

## Understanding the stress effects of major events

When major events occur, we often expend much more emotional and physical energy than we realise. As a result, we commonly put ourselves into a “survival stage” so that we can deal with the issues at hand and manage our anxiety, fears, and apprehensions.

When we are faced with situations that require high levels of mental or physical effort including preparation for possible injury or emotional distress, our body has instinctive mechanisms to ensure we are in the best possible state to combat the problem and survive. These changes require our brain, nervous system, blood circulation and muscles, as well as mental and emotional attitudes, to all work in a different way to normal. When our body is working outside the normal comfort zone in this way, it is referred to as a ‘state of stress’.

### What are the indicators we are in a state of stress?

There are a wide range of indicators of a state of stress and these can vary from individual to individual. Some of the more common indicators include:

- ◆ Having a very wide-awake, energised feeling
- ◆ Being alert to the details that have to be considered
- ◆ Feeling of readiness or even impatience to meet the problem
- ◆ Having less focus on ourselves and a greater focus on others and what is going on around us
- ◆ Strong awareness of our basic needs for fluids, nutrition, sleep and safety
- ◆ The need to be ‘doing something’
- ◆ Strong focus on what needs to be done, before thinking about what may happen
- ◆ An ability to put our emotions to the side while we ‘manage’ the situation at hand

### Why is a state of stress important?

When major events occur, we need to be able to respond and react more quickly than usual. A state of stress can help us to:

- ◆ Focus on what is important
- ◆ Keep important details and information at the ready
- ◆ Think and respond clearly and quickly
- ◆ Work effectively for long periods if required
- ◆ Concentrate for long periods if required
- ◆ Put aside our feelings and emotions in order to do what has to be done
- ◆ Not feel hunger, thirst or fatigue while others are in need
- ◆ Keep on track with what is happening

The state of stress helps us to survive during critical times. Being in a state of stress however uses a great deal of energy and cannot be sustained for extended periods. We can generally keep going for as long as required, but eventually we will start to feel the effects of stress. It is not possible to maintain the same energy continuously and this is when we may start to display stress symptoms.

The longer the period of readiness lasts, the stronger the symptoms are likely to be. Stress is a normal response to abnormal events and understanding how to manage our response during major events will minimise our personal risk and avoid ongoing problems. Indicators that we are starting to be impacted by the effects of stress include:

- ◆ Tiredness, loss of energy and loss of enthusiasm
- ◆ Body tension and tightness in muscles
- ◆ Being overcome by emotions (such as tearfulness, anger, fear, blame, helplessness)
- ◆ Experiencing physical sensations (such as headaches, nausea, trembling, sweating, aches and pains)
- ◆ Feeling overwhelmed and that everything seems too hard
- ◆ Having difficulty making decisions and thinking clearly
- ◆ Having difficulty concentrating or remembering details
- ◆ Having difficulty speaking clearly, forgetting words and names, slurring words
- ◆ Taking risks and shortcuts
- ◆ Losing awareness of our need for nourishment (not eating, drinking, resting when required)
- ◆ Increased desire for stimulants (coffee, alcohol, sugar, caffeine)
- ◆ Wanting to avoid talking about the event and what is/has happened
- ◆ Lack of interest in moving forward and loss of ability to plan next steps
- ◆ Being overly sensitive to what others say or do
- ◆ Feeling tired but being unable to sleep (experiencing disturbed sleep and nightmares)
- ◆ Increased irritability, impatience and restlessness
- ◆ Change in need for social contact (not wanting to be with family/friends – or always needing them around)
- ◆ Having a need to talk about the event constantly

The state of stress is what helps us to prepare for, and manage, a major event. If an event has been extended in duration, there has been a long lead up to the event, or there is a high degree of uncertainty, it is possible for a pattern of stress to form.

If left unaddressed stress can become a lifestyle or habitual state and can lead to a range of health issues. These steps may assist in breaking the pattern:

- ◆ **Recognise you are stressed** – listen to others who may be able to see you more clearly than you see yourself
- ◆ **Understand your own stress response** – recognise the stress symptoms that may create more stress for you and put you into a stress pattern
- ◆ **Acknowledge the need to break the stress pattern** – you need to make the decision before you can achieve a result
- ◆ **Know what you can change** – while there will be many things about your life you cannot change, there will be some tangible things you can change – be prepared to make those changes
- ◆ **Take time out** – introduce some forms of relaxation time and activity into each day
- ◆ **Ask for help when you need it** – it is not a sign of weakness and will aid your recovery
- ◆ **Connect with others** – make time to be with your family or friends and keep regular contact with other people you enjoy being with
- ◆ **Focus on routine** – return to your normal routine as soon as possible
- ◆ **Give yourself every opportunity rest** – or if you are not sleeping well ensure you have regular rest time
- ◆ **Give yourself permission to feel upset or distressed** – emotional release is a healthy part of the healing process
- ◆ **Make time for joy** – make a purposeful effort to do things you enjoy or help you to feel good each day – this can be very difficult in the early stages after a major event and we may often feel guilty for experiencing joy