

*Tension and strain can often result in a low mood, and if ongoing, be confused for depression. Vicki Notaro asks an expert how to combat stress before it escalates*

**H**ave you ever felt so stressed, that you're down in the dumps? Perhaps someone else's behaviour you can't control has you on edge, your boss is an ogre or your workload is really heavy right now. Everything else is fine, but stress has you reaching boiling point – only, it's not resulting in anger or blowing your top. You're turning it inwards and it's making you feel almost... depressed.

This is a common situation for lots of women today. The stress doesn't let up, it feels near constant, and as a result your mood is low and you feel anxious and unhappy. It can have a physical effect on the body that mirrors the symptoms of depression – insomnia, fatigue, sadness, loss of interest in hobbies and sex, and a general feeling of doom and gloom.

"It's absolutely true that chronic stress that is not managed has the potential to become a more serious mental health issue like General Anxiety Disorder and depression," explains therapist Fiona Brennan, the author of self-help bible *The Positive Habit*. "Stress is extremely physical as it releases a constant drip of cortisol into the body that causes inflammation. This leads to muscle tension, digestive issues such as IBS and shallow breathing in the immediate term."

It's also true that you can be under a lot of stress and feeling the effects of it without even realising there's something wrong. "Many people are unfortunately operating from (their rather ironically called) sympathetic nervous system which is more commonly known as the classic fight and flight system," explains Fiona.

"They have become so accustomed to this modus operandi that they think it is normal to suffer both physically and mentally. This is entirely understandable, if you have been struggling for a long time you can forget what it is like to live from the calmer parasympathetic nervous system which is also known as the 'rest and digest' system. Feeling awful becomes normal. This is why it's so essential for people to feel the rewards of feeling calm and adopting a stress management lifestyle. We are pleasure seeking creatures and there is no greater reward than feeling healthy, calm and happy every day. Knowing that you have the capacity to cope with whatever challenges the day brings is something worth cultivating."

So, I ask, what are the best ways to go about relieving stress all by yourself? Lots of people don't want or need to resort to therapy or counselling, or have the money to spend on so-called 'self-care' items that promise relaxation.

"The first thing is to be honest with yourself and to become aware of your stress levels," says Fiona. That means checking in with yourself physically - do you feel tired even if you have rested? How fast does your mind race and what impact does this have on your sleep and digestive system?

Next up is the infamous self-care, but it doesn't have to cost a penny according to Fiona. "Whatever it is that helps you to feel calm and grounded needs to become a daily habit. I recommend a routine for both the mind and the body. For the head, mindfulness, meditation and mental rehearsals of

being calm are the incredibly empowering. For the body daily exercise and good nutrition are essential for maintaining a balanced mood."

The next tip is as free as it gets – breathing. "The tool that will transform both the mind and the body and that truly unites them is deep belly breaths. If you suffer from stress, you need to make deep breathing a priority." It sounds simple and maybe even a bit silly, but making it a habit and not just breathing deep or even hyperventilating when a crisis comes is the single most effective thing you can do to manage stress, says Fiona.

In today's culture, it can seem "cool" to be overly busy and always on, and some seem to thrive on it to an unhealthy degree, while also making others feel bad about themselves. I ask Fiona for help on coping with this unhealthy fascination with being "flat out".

"Being busy can be seen as a badge of honour and this needs to change!" she agrees. "We live in a competitive culture where people strive to be busier and more 'successful' than everybody else. Success is rated on numbers, the higher the better - how many followers we have, how much money we earn, what rating we are given in work, with this pressure people feel they need to be always on. The truth is that nobody thrives with this comparison-led, always on mindset. True success means peace of mind.

"It is vital to remember though, that nobody can make us feel anything. The calmer you are, the more aware you are of owning your feelings. How busy other people are and if they feel the need to shout it from the rooftops is their business - not yours."

For me, stress comes when I'm not in a position to action something myself, and I'm waiting or relying on somebody else to do it. This often results in me taking on way too much, and worrying myself over too much at once. I ask Fiona how to deal with stress that's outside of our control.

"The wisdom of Ancient Greece and stoic philosophy is particularly useful when dealing with things that are out of our control. It's essential to remember that SO much does lie outside of our control from the weather, to situations such as traffic, flight delays and of course the most challenging one, what other people do and say. Acceptance of this is vital.

"The good news is that so much MORE lies within your control, your thoughts, feelings and behaviors are all within your control. Our single biggest trigger is other people, so learning to not take things personally is key to staying happy and well. Understanding that other people see the world through an entirely different lens to you is so important."

So the next time you're feeling frustrated, upset, overrun or just bone tired with a whizzing mind, try and remember that how these things affect you all begins and ends with you.

It might sound airy fairy, but you have a choice – accept reality or break your own heart trying to fight it. I've been employing some of Fiona's tactics, like morning exercise and just telling myself to cop on in the moment, and they're helping so much. It's a process, so take each day as it comes.

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