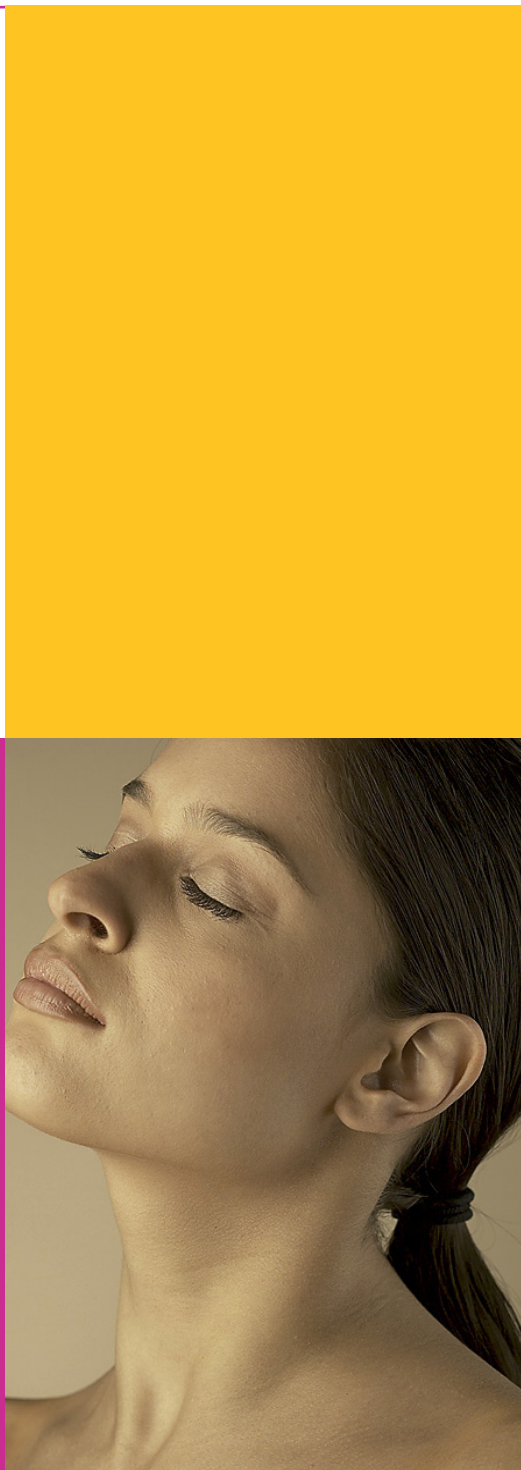




GUIDE TO MENTAL HEALTH



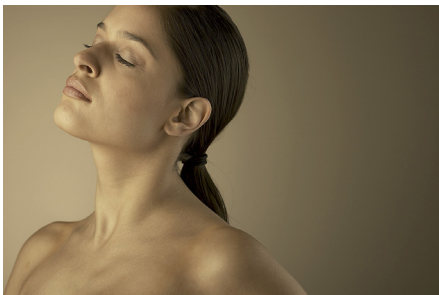
Mental health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there is no one official definition of mental health. One way to think about mental health is by looking at how effectively and successfully a person functions.

Feeling capable and competent, being able to handle normal levels of stress, maintaining satisfying relationships, leading an independent life and being able to recover from difficult situations are all signs of mental health.

On the other hand the terms 'mental health problems' and 'mental illness' describe a broad range of psychological, emotional or behavioral disorders and a state of being in which an individual has difficulty handling everyday situations and feelings.

There are a wide variety of mental health illnesses. This leaflet will discuss some of them but further information can be found on the internet. You should talk over any concerns you have with your GP.



Stress

Defining stress

Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response. It can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, nervous or anxious.

Ongoing stress is thought to be bad for health, although this is difficult to prove.

Common symptoms of stress

Stress can manifest itself in many different ways, but these generally fall into four categories:

- **Physical:** fatigue, headache, insomnia, muscle aches/stiffness, heart palpitations, chest pains, abdominal cramps, nausea, trembling, cold extremities, flushing or sweating and frequent colds.
- **Mental:** decrease in concentration and memory, indecisiveness, mind racing or going blank, confusion, loss of sense of humour.
- **Emotional:** anxiety, nervousness, depression, anger, frustration, worry, fear, irritability, impatience, short temper.
- **Behavioural:** pacing, fidgeting, nervous habits, increased eating, smoking, drinking, crying, yelling, swearing, blaming and even throwing things or hitting.

