under stress can be unkind: Remember that you are a person with rights too. Be kind to yourself. If you like and respect yourself you will find it easier to be kind to the stressed person and be understandable of their issues.

People under stress can be cruel: Try to avoid being a martyr. You need to look after yourself, build your own support network, offload to someone else who is able to listen intently and seek counselling if necessary.

People under stress need someone to lead them into relaxation: Be your stressed friend’s “barometer”, suggesting helpful routines providing he or she will let you help.

People under stress need gentle concern, not criticism: Be willing to offer genuine support and concern. Be able to listen to them without jumping in with a solution. Sometimes, the stressed individual needs to get concerns off their chest and once achieved, can often see the solutions firsthand.

People under stress can be hard to work with: You cannot be expected to listen endlessly to moans and groans if the stressed person is not willing to do anything productive to help matters. Don’t withdraw your care totally but recognise you have a right to enjoy work. Invariably, this will cause the sufferer to reach his or her rock bottom faster and seek help and do something proactive.

People under stress make you tired: Ensure you are able to retreat to your own space and get adequate sleep and rest so you are prepared for the day ahead.

People under stress dwell in the past, blame others and feel pessimistic about the future: It is important to keep the person focusing on today, to live one day at a time and emphasise that a better day today will make tomorrow easier to handle. Take life in bite-sized chunks and keep the positives ahead of the negatives.

Note: You can not change another person but you can change your reaction to their behaviour. Believe things can change and with a little work and commitment, they may be able to change for the better.

Understanding the causes of stress

Understanding the causes of stress is one of the initial steps in winning the battle against detrimental stress. If you are able to pinpoint what causes you to feel stressed, you are more likely to be aware of triggers and plan a strategy to tackle it.

Where is your stress coming from?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Development</td>
<td>Job insecurity, poor pay, lack of status, uncertainty about your future</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Content and Satisfaction</td>
<td>Too much or too little work, impossible targets, lack of variety in your job</td>
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<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Unsupportive colleagues, no friends among colleagues who you can talk to</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work Schedule</td>
<td>Inflexible, long or anti-social hours, long distance commuting</td>
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<td>Firm Culture</td>
<td>Lack of support or supervision, claims pending on you or the firm</td>
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<td>Money</td>
<td>Excessive debts, living from pay cheque to pay cheque, financial concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>Health fears, exhaustion, problems overcoming minor ailments, slow recovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>Large “to do” list, full diary, impatience when waiting for work to come back, sense of urgency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spouse/Partner</td>
<td>Frequent arguments, unfair sharing of chores, little time alone together, outside pressures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Small children/teenagers at home, responsibility for family decisions, elderly parents to care for, abuse in the past</td>
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<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory living accommodation, recent or impending house move, too little space, growing list of chores and things that need to be fixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Life</td>
<td>Too many/too few social commitments, feeling guilty at neglecting friends over work</td>
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Keeping a stress diary

One of the best ways to identify sources of stress is to keep a stress diary for a two to three week period. When you begin to feel stressed, you could look at what you are doing and what you were doing before feeling stressed, and make a mental note of these.

An example of a typical DIARY entry for a stressed individual

1. Cause of headache: rushing to get the kids to school on time and work every morning.
2. Reason for symptoms: Timing, not enough time to do everything, feeling rushed, traffic too heavy and painfully slow.
3. Possible solutions:
   a) Get up a little earlier to allow more time to get to places, hence no need to rush around as much.
   b) Ask spouse or friend to take the kids to school. Maybe, to avoid the feeling of guilt associated with relying on someone else, you could offer to take their kids to an after-school activity or on the weekend.
   c) Get a bike and ride to work if distance permits – This is particularly important as it promotes an active lifestyle; instead of sitting in traffic you would be able to ride right on past.
   d) Prepare the night before, getting clothes and bags packed, lunches made for the following day. This will avoid any unnecessary running around in the morning.

Any physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach pain, should also be noted. You can then investigate whether any patterns exist, looking for clues to your stress.

If you see that every day at about 9.30am you have a bad headache, you may also note that at 9am each day you are busy rushing the kids to school and then had to tackle bad traffic on the way to the office. If on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday you had trouble getting to sleep, you may find that on each of those evenings you brought work home from the office.

As you work through the diary you are able to discover what appeared insignificant at the time could in fact be a major stress trigger. As a result, you would need to make affirmative changes if you are serious about managing or preventing your stress from taking over your life.

