

Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety are two things we hear a lot about and are both very common reactions in everyday life. This is understandable as both stress and anxiety can be triggered when we are dealing with difficult situations and life is constantly full of challenges! It can also be difficult to tell the difference between the two, as when we are stressed or anxious, we experience very similar sensations in our body. Like other emotional responses it is important to understand the differences as it helps direct us to the most effective ways of managing them.

What is stress?

Although everybody can describe feeling stressed at some time or another there is no universal definition. A simple way of explaining stress is that it involves being placed under some kind of pressure (real or perceived) and believing that we do not have sufficient resources to cope. That is, we think that the demands of the situation outweigh our abilities to manage the situation. Generally, the stressor (the thing that has triggered our stress) is something that is imposed on us, such as having to meet a deadline, or receiving an unexpected bill, or difficulties in a relationship. Stress can be short-term (e.g. meeting a deadline) or long-term (e.g. living with pain).



What is anxiety?

 Some anxiety is completely normal. Common situations in which people experience anxiety include going for a job interview, giving a speech, or trying something new. Although anxiety feels uncomfortable, most people will manage to get through the situation.

Problematic anxiety is characterised by fear that is out of proportion to the situation we are facing. When people feel anxious they will often avoid certain things or situations, even when there is no actual danger. Anxiety may be triggered by external situations, or by internal experiences (e.g. noticing unusual physical sensations or health issues, or negative thoughts going through our minds).

Sometimes people can experience anxiety to such a level that it begins to interfere with their day-to-day lives. When this happens, the anxiety response is considered excessive and is sometimes diagnosed as a type of anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are common and affect about 25% of the population (to find out more see our 'What is Anxiety' information sheet).

Why do they feel the same?

Stress and anxiety can both trigger the 'fight or flight' response in our body so physically the two experiences can feel similar. The 'fight or flight' response is the automatic physiological reactions that occur when we believe we are under threat. It can bring on sensations and reactions including muscle tension and aches, increased heart rate, fatigue, nausea or butterflies, and difficulties concentrating or sleeping. We may also experience irritability or anger.



How to manage stress

To manage stress, it can helpful to identify the stressors. Once we clearly identify the thing or things making us feel stressed, we can focus our energies on how to problem solve and manage the situation (see our 'Problem Solving' worksheet to help you find ways to manage a stressor). We may also need to re-evaluate what coping resources we have available, as often we are feeling stressed we underestimate the range of options available to us. When our body is under stress, it can also be helpful to undertake activities that help calm and relax us (see 'Coping with Stress' information sheet).

How to manage anxiety

Normal anxiety comes and goes and generally we cope by 'surfing the wave' of emotion. By that we mean that we notice our anxiety rising, peaking and ultimately subsiding. We usually do nothing more than sit with the unpleasant sensations until they settle.

The key to effectively managing persistent and problematic anxiety is to understand and target the components that keep the anxiety going. Managing anxiety involves re-evaluating the threat, approaching and testing feared and avoided situations, and using de-arousal strategies to calm our body. These strategies are often tailored according to the particular type of anxiety someone is experiencing. On the CCI website you will find a range of resources for learning about and managing various anxiety problems.