

What is a Stress Reaction?

Stress reactions are psychological and physiological changes that occur in a person who has been exposed to a stressful event or situation. The uncertainty around COVID-19 can create such stress.

Every person's reactions will be different; however, most common for people experiencing stress reactions is sleep problems, anger, and difficulties leading a normal life. Often we may not recognise our stress reactions and may even believe that because of our training and experience we are immune to stress.

Stress reactions may appear within days. In some cases, months or years may pass before the symptom surface. If within a few weeks the stress reactions do not diminish in frequency and intensity, assistance from a Mental Health Professional may be necessary.

An important part of helping to cope with stress is to establish a daily routine. Keep exercising and limit alcohol or caffeine. Stay in communication with friends and peers about how you are feeling and remember - you are normal and having normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

The following table is a list of common stress reactions:

Physical	Thinking/Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nausea • Upset stomach • Sleep problems • Fatigue • Tremors (hands) • Fast breathing • Headaches • Profuse sweats • Chills • Rapid heart beat • Chest tightness • Diarrhoea • Dizziness • Grinding teeth • Visual difficulty • Thirst • Twitching • Hormone changes • Feeling cold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slower thought process • Difficulty making decisions • Difficulty in problem solving • Confusion • Disorientation (place/time) • Difficulty calculating • Difficulty concentrating • Memory problems • (short or long) • Difficulty naming common items • Distressing dreams • Poor attention span • Blaming • Hyper-vigilant • Increased/decreased alertness • Offensive/defensive self reviews • Overwhelmed by normal routines • Intrusive memories • Difficulty reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Fear • Guilt • Grief • Depression • Sadness • Feeling lost • Feeling abandoned • Feeling isolated • Worry about others • Wanting to hide • Intense anger • Irritability • Feeling numb all over • Denial • Agitation • Apprehension • Uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in activity • Speech pattern changes • Withdraw into oneself • Emotional outbursts • Suspiciousness • Loss / Increase appetite • Alcohol consumption • Inability to rest/relax • Antisocial actions • Nonspecific body pains • Hyper-alert to settings • Startle reflex intensified • Pacing • Erratic Movements • Changes in sex life • Harsh with family • Relational difficulties • Paranoia

How to Manage a Stress Reaction

Listed below are some things you can do to mitigate the effects of stress reactions.

For Yourself

- Remember you are normal and having normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Exercise is always important, but vigorous exercise is especially important to offset the physiological stress reactions. Move around, stretch, and walk.
- Alternate relaxation techniques like deep breathing with exercise.
- Realise that those around you, especially your family, may be under stress too. Talk to them about what is going on with you.
- Structure your time and follow your routines: eating, sleeping, exercise, family time, etc.
- Have someone stay in contact with you, but where appropriate, practice social distancing.
- Reduce your use of caffeine and alcohol. Both interfere with normal sleep.
- Take naps or just rest. Get more rest than you usually do.
- Contact friends and talk to people that you trust. This is the most healing thing you can do.
- Talk about your reactions to the situation and its "impact" on you.
- Eat healthy foods and snacks even if you are not hungry. Eat regular meals.
- Sleep is critical in recovery. If you can't sleep after a few days, call EAP or 0800 PAN 100 for help.
- Drink lots of fresh water.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten. Share and express your feelings as they arise.
- Do not make big life changes or major decisions.
- Make as many small, daily decisions as you can which will give you a feeling of control over your life.
- Recurring thoughts, intrusive memories, flashbacks are normal - don't try to fight them - they will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Be realistic, this situation is likely to change often and could last a while.
- Stay up to date with accurate reliable information from the Company.

For Family Members and Friends

Share the following information/suggestions with those close to you:

- Offer your assistance and realise the stressed person may not know what he or she needs.
- Listen carefully without offering advice. Don't try to "fix" the situation.
- Don't take the stressed person's anger or other feelings personally.
- Resist telling people how they should feel and try to let them know you have heard them.
- Be prepared for mood swings. People experience stress in different ways. Respect this.
- Try statements like; "I'm so sorry that this happened to you and I want to understand so that I can assist"
- Give the stressed person private time.
- Help them with everyday tasks. Most people will not call and ask for help.
- Create an environment that feels safe to share in. Don't attempt to force the stressed person to talk if they don't want to.
- Keep "curious questions" for your own self satisfaction in their appropriate place. A later time might be more beneficial to everyone.
- Don't try to analyse the behaviours that may become apparent. Acceptance and support are the key elements of providing comfort.
- Be sensitive to the fact that pre-established routine sometimes help to reorient the individual to prior functioning levels.
- Simply being quietly nearby may also be supportive as individuals sift through some of their own issues. But where appropriate, practice social distancing.
- We cannot make grief less painful, often a simple, "I'm sorry you going through this" is enough
- Most of the time a barrage of help is available immediately; but as the days and weeks go on, your friend may need your help even more. Stay in touch!
- Call for help for yourself when you feel overwhelmed.