At the end of the diary you need to write down three comments or observations:
1. The exact cause of your symptom(s) such as physical activity or a particular thought;
2. The reason why the activity is causing the symptom such as timing or the way you do something;
3. Your goals for eliminating the symptom(s).

Eventually, if you keep up the diary, your natural ability to recognise symptoms will become easier, you will identify stressors instantly and will be able to act promptly before they become an issue. You could start making changes in your behaviour patterns and develop methods of dealing with specific stressors; often these changes can be very simple ones.

However, there may be times when you just cannot see a way out. This is when the help of a professional trained counsellor can be very useful.

LawCare
LIV Counselling Service
P: 0408 586 966
E: clarebrough@gmail.com

VLHL – Victorian Lawyers’ Health Line
P: 1300 664 744
Monday to Friday, 8am-6pm
Some suggestions for dealing with stress

There are many methods that may be beneficial in dealing with stress. Understandably, there is no “one size fits all” method; instead it is just a matter of experimenting and seeing what works for you. Below are some suggestions worth considering:

At home
• Eat healthily and exercise regularly. It is recommended that you exercise at least four times a week for a 20 minute time period. If possible, leave your desk during the day and go for a walk. If you put a calendar reminder in your diary to go for a walk, you are more likely to stick to a routine!
• Give up smoking. You may think it relaxes you, but in actual fact nicotine only creates a new stress—that of craving for a cigarette.
• Avoid excessive amounts of alcohol. It is a depressant and is liable to make stress problems worse, not better.
• Learn to relax and unwind, perhaps by meditating or better still by catching up with your spouse, partner, children or friends about non-work related interests.
• Get a decent night’s sleep, the longer the better. If you have problems getting to sleep, force thoughts of work out of your mind by planning your next holiday or composing a poem. Think positive thoughts and avoid drinking coffee/tea/ cola and energy drinks late at night.
• Plan and book a holiday with your family or friends, and ensure that the office knows that you will be off for at least a week no matter what crisis should occur. Use your full holiday entitlement as there is no point having an excessive leave balance - it shows you have not taken time out from work.

At work
• When you are feeling very stressed, STOP and smell the roses! Question what is the worst thing that would happen if you did not do the particular tasks, and whether it would still matter a week later.
• Protect your time by not over-committing yourself. Learn to say “NO” and know that this is an acceptable response to unreasonable demands.
• Be realistic about deadlines. Being over-optimistic usually means increasing the pressure on yourself and letting people down later. It is far better to be honest and upfront and tell people realistic (and sometimes unwelcome) time frames.
• Build some “breathing space” into your day. When you plan the work you will do, leave a good hour or so for those little things that crop up unexpectedly.
• Change activities regularly. If you are doing a lot of computer work, for instance, make a phone call or speak to a colleague.
• Take short work breaks. Walk around the office or have a cup of coffee or better still a glass of fresh water. A five-minute break every hour will actually increase your concentration while reducing stress.
• Take a proper lunch break and do not work while you are eating. Remove yourself from your desk and go outside (or to a lunch room if available).
• If a task seems overwhelming, break it down into bits and deal with them one at a time.
• Try to do one thing at a time. Attempting several things at once only increases stress levels and lowers performance all round.
• If you are getting impatient about something, ask yourself why you are letting it annoy you. Take some deep breaths and relax – not only will a deep breath slow down your heart rate and ease the “flight response” but it will give you some perspective and quality control.
How to say NO gracefully

Most people have difficulty saying “NO”, and boundary invaders take full advantage of this genuine difficulty. If a request or a question makes you feel uncomfortable, it may be an attempt to invade your boundaries, even if the other person is not fully aware that this is what he/she is doing. If a straight-out “NO” is too difficult for you, try some of the following alternatives:

• I’m really over-committed right now and if I take this on I could not do it justice.
• I appreciate your confidence in me. I wouldn’t want to take this on knowing my other tasks and responsibilities right now would prohibit me from doing an excellent job.
• I’d be happy to do this for you but realistically I cannot do it without foregoing some other things I’m working on. Which would you like me to do first? Which can I put aside until later on?
• I can do that for you. Will it be okay if I get back to you in the middle of next week as I currently have a, b and c to do before close of business Friday.
• If you had let me know earlier we could have talked about it, but it’s just not possible for me now.
• I can see something needs doing, but it should be done by the person who caused the problem in the first place, not by me.
• It would be far more appropriate for you to do that.
• Thanks but I’ll have to pass on that.
• I really appreciate your asking me but my time is already committed.
• I wish I could, but it’s just not convenient.
• I promised _____ I wouldn’t take on any more projects without discussing them with her first. (This not only makes it someone else’s decision but also postpones it and allows you to decide if you really want to say no.)
• I just don’t have the time to help you but let me recommend someone else I know. (A great way to say no while still helping the person by giving another option.)

