

FACT SHEET #2

STRESS MASTERY UNDERSTANDING STRESS MANAGEMENT

"A diamond is just a piece of charcoal that handled stress exceptionally well"

Unknown

WHAT IS STRESS AND WHAT IS STRESS MANAGEMENT?

Stress is our body's response to difficulties and changes in our lives. Stress doesn't just affect our mental state and mood; it affects our physical health and overall wellbeing as well. Because life involves constant change and unexpected difficulties, there is no avoiding stress. This is why our goal is not to eliminate stress, but to eliminate unnecessary stress and learn to become resilient to manage stress.

Stress management refers to the coping and preventative strategies we integrate into our lives to navigate stress in a healthy way. Some preventative strategies can involve practising lifestyle mastery (e.g. self-care and physical wellbeing) to make us less receptive to stress, while coping strategies can include mindfulness, self-compassion and reframing our situation to help us "in the moment".

WHAT WE KNOW....

We know that we experience stress when we encounter an adverse or demanding situation. What we also know is that while everyone experiences stress, different situations will cause stress for different people and that we don't all respond to stress in the same way. Stress isn't necessarily a bad thing; however, if we are exposed to it for a long time without managing it in a healthy way, it can have a negative effect on our short-term and long-term physical and psychological health.

A mature leader can acknowledge, identify and manage their stress in helpful and productive ways. The ability to do this is a hallmark of resilient individuals.

SO, WHAT ARE THE FIRST STEPS TO ACHIEVE STRESS MANAGEMENT?

So, the first step in managing stress is to ensure you are aware of what it looks like when you are under stress. We call your unique responses to stress your "stress markers". Recognising when you are stressed is an essential step in personal stress management. If you don't know or tend to deny when you are stressed, and subsequently don't have effective stress management skills, unhelpful or unhealthy stress behaviours can arise. When these unhealthy stress behaviours persist, they can result in harmful short-term and long-term health effects.

Further, recognising your stress markers is an important step to reflect on, even if stress management is a personal strength. Whether we typically handle stress well or not, recognition can help us identify areas of improvement, strength and growth.

EXAMPLE TO RECOGNISE OUR STRESS MARKERS

- 1 Think about a situation when you have felt stressed in the past
- 2 Reflect on the thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical symptoms you experienced during this time

Some examples of thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical symptoms you might experience during stress can be:

Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviours	Physical Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only focusing on the negatives e.g. "there's nothing good here/ everything is going wrong" • Anxious or racing thoughts • 'Defeatist' thoughts e.g. "It's too complicated." • Self-criticising thoughts "I should have/ could have", "I'm not good enough" • Catastrophising thoughts e.g. "This is the worst thing that could happen!" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Restlessness • Irritability or anger • Sadness or depression • Mood swings • Constantly worrying • Confusion • Guilt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overeating or undereating • Angry outbursts • Drug or alcohol misuse • Tobacco use • Social withdrawal • Exercising less often • Memory and concentration problems • Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities • Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing, etc.) • Easily distracted • Becoming impatient with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Muscle tension or pain • Chest pain • Fatigue • Indigestion • Loss or increase in appetite • Sleep problems • Sweating • Dry mouth • Stuttering or stammering

If you are not sure what your stress markers might be, reflect on what those closest to you might say. Our closest family and friends can often quickly list off what we do when we are stressed! Remember to write these down or note them somewhere easy to access, you will soon notice when these stress markers arise, and then be able to implement some stress management skills.

LEADER TIP

In addition to recognising your own stress markers, recognising when one of your direct reports is stressed is helpful in supporting them to develop effective personal stress management skills and develop their resilience also.



If you don't already know, you can ask your team to reflect on and share their stress markers with you. Additionally, when you notice that one of your team members is stressed you can:

- Encourage the employee to apply helpful stress management strategies, and
- Provide practical workplace support such as adjusting workload or timeframes, helping with prioritising work tasks, approving annual leave or helping to resolve an interpersonal conflict.

If you or someone you know needs help contact **TIACS** on 0488 846 988 or your organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), your GP or call: **LifeLine** on 13 11 14, **Kids Helpline** on 1800 551 800, **MensLine Australia** on 1300 789 978 or the **Suicide Call Back Service** on 1300 659 467.