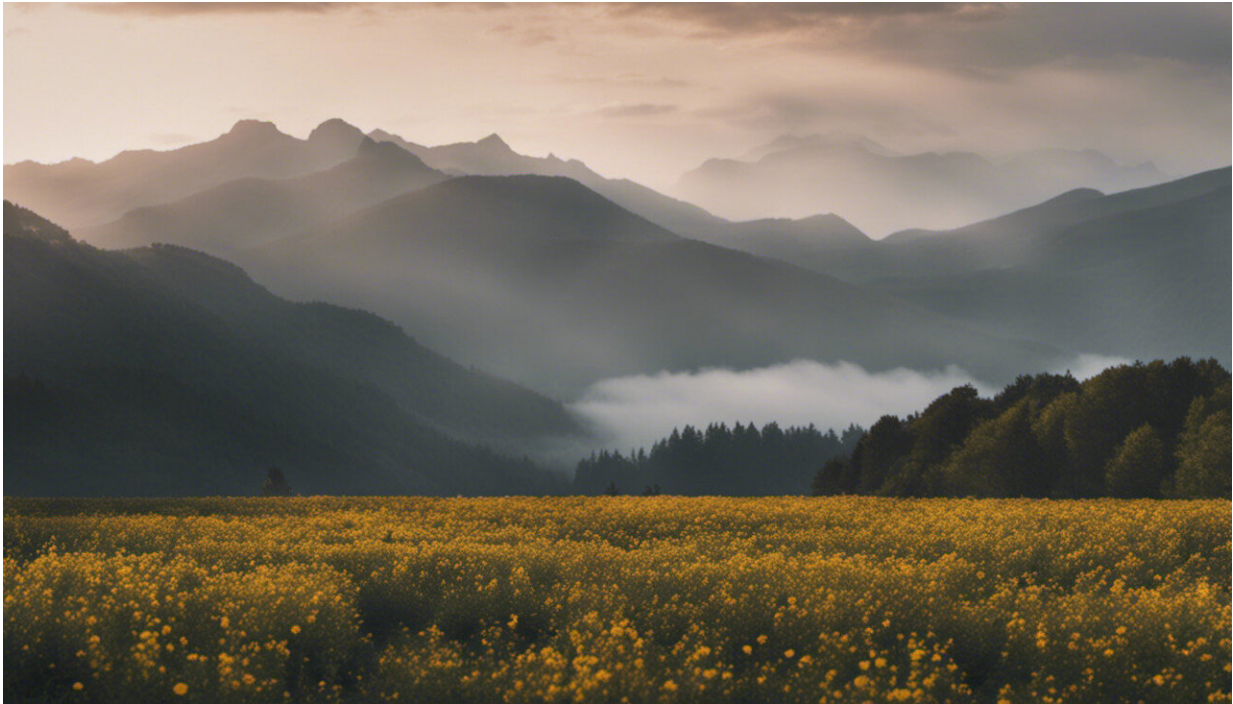


How to get your stress levels in check

January 7 2015, by James Scott



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Stress is the physical and emotional response we all experience when faced with demanding situations.

Our stress can arise from within when we fear we're unable to meet our own high expectations. Or it can come from an inability to meet the requirements of employers, financial institutions (think of your credit card repayments), partners, family and others. But while stress arises

from what we assume others expect of us, the accuracy of these assumptions is variable.

When stressed, we experience a heightened sense of arousal and a range of emotional responses from feeling motivated to achieve, through to being overwhelmed, irritable and anxious. Stress can also cause physical symptoms such as muscle tension, head and stomach aches, nausea, sleep disturbance and fidgetiness.

Stress is not always bad. From an evolutionary perspective, stress activates our autonomic nervous system, responsible for the "fight or flight response" crucial to an animal's survival. In today's society, stress can make us work harder, meet deadlines and complete tasks that might otherwise remain uncompleted.

But excessive or persistent stress can be harmful to our physical and [mental health](#).

Depression and burnout

Depression, anxiety and burnout are sometimes used to describe the experience of stress, but there are important differences between these conditions.

Depression is a state of persistent ill health. It can arise without an external cause and often does not resolve when external problems are solved. Depression is usually effectively treated with psychological support but sometimes medication is required. Those with depression are more susceptible to becoming stressed even by relatively minor triggers.

Burnout is a non-medical term that refers to a state of exhaustion. While stress can lead to higher states of productivity, burnout is often accompanied by cynicism and lack of productivity. Those with burnout

report feeling tired and bored and experience an accompanying loss of enjoyment.

The early studies of burnout focused on work environments but burnout can occur in the context of relationships, family demands and even pursuit of hobbies and interests. Burnout usually requires a break or a change. Unchecked, that tiredness and loss of enjoyment can contaminate other areas of your life.

What stresses us out?

According to the Australian Psychological Society's [2014 Stress and Well-being in Australia Survey](#), one-quarter of Australians experienced moderate to high levels of stress in the previous 12 months. Stress was most prevalent in young Australians aged 18 to 35.

Financial problems, work and relationships were all common sources of stress for younger Australians, whereas health problems were more likely to worry older people.

Like many areas of health and well-being, genes and environment interact to influence the levels of stress that people experience. If you have an inflexible nature, a trait which is highly heritable, and you have experienced unhappiness and adversity throughout childhood, for instance, you are at greater risk of being susceptible to elevated stress responses to relatively minor demands.

Personality undoubtedly influences people's experience of stress. Those who have perfectionistic tendencies (obsessional) and those with a tendency to put the needs of others ahead of their own or seek the approval of others (dependent) are particularly vulnerable to stress.

Having these personality traits is not a bad thing. Obsessional tendencies

make people highly successful when their work that requires attention to detail. Think of surgeons, solicitors, and accountants. But these successful attributes can come at a cost to the individual.

Managing stress

Stress is part of life; the aim should be to manage rather than avoid stress. This can be achieved through preventive and reactive measures.

Time management, budgeting, healthy behaviours (adequate sleep, regular exercise and healthy diet), social activities and pursuing interests are all important in fostering resilience and preventing excessive stress.

But once overwhelmed, the above techniques should be accompanied by psychological interventions, which are also [available online](#). The core principles of [stress management](#) include recognising stress, identifying the sources (and, where possible, resolving them), relaxation strategies and mindfulness.

You may also benefit by challenging patterns of thinking. Being given a work project, for instance, might engender excitement in an employee who views this as an opportunity to develop new skills and enhance their curriculum vitae. But the employee who perceives they are being asked to do work outside their job description or perceive the extra task is unfair will have negative emotions associated with the stress they experience.

While principles of stress management are straightforward, applying them is not easy. Acquiring skills to manage stress is like improving fitness or losing weight. Often personal trainers are needed to achieve these goals. Similarly, psychologists and other health professionals can assist people to better manage their stress so as to cope better with demanding circumstances.

There is an increasing source of stress associated with our society's ongoing emphasis on productivity. Arguably, employers have a role to educate and offer interventions at work to prevent the negative effects of stress that commonly accompany increase demands at work.

Don't worry

Unlike [depression](#) and [burnout](#), stress is not necessarily a bad thing when well managed. However, persistent and overwhelming stress can have [adverse effects](#) on physical and mental health, such as increased risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and cigarette smoking.

An awareness of the causes of [stress](#) and constructive ways to manage it will be a key factor to improving Australians' emotional health and well-being in 2015.

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