

Safeguarding News

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Mental Health Awareness Week

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STRESS: Are we coping?

Results of the Mental Health Foundation's 2018 study

The study was an online poll undertaken by YouGov and had a sample size of 4,619 respondents. This is the largest known study of stress levels in the UK.

In the past year, 74% of people have felt so stressed they have been overwhelmed or unable to cope.

Age differences

30% of older people reported never feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope in the past year, compared to 7% of young adults.

Behavioural effects

46% reported that they ate too much or ate unhealthily due to stress. 29% reported that they started drinking or increased their drinking, and 16% reported that they started smoking or increased their smoking.

Psychological effects

51% of adults who felt stressed reported feeling depressed, and 61% reported feeling anxious.

Of the people who said they had felt stress at some point in their lives, 16% had self-harmed and 32% said they had had suicidal thoughts and feelings.

37% of adults who reported feeling stressed reported feeling lonely as a result.

Causes of stress

36% of all adults who reported stress in the previous year cited either their own or a friend/relative's long-term health condition as a factor. This rose to 44% of adults over 55.

Of those who reported feeling stressed in the past year, 22% cited debt as a stressor.

For people who reported high levels of stress, 12% said that feeling like they need to respond to messages instantly was a stressor.

49% of 18-24 year olds who have experienced high levels of stress, felt that comparing themselves to others was a source of stress, which was higher than in any of the older age groups.

36% of women who felt high levels of stress related this to their comfort with their appearance and body image, compared to 23% of men.

Housing worries are a key source of stress for younger people (32% of 18-24 year olds cited it as a source of stress in the past year). This is less so for older people (22% for 45-54 year olds and just 7% for over 55s).

Younger people have higher stress related to the pressure to succeed. 60% of 18-24 year olds and 41% of 25-34 year olds cited this, compared to 17% of 45-54s and 6% of over 55s).

What is stress? Stress is a feeling of being under abnormal pressure. This pressure can come from different aspects of your day to day life, such as an increased workload, a transitional period, an argument you have with your family or new and existing financial worries. You may find that it has a cumulative effect, with each stressor building on top of one another. During these situations you may feel threatened or upset and your body might create a stress response. This can cause a variety of physical symptoms, change the way you behave, and lead you to experience more intense emotions. Stress affects us in a number of ways, both physically and emotionally, and in varying intensities.

How can I identify the signs of stress? Everyone experiences stress. However, when it is affecting your life, health and well-being, it is important to tackle it as soon as possible. Whilst stress affects everyone differently, there are common signs and symptoms you can look out for: feelings of constant worry or anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed, difficulty concentrating, mood swings or changes in your mood, irritability or having a short temper, difficulty relaxing, depression, low self-esteem, eating more or less than usual, changes in your sleeping habits, using alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs to relax, aches and pains, particularly muscle tension, diarrhoea and constipation, feelings of nausea or dizziness.

If you are experiencing these symptoms for a prolonged period and feel they are affecting your everyday life or are making you feel unwell, you should speak to your GP.

Seven steps to help protect yourself from stress

1. Eat healthily
 - a. Eating healthily can reduce the risks of diet-related diseases.
 - b. There is a growing amount of evidence showing how food affects our mood and how eating healthily can improve this.
 - c. You can protect your feelings of well-being by ensuring that your diet provides adequate amounts of brain nutrients such as essential vitamins and minerals, as well as water.
2. Be aware of smoking and drinking alcohol
 - a. Try not to, or reduce the amount you smoke and drink alcohol.
 - b. Even though they may seem to reduce tension initially, this is misleading as they often make problems worse.
3. Exercise
 - a. Try and integrate physical exercise into your lifestyle, as it can be very effective in relieving stress.
 - b. Even just going out and getting some fresh air, and taking some light physical exercise, like going for a walk to the shops, can really help.
4. Take time out
 - a. Take time to relax.
 - b. Strike the balance between responsibility to others and responsibility to yourself; this can really reduce stress levels.
 - c. Tell yourself that it is okay to prioritise self-care. Are you needing time out but saying 'I just can't take the time off'? If so, read more about how taking a break is important for good mental health.
5. Be mindful
 - a. Mindfulness is a mind-body approach to life that helps us to relate differently to experiences. It involves paying attention to our thoughts and feelings in a way that increases our ability to manage difficult situations and make wise choices.
 - b. Try to practice mindfulness regularly.
 - c. Mindfulness meditation can be practiced anywhere at any time.
 - d. Research has suggested that it can reduce the effects of stress, anxiety and related problems such as insomnia, poor concentration and low moods, in some people.
 - e. Our 'Be Mindful' website features a specially developed online course in mindfulness, as well as details of local courses in your area.
6. Get some restful sleep
 - a. Are you finding you are struggling to sleep? This is a common problem when you're stressed.
 - b. Could your physical or mental health be impacting your ability to sleep?
 - c. Could you amend your environment to help improve your sleep?
 - d. Could you get up instead of staying in bed when your mind is worrying at night?
 - e. Could you make small changes to your lifestyle to help your get a restful sleep?
 - f. For full details on tips on getting a good night's sleep read our guide 'How to sleep better and ten top tips for good sleep'.
7. Don't be too hard on yourself
 - a. Try to keep things in perspective.
 - b. Remember that having a bad day is a universal human experience.
 - c. When your inner critic or an outer critic finds faults, try and find truth and exception to what is being said.
 - d. If you stumble or feel you have failed, don't beat yourself up.
 - e. Act as if you were your own best friend: be kind and supportive.
 - f. Take a few minutes each day to appreciate yourself.