



# The Stress Trap

When pressure and anxiety get the upper hand, you can get mired in unhealthy behaviours

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**WE CAN'T STRESS THIS ENOUGH:** Most Canadians are filled with anxiety, and it's doing more harm than they realize. While it's no surprise that stress makes you feel as bad as a diet of cigarettes and cola, you might be surprised to know that everyday stressors are contributing to a number of health problems. Not only does stress lead to tension headaches, stomach upset, appetite changes, decreased immune-system function and sleeplessness, but it's also been linked to chronic diseases, including arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's and cancer.

As if that wasn't enough, stress also places a heavy weight on us mentally. It can lead to depression, affect our sense of self-worth, wreak havoc with our relationships and shorten our life expectancy. "My take on stress, anxiety and depression is that they generally make most things worse," says psychiatrist Dr. Michael Trew, senior medical director, Addiction & Mental Health, Alberta Health Services in Calgary. Now that's stressful. And problems are only exacerbated with poor methods of coping such as smoking, overeating and excessive drinking.

The truth is, says Trew, stress is a part of life that isn't going to go away. And whether you're worried about paying off your mounting credit-card debt, upset about that looming deadline at work or fretting about how to deal with an aging parent, the key to keeping stress in check is learning to control it.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE STRESSED?

In layperson's terms, "stress happens when things are different from what we expected or when significant change is occurring in life," says Trew. "It really refers to our body-mind response to change or to remaining in an undesired state."

When we're stressed, we go through the "fight or flight" response, which is our body's reaction to the world around us, says Beverly Beuermann-King, a stress expert and a speaker with Work Smart Live Smart who is based in Little Britain, Ont. No matter which type of stress you're facing — and there are positive stresses, such as getting married, taking an exciting trip, starting a new job or having a baby — our bodies react. Our heart rate rises; our blood pressure goes up; our blood flows faster to our muscles; and we sweat and feel short of breath.

Even good anxiety also increases levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which peaks in times of stress. Studies have proven that too much cortisol can prevent our brains from forming new memories and accessing old ones. (That's why it's best to have notes to refer to when speaking in public, for example.)

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### HOW TO CONTROL IT: THE SOS PRINCIPLE

Beuermann-King advocates the SOS stress-management strategy, which stands for Situation, Ourselves and Support. When something stressful happens, the first step is to take control and be a problem solver. Step back, gain perspective and ask, “What can I do?” In the case of a fender-bender, for example, first, you calmly exchange with the other driver. The second step is to take care of yourself. Whatever the stressful situation, “take a break from the stress. Do something that promotes relaxation,” Beuermann-King says. Instead of worrying about how much your car insurance will go up, take your mind off the accident by going for a walk or watching a movie. The final step is to get support: vent to a friend or get your questions answered by your insurance adjuster.

“Stress presents a bigger problem when we perceive it as out of control,” adds Trew. “The concept of self-control is the important element here.”



### OTHER METHODS FOR HANDLING STRESS

There is evidence that the simple things you can do every day, such as eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise and having a good night's sleep, can make a big impact on how your body reacts to and deals with stress. Maintaining a positive attitude is vital. (You know how the saying goes, “Don't sweat the small stuff.”) Having a good support system you trust — family, friends, co-workers, counsellors — helps when anxiety sets in. You can also try relaxation techniques, such as yoga, meditation and deep breathing.

Journalling may help tame stress because it sheds light on the stress traps in your daily life. “It's a helpful way to work through our feelings and reflect on and gain insight into our day,” says Dr. Marjorie Docherty, a clinical professor of family medicine at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. For those who have severe anxiety, Docherty says cognitive-behavioural therapy, self-regulation therapy, or medication may be necessary. “Appropriate treatment for stress can make a huge difference to the quality and your enjoyment of your life,” she says.

Beware of the harmful things that people do to try to cope, such as drinking too much, smoking, gambling or spending compulsively. “These and other attempts to soothe discomfort sometimes have consequences that are much worse than the original problem,” says Trew. Adds Docherty: “Sometimes the behaviours we get into to cope with stress seem like being on a gerbil wheel. It's going in circles and we're not sure how to get off and walk straight again.”

### IT'S ALL IN A DAY

What are your stress traps? Check out these tips for taking some of the stress out of your working life.

- 1 Prepare for your day the night before — even if it means letting tomorrow morning intrude on this evening. Get your agenda, clothing, lunch, keys and bus fare ready to go.
- 2 Set out a plan for the day but be realistic about the amount of time each item will take and look for potential conflicts. Don't be afraid to cancel that one (or two) impossible thing — be it a lunch date, an after-work shopping mission or a hairdresser's appointment.
- 3 Eat a quality breakfast with adequate protein.
- 4 Give yourself extra time to get to appointments. It's better to arrive early and have to wait a few minutes than to rush in stressed at the last minute.
- 5 Take mini-breaks. A 30-second to two-minute interruption in your routine every 30 to 60 minutes will help remind you of the things that make life worthwhile. Look out the window at the weather, peruse a picture of your family, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to stop yourself from getting too tense.
- 6 Laugh and kibitz with your co-workers. They're in this with you.
- 7 Protect your productivity. When you have serious work to do, turn off your email alert and forward your telephone calls to voice mail. Get back to people only when you've accomplished something. Constant interruptions decrease your output and send your stress levels rocketing.
- 8 Don't schedule meetings and appointments on hectic days such as Mondays and Fridays, when you're catching up on last week's work or rushing to get things done before the weekend.