



Carers: Coping with Stress and Depression

Stress

Stress is part of everyday life and, for many carers; stress can be a major factor affecting their health.

Stress is caused by the many demands made on our time and energy and the expectations we have of ourselves. Not all stress is negative – stress can alert you to potential dangers and can also spur you on to achieve a goal or complete a task. However, sometimes the balance tips too far and the pressure becomes so intense or so persistent that you may feel unable to cope.

Stress can make it hard to cope with the demands of caring. You can become more and more exhausted, tense and irritable, putting a strain on relationships. This can make you feel you are losing control over your life and that there is no way of regaining this control.

The first step in dealing with stress is to recognise that it is happening. You may have so little time to yourself that you don't realise at first. When you do start noticing the symptoms of stress (see below), do not struggle on, hoping it will go away. The sooner you deal with the problem, the better, and just talking about how you feel can help you find a way to deal with it.

Symptoms of Stress

The symptoms of stress can be both mental and physical, and can vary from person to person:

- Mental symptoms can include anxiety, anger, depression, lack of appetite, sleeplessness, crying often, tiredness and difficulty concentrating.
- Physical symptoms can include chest pains, cramps, muscle spasms, chest pains, dizziness, restlessness, nervous twitches and breathlessness.

In the long-term some of these stress symptoms can affect your health - putting you at risk of high blood pressure, which can lead to heart attacks and stroke.

Coping with Stress

Support

Talking to other people who are in a similar situation can be a great help when you are feeling stressed. Not everyone finds this easy but it may be a surprise to find that others feel the same way as you. For example, you could join a local carers' group to share your experiences.

Your local carers' group may also be able to help you get a break from caring so you can allow yourself some breathing space. Even if just for a couple of hours each week to treat yourself to something you enjoy.

If you are not the sort of person who wants to join a group why not try talking online at the Carers UK website forum where you can meet other carers anonymously, share experiences and find support.

If you can, talk to your family and friends as well. Just talking about how you feel and getting it out into the open, can make you feel better. Sharing your feelings and problems with those close to you may mean that they realise that you need more help from them.

Self-help

If you are feeling tearful, angry or have other symptoms of stress, there are a number of steps you can take to help bring down your stress levels. These include:

- Go out of the room – or right outside if you can – for at least five minutes. Take a deep breath and hold it for a count of three, then breathe out. Repeat again, until you feel more relaxed, but not so often that you feel dizzy.
- Relax your muscles. Tense muscles are a physical sign that you are stressed. Training on relaxation techniques is often available locally. Your local healthy living centre or local library may have information about this as well as books or tapes about relaxation.
- Don't drink or smoke too much. Alcohol and cigarettes have harmful effects on your body, and make you more at risk of the physical effects of stress.
- Caffeine can have similar effects on your body as stress, so watch your coffee intake.
- Get active. Physical exercise is a simple way to relieve tension. Even a walk to the shops can help reduce your stress levels.
- Try to pace yourself and tackle one thing at a time. Be realistic about what you expect of yourself. Learn to say “no” to other people, some of the time at least.

Treatment

Talk to your GP, who will have seen a lot of patients with stress-related problems. Consider counselling or another talking treatment. A counsellor will listen to you, and help you to find ways of dealing with your stress.

There are also medicines you might be able to take to relieve some of the symptoms of stress. If stress is making you feel depressed, your GP may prescribe antidepressants to help make life feel better. Different antidepressants suit different people, so if you aren't happy with the one you are prescribed, go back to your GP. Consider all of your options before taking antidepressants. Ask your GP for information about side effects. Tell your GP if you would prefer to try talking treatments first.

Depression is an illness, just as flu and chickenpox are. In fact, depression is one of the most common medical conditions in Europe today.

At some point in our lives one in five people will suffer from some form of depression. Usually this is a temporary low (perhaps linked to bereavement, the illness of a family member, redundancy or divorce) – gradually improving until things are back to normal. However, sometimes depression can go on to play a large part in our lives, with 3-4% of men and 7-8% of women suffering from moderate to severe depressive illness at any one time.

Knowing what the symptoms are, who you should talk to and what treatments are available should help you deal with depression quickly.

Depression is when we feel low or sad and can't find any pleasure in life. Many of us feel like this sometimes, but depression is when these feelings last longer and are more extreme.

Other symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling hopeless, irritable, anxious, worried or tearful.
- Feeling unable to cope with every-day things that you would not have thought twice about in the past.
- Losing your appetite, losing weight or having trouble sleeping.
- In extreme cases you might even think about harming yourself or other people.

Depression can build up gradually, so you may not realise how much it is affecting you. And because of the stressful nature of their lives, carers can be more prone to depression.

If you have recognised any of these symptoms in yourself, you may be affected by depression.

Coping with Depression

There are steps you can take to help tackle depression and move on. What works will be different for each individual but here are some ideas:

- Don't keep it to yourself. If you are depressed, try telling someone about it. It often helps to talk things over with someone you trust rather than keeping it all bottled up.
- Do some exercise – get out of doors, even if only for a walk. This will not only help to keep you fit but may help aid sleep. Try to keep active – whether that is housework, DIY or your normal routine. All of these can help take your mind off thoughts that may make you more depressed.
- Look after yourself – eat a healthy diet and steer clear of alcohol as this can make your depression worse.
- Meet with other people who have experienced depression and hear how they coped. In Carers support groups there will be others who have had similar experiences to you.
- Keep hopeful – remind yourself that you are suffering from an experience that many other people have gone through. You will eventually come out of it – although you may find it hard to believe at the time.

Treatment

If you feel that you may be depressed, see your GP. It is important to see your GP sooner rather than later, so you can start having treatment and start feeling like your old self again.

If your GP thinks you have mild depression that may improve, they might simply suggest that they see you again in a couple of week's time.

If your GP thinks you need treatment, there are two types they may prescribe:

- A short course of medication – for example, a short course of anti-depressant drugs to help lighten your mood to allow you to cope more effectively. These can take two to four weeks to have an effect. Antidepressants can work well, and help you to feel and cope better, but you may have to try different doses – or different types – to find the best one for you.

- A talking treatment - such as counselling or psychotherapy. These offer a chance to talk through difficulties and feelings and can help you to learn how to manage your stress or depression by using a variety of techniques.

If your GP feels that you have severe depression, they may suggest a talking treatment and antidepressants. Seek advice and consider all of your options before deciding on a course of treatment.

Courtesy of www.carersuk.org