

Finding the line

When does stress become something more serious?

by GAYNOR PARKIN

One of the tricky things about stress is that each of us experiences stress differently. This makes it difficult to describe what 'normal' stress looks like, and subsequently, to define clearly at what point stress turns into something more serious.

In general terms, identifying stress usually means noticing specific changes in ourselves, or someone else. Usually these changes fall into these categories:

- Physical changes; such as body tension or feeling breathless
- Emotional changes; maybe feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- Thinking changes; perhaps having trouble seeing the big picture or remembering important details
- Behaviour changes; being less productive or drinking too much coffee

Of course there can be other reasons for changes like these. However usually if we notice several changes over a specific time period we often identify the signs as signs of stress.

HOW MUCH STRESS IS NORMAL?

Another tricky question to answer because again there are individual differences. Some people are comfortable with and even enjoy high levels of stress. They may think of the signs as signs of challenge, or excitement. Other people experience even small amounts of stress as uncomfortable. There is no right or wrong about this, it's just personal style

and preference. It is helpful to know which style you tend to prefer as this has implications for career and life choices.

One fact we do know is that as human beings, we perform best and maintain better well-being when stress or challenge is for specific periods of time, and is balanced with recovery (when we recharge our mental and physical batteries). Oscillating between periods of challenge and periods of recovery is ideal.

Back to our original question then – when does stress become something more serious?

Psychologists usually answer this by asking people questions about time frames and the impact of the stress on someone's life and functioning.

Generally, stress may become a problem, or something more serious, when it has been going on for too long, when there hasn't been enough opportunity for recovery, and/or when the stress is interfering in the person's ability to do their job well or function well in their life. For example the stress is interfering with their ability to be a good parent, or to maintain close relationships.

As well as this interference in the person's life or functioning, or both, stress can morph into other difficulties. Often these will show up as anxiety or depression.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU NOTICE THESE SIGNS IN YOURSELF, OR IN SOMEONE ELSE?

Firstly, and most importantly, tell someone, and get help. The person you tell will ideally be someone you trust, and whom you feel comfortable with. You don't have to give details; just let them know you are finding things hard. If the words are hard show them this article, or anything else you have seen or read which describes how you are feeling.

Secondly, seek help for yourself, or ask the person you have told to do it for you or with you, if the help seeking feels too hard.

GOOD PLACES TO START INCLUDE:

- Your GP
- Your Employee Assistance programme at work
- NZ Depression Helpline 0800 111757
- NZ Mental Health Foundation
<http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/>

The good news is; anxiety and depression are both very treatable.

With a combination of the right help and support, and sometimes with medication, people recover well and stay well. Often the treatment includes reviewing the person's usual coping strategies for managing stress, and adding to these strategies with some new tools to strengthen personal and professional resilience.

SIGNS THAT YOU OR SOMEONE ELSE MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING:

DEPRESSION:

- Sad, depressed or irritable mood
- Feeling guilty
- Less interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Withdrawing from or avoiding people
- Finding it harder than usual to do things
- Trouble concentrating, difficulty making decisions
- Suicidal thoughts, even making a suicide plan
- Recurrent thoughts of death
- Low self-esteem or self-worth
- Seeing the future as hopeless
- Self-critical thoughts
- Tiredness or loss of energy
- Significant weight loss or decrease in appetite (but not if you are dieting)
- Change in sleep pattern – difficulty sleeping, or sleeping more than usual
- Decreased sexual desire.

ANXIETY

- Feeling nervous
- Frequent worrying
- Trembling, twitching, feeling shaky and restless
- Muscle tension, muscle aches, muscle soreness
- Restlessness
- Easily tired, shortness of breath
- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweating not due to the heat
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Nausea, diarrhoea or stomach problems, frequent urination
- Hot flashes or chills
- Trouble swallowing or 'lump in throat', dry mouth
- Feeling keyed up or on edge
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Avoiding places where you might be anxious
- Frequent thoughts of danger
- Seeing yourself as unable to cope
- Frequent thoughts that something terrible will happen.