It is vitally important that you do not respond with “maybe”. Maybe is only a way of postponing a decision. When you know you want to say no, say no. Otherwise you’re not playing fair with yourself – or others. And saying “maybe next time” makes it harder and harder to say “NO” the next time. Don’t fall into this trap as you often create more work for yourself in the long term.

(Information courtesy of Dianna Keel as outlined on www.lawcare.org.uk)
Stress management

Meditation exercise

1. **Body awareness**
   - Sit, feet on the ground, back reasonably straight, but not too rigid.
   - Concentrate your whole attention on what you feel physically in your body.
   - Don’t think, just focus on what you feel.
   - You may begin with your feet and work upwards, spending a moment or two on each part of your body.
   - If you feel an itch, discomfort or want to move, acknowledge it, tell yourself “It’s all right” and try not to move.
   - If you become aware of thoughts or questions, treat them as an itch! Acknowledge them but then go back to concentrating on the physical feelings in your body.
   - Stay with this exercise until you have focussed on all of your body and then, most importantly, let go.

2. **Breathing**
   - In the same position, relaxed with your back straight, concentrate your attention on the physical feeling of breathing in and then of breathing out.
   - Do not deliberately change your breathing, although you may find that it does change naturally, becoming slower and deeper as you concentrate more on this natural body response.
   - Should this exercise make you feel breathless, abandon it.
   - Do not be surprised if this exercise makes you feel drowsy – it means that it has made you calm down and relax.
   - Do not moralise or judge yourself during these exercises, just let go. The moral of the story is to relax and not think too much about anything in particular.

3. **Listening**
   - Listen to the sounds, the traffic in the distance or to the little sounds in your office or room. Don’t push them away as irritants; they are part of your life and you will need to accept them.
   - Put your hands over your ears and listen to your breathing. Listen to your thoughts and feelings, acknowledge them and let them go. Don’t push them away as irritants, they are part of your life so again you will need to accept them.
   - Go back and listen to the external and internal noises. Listen to the nuances, to the pitch and intensity of the sounds, then let them go.
   - Let your mind be quiet and free from thoughts.

4. **Be still**
   - With your mind and body still, remain at peace for as long as it is appropriate. Focus on the stillness. If you are fortunate enough to have your own office, sit in your office, turn off the light and practice being still and quiet.

Stretching away your stress

1. **Back and shoulder.**
   - Stand facing the wall and place your hands on the wall shoulder-width apart. Your toes should point forward and your knees should be slightly bent. Lean forward, lowering your head between your arms until you can feel the stretch across your upper back, shoulders, neck and arms.

2. **Mid back stretch**
   - Sit up straight and lace your fingers behind your head, keeping your elbows at ear level. Then pull your shoulder blades towards each other.

3. **Lower back stretch**
   - Pain or discomfort in the lower back is very common among those of us who sit for long periods of time at our desk. You need to sit up straight in your chair. With both hands, grab your left leg just under the knee. Keep your right foot flat on the floor. With your left leg bent, slowly pull that leg towards your chest. Then do the same with the other leg.

4. **Hand stretch**
   - To release the tension in your hands, stand and hold your left arm straight in front of you, putting your left hand up as though you were a policeman stopping the traffic. Then put the palm of your right hand against the tips of your left fingers and gently pull your left hand towards your forearm. Continue doing this until you feel tension across your fingers and the underside of your wrist. Hold this position for 10 deep breaths and then change hands.

5. **Facial stretch**
   - Have you ever noticed how your face becomes taught with concentration? There is a very simple exercise to relieve this but it is suggested that you do this in complete privacy (or face the possibility of some very amused passers by) Raise your eyebrows and open your eyes as wide as you can. Open your mouth as if to yawn and stick your tongue out as far as possible. Like all these exercises, hold for 10 deep breaths and then relax.
Beat stress through diet and exercise

If you work excessively long hours in a stressful environment, then it may well be tempting to “eat, drink and be merry” until the early hours. In reality, your body will not be able to take such mental and physical abuse for long and telltale signs of abuse will appear.

