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The warning signs of stress

Sometimes stress can sneak up on us without us realising. Whether it's work, money or anxiety related to COVID-19, we might not even notice that we are struggling until things get really bad. So what are the warning signs of stress - and how can we look after ourselves day to day?

Any number of factors can cause [stress](#) to build up. Work is one of the most common causes, with [79%](#) of UK adults reporting that they often experienced work-related stress in 2020. Money worries are also a key trigger, particularly among those worried about job insecurity as a result of the pandemic.

In the last 18 months, COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns have had a marked effect on people's mental health and stress levels. Health concerns, fears over vulnerable loved ones and changes to the way we work and live have triggered high levels of [anxiety](#).

According to a survey of more than 16,000 Brits by the charity [Mind](#), 60% of adults said their mental health has worsened during the pandemic. Although many restrictions have been lifted, new, fast-spreading variants have caused a surge of infections, triggering worry and stress for lots of people.

Tuning into our bodies

And in our fast-paced society, it can be difficult to find the time to consider how we are feeling - making it easy to miss signs of stress. "Modern-day life is so busy for many people. Their behaviour is on autopilot," says Yuko Nippoda, psychotherapist and spokesperson for the UK Council for Psychotherapy ([UKCP](#)).

"They concentrate on what they need to do, but sometimes it becomes too much and they can lose the ability to pay attention to their physical and emotional needs. Or they might not have learned to listen to what the body and mind are telling them and they miss the warning signs of stress."

Additionally, many of us face external pressure from others to keep going when we need to take a break. Whether it's a pushy boss or a well-intentioned friend, we may find it hard to say 'no' to someone. It can lead us to take on too much, which can lead to [burnout – a state of chronic stress](#) that can affect our physical and mental health.

"Pressure from society is enormous and people feel that they need to live up to other people's expectations," says Nippoda. "They feel that they have to meet others' needs even if it means doing things they do not wish to do, and they overdo it. If they feel stressed, they try to ignore the signs; otherwise they fear they might lose their position or damage their relationships."

Finally, we may feel overconfident in our ability to deal with stress. "Some people may believe they can handle the situation very well and they do not wish to show their 'weak' side," explains Nippoda. "They stretch themselves and do not stop when they need to. Then they lose sight of the signs that they are under tremendous stress."

What are the warning signs of stress?

[Stress](#) can cause many different symptoms. It might affect how you feel physically and mentally, and also how you behave.

"The physical warning signs of stress include aches and pains in the shoulders, neck and back, headaches, sleeping difficulties and dizziness," says Nippoda. You may also experience trembling, sweating, a heavy feeling in the chest, breathing difficulties, an increased heart rate and an upset stomach.

There are also emotional warning signs of stress. You may feel anxious, just in general or about specific concerns such as your finances or work. You may also experience [panic attacks](#), a severe attack of anxiety and fear which occurs suddenly, often without warning.

"Emotional warning signs of [stress](#) also include depression, a lack of concentration, irritability and mood swings," Nippoda says. You may also find yourself forgetting things or feeling overwhelmed.

You may find your behaviour changes when you are stressed, too. Even though you're normally calm, you may find yourself being snappy with others, sleeping too much or too little, changing your eating habits or avoiding certain places or people. Stress can also make you want to adopt unhealthy habits, like smoking or drinking more than usual.

The [signs of burnout](#) can be similar to stress. Burnout is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when an individual feels overwhelmed, emotionally drained and unable to meet constant demands.

In 2019, the World Health Organization classified workplace burnout as an occupational phenomenon. However, it's possible to experience burnout as a result of many different stressors, from work to a busy home life.

Although elevated stress isn't a mental health problem in itself, long-lasting or unaddressed stress can often lead to [anxiety, depression and self-harm](#). It can also lead to physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease and joint and muscle problems, such as tense muscles, headaches and more.

Therefore, it's important to look after yourself and take action if you're feeling stressed.

How to regulate your stress levels

Speak to your GP

"First of all, it is important to go to a doctor. The warning signs of stress can be identical to symptoms of serious illness, and they need to be checked out," says Nippoda.

"If there is nothing wrong with you physically, the first thing you need to think about is how you can look after yourself better," she says. Think about what your body is telling you, for example, if you need to take a step back from work.

If your stress is affecting your mental health, your doctor may recommend talking therapy or medication to help you cope.

Make positive changes

Realising you are experiencing stress can be overwhelming, but it's important to use it as a springboard to [make positive changes](#).

"When you are starting to feel stressed, you can use the opportunity positively. It means something in you is telling you to make a change," says Nippoda. "For example, stress might be telling you to learn your own limitations and when to stop."

Stress can be the sign you need to create firm boundaries and be more assertive in relationships with other people. "You can make stress your internal mentor," Nippoda says.

Make relaxation a part of your daily routine

[Relaxation](#), breathing methods and meditation can be very useful when you have noticed that you are beginning to feel stressed.

"There are many ways to relax even without using specific techniques," says Nippoda. "For example, soaking in a bath full of scented bubbles, or listening to music that you can relax to."

"If you would like to learn how to [breathe or meditate](#), you can learn online," she adds. "Everybody has different tastes. Use trial and error to find what works for you."

Make time for yourself

Treating yourself once a week is a great way to de-stress – and it can give you something to look forward to when things seem overwhelming. This might be a massage, a dinner out or a takeaway. It's also essential to take regular breaks from work and to take time off for a change of scenery.

"However, making time and space for yourself is still meaningful, especially if you are a busy person. Or you could go on a trip into nature – being surrounded by nature is refreshing," says Nippoda.

Develop a healthy routine

Stress prevention is important too. It's key to stick to a [healthy routine](#) so stress is less likely to become a hazard. "It goes without saying that a healthy lifestyle is fundamental," says Nippoda.

"Getting up and going to bed at the same time every day, having a good night's sleep, doing exercise, and eating healthy food. Looking after your physical needs leads to mental well-being."

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