



# ABI, stress and tips

Stress is a physical and psychological reaction, which occurs in response to difficult situations in our lives. It can be triggered by fear, anxiety, relationships, change, work, making decisions, physical factors (e.g. lack of sleep, poor nutrition), illness, pain or the person's environment (e.g. loud noises, poor lighting, too hot or cold).

Coping with stress uses many different cognitive functions of the brain such as recognising the symptoms, identifying causes, formulating a coping strategy and maintaining control of emotions. A brain injury can dramatically affect these cognitive functions resulting in little ability to cope with the stresses of everyday life. Family members can find this hard to realise and believe a person is simply whining, being overemotional or immature.

Symptoms may include increased heart rate and blood pressure, increased rate of breathing, tense muscles, upset stomach, sweating, dilated pupils, lowered immune system, fatigue, sleep disturbance and muscular tension.

## How it effects daily life

Stress can result in difficulty concentrating, increased use of alcohol/cigarettes, significant increase or decrease in eating, depressed feelings as well as increased irritability, anger and anxiety.

Long term stress can cause effects such as:

- reduced protection from disease and infection
- hypertension
- heart/liver/kidney conditions
- psychological disorders

## Tips

### Skills for managing stressful situations

#### Awareness

- become more aware of the sources of stress in their life and how it effects them
- keep a stress awareness diary – listing the date, time, event, severity, physical/mental/behavioural symptoms and coping strategies in the situation

#### Coping

- prepare to cope with the stressful situation by learning various strategies.
- identify what changes a person can make to control the situation and reduce stress levels (e.g.: use self-talk to develop a constructive outlook towards the situation)

#### Acceptance

- acknowledging the stress and being realistic about how it affects a person's lifestyle what aspects are controllable/uncontrollable or important/unimportant this can help a person to stand back from their situation in order to see it more clearly.
- a person may not be able to control the situation but is able to manage their thoughts and reactions to it.

#### Action

- actively making changes to counteract/reduce the level of stress monitoring stress levels
- practicing how stress management skills will be applied using different stressful situations (eg: getting caught in a traffic jam, having an argument)

#### Evaluation

- assess the effectiveness of strategies by:
- noticing the physical, mental and behavioural signs of stress
- selecting a coping strategy for reducing stress
- evaluating whether or not the strategy worked by reassessing the level of severity.



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## What can I do?

### Visualisation

- select and imagine a favourite peaceful place focus the imagination using all 5 senses
- repeat affirmations such as 'I am feeling peaceful' or 'I am letting go of tension'
- practice using visualisation for a few minutes 3 times a day (eg: in the morning and at night in bed)

### Slow breathing techniques

- focus on breathing pattern
- avoid short, shallow breaths from upper chest
- breath deeply and slowly through the nose, feeling movement in the stomach when inhaling and exhaling

### Progressive muscle relaxation

- get comfortable, scan the body for tension and relax the muscles
- focus upon the 4 main muscle groups:
  1. hands, forearms and biceps
  2. head, face, throat and shoulders
  3. chest, stomach and lower back
  4. thighs, buttocks, calves and feet
- tense muscles for 5-7 seconds and relax for 10-15 seconds
- practice for 2 sessions of 15 minutes per day

## Please remember you are not alone.

Headwest's trained and compassionate advocates understand what clients, their Carers and family are facing. Let us help you to gain access to the best services for you following an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI).

**Our service is free and confidential**

**Freecall: 1800 626 370**

Email: [admin@headwest.asn.au](mailto:admin@headwest.asn.au)

Web: [www.headwest.asn.au](http://www.headwest.asn.au)