If you are under stress in your professional life, it is far more important to be sure that you look after your health. Following a healthy diet and taking regular exercise will increase your general well-being, reduce your perception of stress and ensure that you are in peak condition to take on everyday tasks. Exercise even releases endorphins which make you feel good and feeling good is exactly what you should feel!

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<tr>
<th>Eat five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.</th>
<th>Drink two litres of fluid each day.</th>
<th>Treats and special occasion foods.</th>
<th>Find an exercise you enjoy.</th>
<th>Lead an active life – some positive suggestions.</th>
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<tr>
<td>It’s not difficult – a glass of orange juice with your breakfast, salad in your sandwiches and a banana with your lunch, carrots with your dinner and apple pie for dessert would give you the recommended intake of fruit and vegetables.</td>
<td>It may be an idea to fill up a jug of chilled water at the start of the day and try and drink as much as you can out of the jug by the end of the day. Have a drink if you feel hungry (you may actually be thirsty) and drink water or milk with each meal. This will ensure you are well hydrated and able to tackle the day’s challenges with a clear head.</td>
<td>Healthy eating does not mean you have to give up special treats altogether, but keep consumption to a minimum. Reward yourself for a job well done by eating a bowl of ice cream or a chocolate bar. It is often easy to comfort eat when you are under stress so be aware if this is your tendency and try and minimise the number of times you reach for a treat.</td>
<td>The key to keeping up any exercise regime is to enjoy it, and to build exercise into your daily routine. Try different forms of exercise until you find one you really like doing – you may hate working out at the gym, but really enjoy swimming. Try to do 20 minutes exercise four times a week – it may just be to step out of the office and go for a 20-30 minute walk with some work colleagues.</td>
<td>Park further from the office than you normally would and walk in briskly, take the stairs instead of the lift and spend some time each day playing with your children. Any activity that makes you a little out of breath counts as exercise and is in effect toning and strengthening your body as well as burning fat and reducing stress levels in your body.</td>
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Time management at work

There seems to be so much to do and not enough time to get everything done! Struggling to keep up with the increasing demands on time leaves you stressed and depressed. Try these tips for making every minute count:

- Ensure you get up on time by putting your alarm clock across the room so that you have to get up to turn it off. This will make it much easier to get ready on time and reduce the need to rush around the house in a panic.
- Before you begin your day, think of three things that will give you pleasure that day. Don’t think about any negative things, and forget yesterday completely. Think of one (realistic) thing you want to achieve today - even if it’s only to “eat lunch”.
- Leave for work a few minutes earlier than you normally would leave. You’ll be less stressed at red lights and by late trains, and if you do get there early you’ll have a few peaceful minutes before the phone starts ringing.
- Open mail with the waste paper bin handy, or get an assistant, if you can to sort your mail first and weed out all the junk.
- PRIORITISE! Put all the things you have to do in order of importance. Think about how much time each task will take, then add half that time again plus five minutes for stretching, relaxing, putting things away and getting another cup of coffee. In an eight-hour work day you have six hours of actual working time, plus one hour for a lunch break (which is very important), and another hour for unavoidable and unforeseen matters. Put everything you’re not going to be able to deal with today out of the way so it does not tempt you. Then gather together all the information, files, documents and telephone numbers you’ll need. The best time to do this might be first thing in the morning, or perhaps before you leave the office at night so that you can get started right away the next day. You will feel more in control and less stressed and daunted by the experience.
- If someone asks you to do another task, don’t be afraid to say “If I do this I won’t have time to deal with this other file. Which would you like me to do?” Turning down additional work will not make you look half as bad as failing to do work you have accepted, or doing it badly.
- If a matter arises, such as a phone call, which isn’t important, don’t be afraid to say “This isn’t a good time, please call back later”. You may find it helpful to establish an hour each day when you make and receive phone calls or meet with clients.
- Don’t subscribe to journals and periodicals you never have time to read.
- Fifteen minutes before you’re due to leave work - stop working! This is the time to organise everything ready for the next day, clear away files, pat yourself on the back for getting so far through your “must, should and want” lists, and start winding down and switching off. That way you should actually be ready to leave in time to catch your train home.
- Try not to take work home, this will not only increase your levels of stress at home but has the potential to impact on your home life too. Instead of working after hours, take a friend out to the movies, play with the children or simply watch TV to unwind and recharge.