


# *Managing Stress and Anxiety*

The background is a solid blue color with a halftone dot pattern. A faint, stylized silhouette of a mountain range is visible in the lower half of the image, rendered in a slightly darker shade of blue.

## *Everyone finds it difficult to cope at times*

Are you experiencing any of the following?

- excessive worrying
- restless behaviour
- disturbed sleep
- relationship problems with family or friends
- constant headaches or backaches
- argumentative behaviour
- over or under eating
- feelings of loneliness or withdrawal
- tiredness, anger or depression.

These feelings can be painful and upsetting but may be natural reactions to stress or anxiety.

There are many ways to deal with these problems. Recognising the causes of your stress or anxiety is the first step towards solving the problem and feeling better. In some cases, medication will also help.

## *What is anxiety?*

*Anxiety* is the emotional response your body uses to protect you from dangers and threats in your environment. All people experience anxiety, whether it is butterflies in your stomach before a sporting competition, or the rush of anxiety that you feel when you are running late for work or an important meeting. These feelings are often uncomfortable, but are a normal part of being a human being.

## What is stress?

Stress involves changes to your thoughts, feelings, body or behaviour in response to a threat or long-term frustration. It involves a combination of emotions and physical and mental feelings that result from worry and anxiety.

A small amount of stress can be helpful. It keeps your mind alert, prepares your body for work or action and drives you to achieve your goals.

However, too much or prolonged stress is unhealthy. It can cause:

- your body to be less resistant to illness
- feelings of depression or hopelessness
- ulcers
- sleep problems
- relationship problems
- heart disease – especially when you have other risk factors such as high blood pressure, a family history of heart disease, or being overweight, a smoker or a heavy drinker
- tension to build up in your body, resulting in aches and pains.

The causes of stress are often called 'stressors'. There are two kinds of stressors: external and internal.

### External stressors include:

- the physical environment (e.g. heat, noise and lights)
- organisational factors (e.g. work deadlines, rules and regulations)

- the social environment (e.g. aggressive people or the death of a relative)
- daily events (e.g. traffic or finding a parking space).

### Internal stressors include:

- lifestyle factors (e.g. drinking too much caffeine, eating an unbalanced diet or a lack of sleep)
- personality traits (e.g. working too hard, low motivation or perfectionism)
- negative thoughts (e.g. pessimism or self-criticism).

It is important to recognise that you create most of your own stress and anxiety through how you react to situations. This is the first step in being able to change your thoughts and behaviours to deal with the causes of the problem.

## Are benzodiazepines and antidepressants a solution to managing stress and anxiety?

**Benzodiazepines** are depressant drugs that have sedative (calming), anxiolytic (anxiety relieving) and hypnotic (sleep inducing) properties. Once absorbed into the bloodstream, benzodiazepines circulate throughout the body, slowing down the central nervous system.

Benzodiazepines are prescribed to help manage stress and anxiety, relax muscles and induce sleep. Some benzodiazepines are used to treat epilepsy.

Benzodiazepines provide relief from the symptoms of anxiety, insomnia or stress in a crisis. However, they should not be seen as a long-term solution by themselves.

**Antidepressants** are drugs designed to reduce the symptoms of depression. These drugs can also be used to treat severe anxiety.

## *Are benzodiazepines and antidepressants safe?*

The effects of benzodiazepines and antidepressants will vary between people, depending on the type of benzodiazepine and dosage taken, height, weight, general health, previous use of benzodiazepines, use of other drugs at the same time and the way the drug is taken. Combining benzodiazepines with some anti-depressant drugs (e.g. Melleril® and Doxepin®) can increase the chance of overdosing.

**Benzodiazepines** can be effective in reducing stress and anxiety and are relatively safe when they are used as prescribed by a doctor for short periods of time (up to two weeks). If used for longer periods of time, benzodiazepines can produce unpleasant side effects, tolerance and dependence.

