

Summary sheet 9

Dealing with stress



What is stress and what causes it?

Stress is sometimes used to describe how we react to the very fast pace of life that many of us lead, or the way we feel when we're under a lot of pressure. We all find different things stressful and respond differently to feeling stressed. Stress generally occurs if we feel unable to cope when high demands are placed on us.

It is difficult to measure stress, but we all have some experience of what it is like and how we cope with stressful situations.

People have different ways of coping with stress. Some need to relax quietly, while others find that doing some exercise gets the stress 'out of their system'.

So, the way that we perceive and recognise stress, both in ourselves, and those around us, is very important.

We need *some* stress to feel motivated and enthusiastic. But too much stress can cause ill health – for example, if too many new or challenging things happen at once, or if the challenges go on for too long. Getting the balance right helps us to cope with stress in a positive way and lead a healthy, active life.

How does stress affect your health?

Stress is not considered a direct risk factor for coronary heart disease, as we're not sure how it affects the development of the disease. However, the way that you respond to stress can encourage unhealthy behaviour, such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, and overeating. These can all increase your risk of developing coronary heart disease.

How can you manage stress?

Once you have identified the things that are causing you stress, think about how you could tackle each source of stress. For example:

- If you have trouble managing your workload, you could talk to your manager and maybe arrange to go on a time management course.
- If you find that you are rushing around all the time, think carefully about what really matters to you. Can you work out what your priorities are, and drop the less important things?
- If you are having family difficulties, perhaps you could think about having counselling, or arrange to spend more time with your family or friends doing activities that you all enjoy.

There's also a lot you can do to manage stress or anxiety. For example:

- Avoid stressful situations at home or at work if you can.
- Learn to say 'No' to people, when you feel overburdened.
- Find out about techniques for managing stress. Your GP will be able to advise you and help you decide on the best way to deal with it.
- Talk to friends, workmates and family. Or find out about joining a support group.
- Learn how to relax. Some people find that physical activity, and/or yoga and other relaxation techniques can help.

Making some changes to your lifestyle may help to reduce the effects of stress on your body. For example:

- take more exercise
- eat well, and drink plenty of water
- cut down on alcohol
- give up smoking
- make more time for rest and relaxation.

For more information

bhf.org.uk

BHF Heart Helpline: 0300 330 3311 – for information and support on anything related to heart health.

This service is available in English only. Phone lines open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.

BHF booklets:

Coping with stress (in English)

To order these *free* resources, call the **BHF Orderline** on **0870 600 6566**