What causes stress?

Stress is difficult to measure and the causes of stress can vary. It may build up as a result of a particular circumstance or it can arise as a result of an ongoing situation.

External stressors include:

- **Physical environment:** noise, bright lights, heat, confined spaces.
- **Social rudeness:** bossiness or aggressiveness on the part of someone else.
- **Organisational:** rules, regulations, “red tape,” deadlines.
- **Major life events:** death of a relative, lost job, promotion, new baby.
- **Daily hassles:** commuting, misplacing keys, mechanical breakdowns.

Internal stressors include:

- **Lifestyle choices:** caffeine, not enough sleep, overloaded schedule.
- **Negative self-talk:** pessimistic thinking, self-criticism, over-analysing.
- **Mind traps:** unrealistic expectations, taking things personally, all-or-nothing thinking, exaggerating, rigid thinking.
- **Stressful personality traits:** perfectionist, workaholic, pleaser.

It is important to remember that most of the stress we have is self-generated. Recognising that we create most of our own upsets is an important first step to dealing with them.

Mastering stress

The following can be helpful in mastering stress:

Change lifestyle habits

- Decrease caffeine
- Well-balanced diet
- Eat slowly
- Regular exercise (at least 30 minutes, three times per week)
- Adequate sleep
- Leisure time
- Relaxation exercises

Change stressful situations

- Time and money management
- Assertiveness
- Problem-solving
- Possibly leaving a job or a relationship

Change your thinking

- Look at things more positively
- See problems as opportunities
- Refute negative thoughts
- Keep a sense of humour

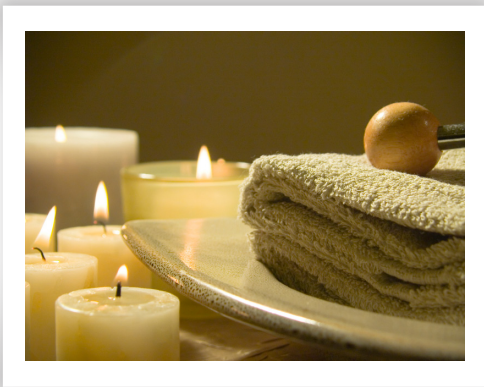
Diversion and distraction - take time out (anything from a short walk to a holiday) to get away from the things that are bothering you. This will not necessarily resolve the problem, but it gives you a break and a chance for your stress levels to decrease. Then, you can return to deal with issues feeling more rested and in a better frame of mind.

Anxiety

Defining anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, apprehension or worry, often accompanied by physical symptoms such as rapid heart beat, palpitations or shortness of breath. Everybody will feel anxious from time to time and anxiety is a natural reaction to a stressful situation. In some cases it can even improve performance.

For others, though, anxiety can become severe or prolonged. In fact, for one in 10 people in the UK, anxiety interferes with everyday life. This is called an anxiety disorder and is considered to be a mental health problem.



Anxiety is 'abnormal' if it:

- is out of proportion to the stressful situation
- persists when a stressful situation has gone, or the stress is minor
- appears for no apparent reason when there is no stressful situation.

Anxiety disorders include:

- **Panic disorder:** This involves recurring panic attacks - a severe attack of anxiety and fear which occurs suddenly, often without warning and for no apparent reason.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD):** OCD consists of recurring obsessions, compulsions, or both. Obsessions are recurring thoughts, images, or urges that cause you anxiety or disgust.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder:** This condition may follow a severe trauma such as a serious assault or a life-threatening accident.
- **Social phobia:** This is possibly the most common phobia. It is where you become very anxious about what other people may think of you, or how they may judge you.
- **Specific phobias:** Many people are phobic about specific things or situations such as claustrophobia or a fear of injections.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD):** A long-term condition causing the sufferer to have feelings of anxiety on most days.

Common symptoms of anxiety

Psychological symptoms can include:

- insomnia
- feeling worried or uneasy all the time
- feeling tired
- being irritable or quick to anger
- an inability to concentrate
- a fear that you are going “mad”
- feeling unreal and not in control of your actions
- detachment from your surroundings.