Like all drugs, benzodiazepines will affect each person differently depending on the characteristics of the:

- **individual** (person taking the drug) – mood, height, weight and gender

- **drug** – the amount used and the way it is used
- **setting (environment)** – where the drug is taken and who it is taken with.

The immediate effects of using benzodiazepines may last from a few hours to a few days and include:

- relaxation
- improved sleep
- relief from muscle spasms
- euphoria.

After taking benzodiazepines, users may also experience the following unpleasant side effects:

- drowsiness and a lack of energy
- memory loss and confusion, which can lead to inappropriate behaviour (especially with larger doses)
- dizziness
- blurred or double vision
- mood swings
- poor coordination.

Driving under the influence of benzodiazepines can be dangerous. Benzodiazepines can cause impaired coordination and reaction time, distorted perceptions and difficulties in judging distances and speed.

Always read the medication label or consult your doctor or pharmacist to find out how long the medication is likely to be active in the body and the impact it will have on driving ability.

While benzodiazepines can be useful in treating the symptoms of stress and anxiety, sleeplessness and muscular pain, **using these drugs for longer than two to three weeks may cause:**

- negative moods and a lack of motivation
- headaches and nausea
- depression
- increased hunger and weight gain
- skin rashes
- increased risk of accidents and falling over (especially for elderly people)
- disturbing dreams
- irritability or aggression
- sexual and menstrual problems (e.g. loss of interest in sex or irregular menstrual cycles).

If you need to take benzodiazepines for longer than a few weeks, let your doctor know if you notice any of the above symptoms.

**Tolerance** and **dependence** to benzodiazepines can happen **within two weeks** of regular use (depending on the person, frequency of use and dose).

**Tolerance** occurs when your body gets used to taking a drug and higher doses are needed to experience the same effects. People may not experience the same relaxing effects of benzodiazepines as their bodies become used to the drug.

**Dependence** on benzodiazepines occurs when it becomes difficult to make it through the day without taking these drugs. People who have used the drug for two or more

weeks, may crave the drug or find it difficult to function without it. When the body becomes physically dependent on benzodiazepines it may stop producing its own chemicals that help sleep and relaxation.

**Withdrawal** is a set of symptoms that may occur when someone who is dependent on benzodiazepines attempts to reduce the dosage or stop taking the drug. These symptoms can range from mild to severe and will vary from person to person.

If you have been taking benzodiazepines for more than two weeks and would like to stop taking them, it is important to do so gradually and under medical supervision.

**Antidepressant drugs** may cause unpleasant side effects. These effects usually occur during the first six weeks of treatment and can include:

- constipation
- low blood pressure resulting in faintness
- headaches and blurred vision
- sweatiness
- nausea and vomiting
- loss of interest in sex/sexual dysfunction
- increased pulse rate
- weight gain or weight loss
- accidents
- urination difficulties
- confusion
- falls (in the elderly).

Some anti-depressants will increase the effects of confusion from benzodiazepines.

Some anti-depressants interact with specific benzodiazepines (e.g. Fluoxetine® and Diazepam®). **Make sure your doctor knows what other drugs – prescription, over the counter and herbal medicines – you are taking if he or she prescribes benzodiazepines or an anti-depressant drug.**

Antidepressants are not physically addictive. However, **withdrawal symptoms** can occur when these drugs are no longer taken. Common withdrawal symptoms are:

- abdominal pain
- anxiety
- fatigue
- dizziness
- insomnia
- diarrhoea
- nausea or vomiting
- headache and muscle ache
- vivid dreams and nightmares
- loss of balance.

To prevent these effects, you should gradually reduce the amount of antidepressants you use under close medical supervision.

## *How can I manage stress and anxiety without benzodiazepines or antidepressants?*

Medication is not the only way to reduce stress and anxiety. There are other changes you can make to your lifestyle, thought patterns and behaviours to relax and cope with the causes of the problem. Alternative herbal

remedies (e.g. chamomile tea and valerian root) may also help to relieve tension.

