

Factsheet 43

Updated on 7 May 2021

Stress and Asthma

This factsheet has been designed for use by healthcare professionals only.

We know that managing stress can play a key role in keeping asthma well controlled. The pandemic has affected people in many different ways, and recent research¹ has indicated that just over two thirds of British adults have experienced an increase in stress levels over the last year. So, let us begin with understanding how we can manage stress more effectively; this will then enable us to identify those key strategies we can share to better support our patients.

Causes of stress:

- When asked about the causes of stress during the pandemic, popular responses included:
- Missing family and friends (57%)
- Concern about when things would get back to normal (46%)
- Anxiety about the changing rules surrounding lockdown (37%)
- Fear of the future post-Covid (34%)

Let us explore these strategies and resources in further detail.

Understanding stress

Most of us are aware that stress is primarily a physical response. When stressed, the body thinks it is under attack and switches to 'fight or flight' mode, releasing hormones and chemicals including adrenaline and cortisol to prepare the body for physical action. This causes a number of reactions, from blood being diverted to muscles to shutting down unnecessary bodily functions such as digestion, and we often experience physical symptoms.

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Due to this release of hormones, we also experience a rush of energy, which is our body preparing to either battle a predator or make a quick getaway. This was particularly helpful in the caveman days, when a sabre-tooth tiger might appear at any moment, but even in the modern world, the 'fight or flight' mode can still help us survive dangerous situations, such as reacting swiftly to a person running in front of our car by slamming on the brakes. Some people may also find that they experience a 'freeze' reaction.

We are often very good at recognising our own symptoms of stress – many of the following may sound familiar²:

SIGNS OF STRESS

We all experience stress differently in different situations. Sometimes you might be able to tell right away when you're feeling under stress, but other times you might keep going without recognising the signs. Stress can affect you both emotionally and physically, and it can affect the way you behave.

<p>Emotional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up over-burdened anxious, nervous or afraid like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off unable to enjoy yourself depressed uninterested in life like you've lost your sense of humour a sense of dread worried about your health neglected or lonely 	<p>Behavioural:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> finding it hard to make decisions constantly worrying avoiding situations that are troubling you snapping at people biting your nails picking at your skin unable to concentrate eating too much or too little smoking or drinking alcohol more than usual restless, like you can't sit still being tearful or crying
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Physical:

- shallow breathing or hyperventilating
- you might have a panic attack
- muscle tension
- blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares
- sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- tired all the time
- grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw
- headaches
- chest pains
- high blood pressure
- indigestion or heartburn
- constipation or diarrhoea
- feeling sick, dizzy or fainting

(Mind, 2017)

It is often much harder to spot signs of stress in other people, particularly if you do not know them well, and while we are communicating with people remotely, it can be easy to miss signs of stress. It is therefore important to be sensitive to any changes we do notice in people's behaviour, whether it is our friends, colleagues, or patients, and to maximise any opportunities to check in with one another.

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Hormone Warfare

When we are feeling stressed or anxious, the best way to tackle it can often depend on the source of the stress. Different relaxation strategies can release different hormones and our bodies are very good at telling us what we are lacking: we often hear people say they need a hug, or they need to go for a run, and there could well be a biological reason for this?



UNLOCK YOUR HAPPY

<p>SEROTONIN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being outside in nature • Having a massage • Breathing exercises • Practising daily gratitude • Aerobic exercise <p><i>The mood stabilizer</i></p>	<p>DOPAMINE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating success • Getting enough sleep • Mindfulness/Meditation • Listening to music • Sunlight exposure <p><i>The reward chemical</i></p>
<p>ENDORPHINS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having sex • Creative activities • Laughter • Eating cacao rich foods • Random acts of kindness • Taking a hot salt bath <p><i>The pain killer</i></p>	<p>OXYTOCIN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practising yoga • Cuddles and hugs • Petting a dog • Telling someone how much you care • Spending time with friends <p><i>The love hormone</i></p>

www.wellbeing.work
www.stress.org.uk

 International Wellbeing Insights
 People, Culture & Wellbeing

 Stress Management Society
 from distress to de-stress

Tapping into our mood, and specifically what kind of stress we are experiencing, can therefore be key to finding strategies to successfully de-stress. It can be difficult to approach this logically when you are feeling anxious, but it can be helpful to ask yourself what it is that is making you feel stressed:



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- Is it emotional, such as missing your family? An **oxytocin** boost might be needed.
- Is it physical, perhaps you are in pain or frustrated by not being able to be active? How can you release some **endorphins**?
- Are you feeling deprived, possibly through dieting or the limitations of lockdown? What other things can you do to create a **dopamine** surge?
- Does life seem a bit overwhelming, or are you feeling inexplicably low? Activities that release **serotonin** can bring you back to an even keel.

When patients are feeling more in control of their stress levels, they can devote more attention to managing their asthma (and, of course, avoid attacks triggered by stress) so recognising stressors and knowing how to combat them can be hugely beneficial.

Managing work-related stress

There are many useful resources for understanding stress triggers and how to manage stressful situations, both at home and at work on [The Stress Management Society website](#).

You can use these for yourself and equally when you are supporting your patients.

With many people working from home, it may be supporting people to manage their emails better by giving them helpful tips:

Here are seven effective habits to help control your email stress⁴

1. Do not be enslaved by email

Do not forget that you are in control of your email. You can choose to open it or not.

2. Put your email into perspective

How often do we get life-changing emails? The reality is that is when we disconnect from emails for a couple of days the majority of things can wait.

3. Choose your time to reduce email stress

Why not set dedicated times to check your email rather than always leaving your inbox open? It is a much more efficient and less distracting way of managing your emails and will enable you to focus and concentrate on other tasks.

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4. File/save important tasks right away

This might save hours of looking for an email at a later date and will help you stay on top of things you have actioned.

5. Process and purge

Aim to delete emails as soon as you have dealt with them. Sort your emails in to important and urgent and work on the high priority emails first.

6. Is your inbox your virtual attic?

Are you keeping lots of things in your inbox that you do not need? If you have not looked at them for over a year - would you miss them if you got rid of them? Your inbox is exactly the same as all the items sitting in your loft at home.

7. Stop panicking

If someone needs you urgently they will usually try and get you on the phone. Just because email is instantaneous does not mean your need to respond immediately.

References:

¹ Stress Management Society and Huawei AppGallery, 2021, Available from:

<https://www.stress.org.uk/stressawarenessmonth/>

² Image taken from Stress Management Society, 2021, Available from:

<https://www.stress.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Signs-of-stress-SMS.pdf>

³ Image taken from Stress Management Society, 2021, Available from:

<https://www.stress.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Unlock-your-happy.pdf>

⁴ Stress Management Society, 2021, Available from: <https://www.stress.org.uk/7-habits-to-control-email-stress/>