It’s also possible to experience a range of physical symptoms such as:

- abdominal discomfort
- diarrhoea
- dry mouth
- rapid heartbeat or palpitations
- tightness or pain in the chest
- shortness of breath
- dizziness
- frequent urination
- difficulty swallowing
- shaking.

What causes anxiety disorders?

Anxiety may be a symptom of other mental health problems, such as depression or alcohol dependence. It can also be caused by substances such as ecstasy or caffeine or by withdrawal from long-term drugs like tranquillisers.

Sometimes anxiety can be associated with a physical illness, such as thyroid disorder. For this reason it’s advisable to see your GP to rule out a physical cause.

Treatment

The main aim of treatment is to help you to reduce symptoms so that anxiety no longer affects your day-to-day life. The treatment options depend on what condition you have and how severely you are affected. They may include one or more of the following:

Non-medication treatments:

- understanding
- counselling
- anxiety management courses
- cognitive behaviour therapy
- self-help

Medication

- antidepressant medicines
- benzodiazepines such as diazepam
- buspirone
- beta-blocker medicines

In some cases a combination of treatments such as cognitive therapy and an antidepressant may work better than either treatment alone.

Depression

Defining depression

Depression is an illness that involves the body, mood and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way they feel about themselves, and the way they think about things.

A depressive disorder is not a sign of personal weakness and people with a depressive disease cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better.

Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help most people with depression.

Common symptoms

As with many mental health problems, there are a number of symptoms of depression. The severity of the symptoms can vary from mild to severe. In general the more symptoms you have the more severe the depression.

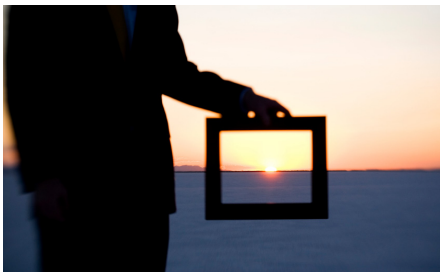
Symptoms include:

- low mood for most of the day, nearly every day
- loss of enjoyment and interest in life
- abnormal sadness, often with weepiness
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness or uselessness
- poor motivation with even simple tasks seeming difficult
- poor concentration
- sleeping problems
- lack of energy, always tired
- difficulty with affection, including going off sex
- poor appetite and weight loss or the reverse with comfort eating and weight gain
- irritability, agitation, or restlessness
- physical symptoms such as headaches, palpitations, chest pains, and general aches
- recurrent thoughts of death.

This presents a very bleak picture. However, it's important to remember that depression isn't an absolute - it's not simply a case of either you're depressed or you're not. There's a progression from feeling blue to the full clinical illness described above. Even then, you won't suffer from every symptom.

Quick fact

Over 5000 people commit suicide in the UK each year. ³



What causes depression?

The exact cause is not known. Anyone can become depressed and it can develop for no apparent reason. It can also be triggered by a life event such as relationship problems, bereavement, redundancy or illness. In many people it is a combination of a low mood with some life problem that leads to a spiral down into depression.

Women tend to develop depression more often than men. Particularly common times for women to become depressed are after childbirth (post-natal depression) and the menopause.

A chemical imbalance in the brain might be a factor. This is not fully understood. However, an alteration in some chemicals in the brain is thought to be the reason why antidepressants work in treating depression.

Quick fact

Clinical depression is growing at an incredible rate and is now the number one psychological disorder in the Western world.⁴



Treatment

Regular exercise such as a daily brisk walk, jog or swim is thought to help ease symptoms. Treatment with one or more of the following is also often advised:

- talking through feelings
- antidepressant medicines
- cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)

In some severe cases specialist medicines or electrical treatment (ECT) are options.

Further help and advice

Samaritans

Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (UK), 1850 60 90 90 (ROI)

www.samaritans.org

Stress Management Society

Tel: 0203 142 8650

www.stress.org.uk

Depression Alliance

Tel: 0845 123 2320

www.depressionalliance.org

Useful Links

You can also obtain more information from the following websites:

www.bbc.co.uk

www.patient.co.uk

www.rcpsych.ac.uk

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

References

1 <http://www.news-medical.net/news/>

2 <http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk>

3 <http://www.recoveryourlife.com>

4 <http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk>

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