



## **What is Stress?**

Stress has been linked to just about every physical illness imaginable; whether as a risk factor, a cause, or the triggering event. People experiencing moderate to high levels of stress most of time are at greater risk of many physical health issues, including heart disease, obesity and high blood pressure. Stress can also play a role in contributing to psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and memory loss.

As humans, we are unconsciously able to analyse 11 million bits of information per second, but our conscious minds can only deal with about 40 bits per second; which means that it is quite easy for our brains to become overloaded. The information around us is taken in through our senses and processed in the amygdala area in our brains to determine whether or not we are in danger. If we are seen to be in danger, the amygdala then communicates with the emotional brain which in turn sends out signals to release chemicals (adrenaline and cortisol) into the body to signal off the “fight or flight” response.

This is all very natural in the short term, but if the same types of stress responses are kicked in repeatedly, this can be very dangerous for the body and mind, leading to an overactive amygdala and/or allostatic load. It's often the allostatic load that damages the body in the long run and leads to chemical imbalances and other physiological issues including diseases. The opposite of this is homeostasis – the state our bodies go into after the threat has passed. However, unless changes are made to how we deal with and manage stress, the overall consequences can be devastating.

### **Good news about stress:**

The good news is that we know more now about how the brain works and, therefore, have a greater understanding about how to deal with stress. The bad news is that there is no magic pill (yet) to cure us.

But let's look in the bright side. We know that the brain's natural tendency is to move towards pleasure and away from pain – in fact we've known this for a long time thanks to Freud's pleasure principle theory. We also know that when the brain is stuck in stress, we will often reach for more negative pleasures like overeating, smoking, shopping, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, etc. So, our brain is definitely following the principle of moving towards pleasure, but because the emotional brain is overloaded and therefore unable to find pleasure from within – it will compel us to turn to external false pleasures that are not only often



harmful to us, but fleeting. Thus, our brains do the best they can to find us happiness, given the circumstances.

We also know more about neuroplasticity than we did just a short while ago. We know that some areas of the brain are more “plastic” or flexible than others and that we can rewire or change some of our circuitry to be able to more naturally move into a state of joy; which is the opposite of stress. Knowing that we have the ability to change our brain states, feelings and beliefs - even some of those things that were installed in us from when we were children - is very exciting. It means that we no longer have to fall victim to the things that cause us stress; we no longer have to turn to external, negative solutions to give us pleasure. We can instead be more in control of how we perceive ourselves and the world around us by finding all the joy and pleasure from within ourselves. We can live more often in a homeostatic state.

### **Moving out of stress and towards joy**

There are several things that you can do to distress: you can have a bath; listen to soothing music; call a friend; meditate. And those solutions can be very helpful in the short term; but if you are looking for longer term relief from what is causing you stress in life, one of the best ways is to seek support.

Therapies like Cognitive Hypnotherapy and Emotional Brain Training (EBT) can teach you how to use your own mind to change the structure and function of your brain. Hypnotherapists speak directly to the unconscious mind, which, in addition to regulating our bodies and keeping us alive, is where all of our past memories and experiences that effect us constantly reside. If you were to look at the palm of your hand and take a pen and make a small dot in the middle of it, that dot would represent your conscious mind and the rest of the palm area your unconscious mind. So it makes sense why it is important to get the unconscious on board with any changes you might make. It also makes us realise why it so difficult sometime for us to rationalise away stress or bad habits – it’s like asking a mouse to move a mountain.

That being said, however, EBT does go a long way towards teaching us tools that we can consciously use on a day to day to basis to change our brain states from a Level 5 (extremely stressed) to a Level 1 (calm and balanced). It is a revolutionary technique that incorporates elements of attachment theory, neuroscience, stress management and psychotherapy thus empowering us to use our own software (our conscious minds) to change our hardware (the unconscious mind).



Stress is a part of life, and it is of course natural for us to experience the chemical reaction in our bodies that some stressful situations require. Without it we might be oblivious to danger and get ourselves into real trouble. However, our bodies are not designed to be in a stressed state for more than 30 seconds or so at a time – they simply cannot handle that kind of pressure on them. So if you find yourself in stress more often than not it is imperative that you take action quickly, before your body takes action for you.