

Stress Effects During Major Events

During major events, we generally use much more emotional energy and physical energy than we realise. During these events we put ourselves into a survival state to deal with the issues and hand and to cope with our anxiety, fears, and apprehensions.

When we are faced with situations that may require a high level of mental or physical effort including preparation for possible injury or emotional distress, our body has instinctive mechanisms to ensure we are in the best possible state to combat the problem and survive. These changes require our brain, nervous system, blood circulation and muscles, as well as mental and emotional attitudes, to all work in a different way to normal. When our body is working outside the normal comfort zone in this way, it is referred to as a 'state of stress'.

During a major event indicators that we are in a state of stress may include:

- ▶ Having a very wide-awake, energised feeling
- ▶ Being alert to the details that have to be taken into account
- ▶ Feeling of readiness or sometimes even impatience to meet the problem
- ▶ Having less focus on ourselves and a greater focus on others and what is going on around us
- ▶ Strong awareness of our basic needs for fluids, nutrition, sleep and safety
- ▶ Having a need to be 'doing something'
- ▶ Strong focus on what needs to be done, before thinking about what may happen
- ▶ An ability to put our emotions to the side while we 'manage' the situation at hand



Being in a state of stress enables us to:

- ▶ Focus on what is important
- ▶ Keep important details and information at the ready
- ▶ Think and respond clearly and quickly
- ▶ Work effectively for long periods if required
- ▶ Concentrate for long periods if required
- ▶ Put aside our feelings and emotions in order to do what has to be done
- ▶ Not feel hunger, thirst or fatigue while others are in need
- ▶ Keep on track with what is happening

The state of stress helps us to survive during critical times. Being in a state of stress however uses a great deal of energy and cannot be sustained for extended periods. We can generally keep going for as long as required, but eventually we will start to feel the effects of stress. It is not possible to maintain the same energy continuously and this is when we may start to display stress symptoms.

The longer the period of readiness lasts, the stronger the symptoms are likely to be. Stress is a normal response to abnormal events and understanding how to manage our response during major events will minimise our personal risk and avoid ongoing problems.

Indicators that we are starting to be impacted by the effects of stress include:

- ▶ Tiredness, loss of energy and loss of enthusiasm
- ▶ Body tension and tightness in muscles
- ▶ Being overcome by emotions (such as tearfulness, anger, fear, blame, helplessness)
- ▶ Experiencing physical sensations (such as headaches, nausea, trembling, sweating, aches and pains)
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed and that everything seems too hard
- ▶ Having difficulty making decisions and thinking clearly
- ▶ Having difficulty concentrating or remembering details
- ▶ Having difficulty speaking clearly, forgetting words and names, slurring words
- ▶ Taking risks and shortcuts
- ▶ Losing awareness of our need for nourishment (not eating, drinking, resting when required)
- ▶ Increased desire for stimulants (coffee, alcohol, sugar, caffeine)
- ▶ Wanting to avoid talking about the event and what is/has happened
- ▶ Lack of interest in moving forward and loss of ability to plan next steps
- ▶ Being overly sensitive to what others say or do
- ▶ Feeling tired but being unable to sleep (experiencing disturbed sleep and nightmares)
- ▶ Increased irritability, impatience and restlessness
- ▶ Change in need for social contact (not wanting to be with family/friends – or always needing them around)
- ▶ Having a need to talk about the event constantly



The state of stress is what helps us to prepare for, and manage, a major event. If an event has been extended in duration, there has been a long lead up to the event, or there is a high degree of uncertainty, it is possible for a pattern of stress to form. If left unaddressed stress can become a lifestyle or habitual state and can lead to a range of health issues. These steps will help to break the pattern:

- ▶ Recognise you are stressed – listen to others who may be able to see you more clearly than you see yourself
- ▶ Understand your own stress response – recognise the stress symptoms that may create more stress for you and put you into a stress pattern
- ▶ Acknowledge the need to break the stress pattern – you need to make the decision before you can achieve a result
- ▶ While there will be many things about your life you cannot change, there will be some tangible things you can change – be prepared to make those changes.
- ▶ Introduce some forms of relaxation time and activity into each day
- ▶ Make purposeful effort to doing things you enjoy or help you to feel good each day – this can be very difficult in the early stages after a major event and we may often feel guilty for experiencing joy

In addition to looking after you, this is an important time to keep a watchful eye on your family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. It does not take major initiatives to make a difference, but it does take regular focus and commitment. The following actions will achieve positive outcomes in reducing tension and anxiety and assist in returning you to a healthy stress level:

- ▶ Ask for help when you need it – it is not a sign of weakness and will aid your recovery
- ▶ Make time to be with your family or friends and keep regular contact with other people you enjoy being with
- ▶ Talk about what is happening to you with those you trust (if talking is difficult writing it down can help)
- ▶ Return to your normal routine as soon as possible
- ▶ Eat regular meals and stay well hydrated
- ▶ Minimise your intake of stimulants (sugar, alcohol, tobacco, caffeine)
- ▶ Introduce some relaxation activities (deep breathing, meditating, listening to quiet music)
- ▶ Participate in some form of rhythmic exercise (walking, swimming) – but be careful not to overdo it
- ▶ If you are feeling very tense do some stretching or have a massage
- ▶ Give yourself every opportunity for good sleep – or if you are not sleeping well ensure you have regular rest time
- ▶ Take care with day to day activities such as cooking, driving and lifting as accidents may increase when your concentration is reduced
- ▶ Physical energy and emotions are related. Try not to think about emotional problems when you are tired
- ▶ Give yourself permission to feel upset or distressed – emotional release is a healthy part of the healing process

- ▶ If you are emotional take someone aside to let off steam with (emotional distress can be contagious)
- ▶ Emotions feed emotions – try to express as much positive emotions as possible (such as optimism and confidence in the future)
- ▶ If you have returned to work, be careful not to overload yourself or work long hours
- ▶ If tasks or decisions feel overwhelming, break them down into smaller components and deal with them that way. If that is still challenging take some time out and return to it later
- ▶ Be prepared to leave anything that is not essential to be done until later – the world won't stop if things are not perfectly in order
- ▶ Give yourself permission to laugh and look for things that will let you experience laughter
- ▶ Make use of all resources that are provided for you by your family, friends, community and your employer



📞 Your EAP is there to help

Remember the EAP offers support through confidential face-to-face, telephone and online counselling for individuals and coaching and advice for managers. Appointments can be made by telephoning your EAP provider, Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC), on **1300 360 364**.