### **1. Lifestyle changes**

You can make changes to your lifestyle that may help reduce stress and anxiety:

- balance work, family and personal commitments so that important parts of your life are not neglected
- put aside some time each week for doing something you really enjoy
- take part in regular exercise and eat a balanced diet
- break difficult jobs into smaller stages, and work on each stage separately
- don't let little things become big issues. Talk things over before you start getting worried
- don't be persuaded into taking on more things than you can handle
- live the year one-day at a time, and make time to spend with family and friends
- if you are worried or anxious about something, try talking to someone about it. Together you may be able to come up with solutions to relieve your stress or anxiety
- get a good night's sleep. If you are often tired and irritable, you may need more or better quality sleep. Try practising a relaxation exercise in the evening, not consuming coffee (try a herbal tea instead) or cigarettes at night and not eating a heavy meal just before bed as your body will be working hard to digest it.

## 2. Positive thinking and thought patterns

Your thoughts and beliefs about the events and circumstances in your life can affect your stress levels. The following may assist you:

- keep an open mind and try to be more positive. You will put more energy and enthusiasm into what you do, making a positive result more likely
- focus on the positive side of events and situations
- have realistic expectations of yourself and others
- remember that there are many things you can't control. It is important to accept what you can't control or change and concentrate your energies on the things you can
- seek extra support from friends or family
- look at the positive side of a situation. Even from difficult situations, we can learn lessons that will help us in the future
- don't let minor difficulties take your focus away from what is important to you.

## 3. Develop an action plan

If you spend too much time worrying, think of what you can do to change the situation. Try following these steps, which are called the problem-solving technique:

**STEP 1:** Write down the problem that triggers your stress. Be specific – for example, don't just write 'work'; a better description is 'too

much traffic driving to and from work'.

**STEP 2:** Write down all the things that you could do to solve the problem, and ask other people what they would do. Develop as big a list as possible – often the best solution is not the first to come to mind.

**STEP 3:** Choose the solution you think has the greatest chance of succeeding in the short and long term.

**STEP 4:** Decide how you can put the chosen solution into practice.

**STEP 5:** Put your plan into action!

## 4. Relaxation techniques

Everyone needs to relax and you need to find your own way of doing this. Relaxation can help reduce the physical and mental tension that can build up from stress and anxiety. When you relax you feel less tense in your body and mind, your muscles feel looser and your heart and breathing rates slow down.

There are a number of relaxation techniques you can try. Many people find yoga and meditation helpful. These activities relax the mind and body, relieve muscular tension and improve circulation and concentration. Yoga and meditation classes are conducted in most communities.

There are also some simple methods you can try at home:

## ● Progressive muscular relaxation

This technique involves consciously relaxing the large muscles of your body. Relaxing the body helps to relax the mind. Try this method for about 20 minutes each day:

1. sit or lie in a relaxed position with your eyes closed. Breathe naturally
2. clench your fists hard, so your arms feel tense. Slowly relax your muscles as you breathe out and say the word 'relax' to yourself
3. do the same in turn with your legs, trunk, stomach, back and head
4. after doing this a few times, move to the next phase. Repeat the process but don't tense first, just relax. Let each part of you in turn feel heavy and relaxed. Associate each 'out' breath with the word 'relax'
5. add a little imagination: imagine a peaceful scene and picture yourself there.

## ● Relaxation breathing

Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing – in through the nose, out through the mouth. Imagine the air you breathe is spreading energy – giving oxygen to every muscle in your body.

As you breathe out, say the word 'relax'. Concentrate on the 'floating' feelings in your legs and arms.

**Learning new ways of coping that don't require the use of medication may help you reduce your stress or anxiety. Eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly and getting plenty of sleep may also improve your health.**

## *What if I'm already using benzodiazepines or antidepressants?*

If you are already taking benzodiazepines and have decided that there are other ways to manage your stress or anxiety, you need to think very carefully about how to proceed and seek medical advice.

It is best to stop using benzodiazepines gradually. Just as your body got used to the drug, it now has to gradually learn to do without it. Stopping suddenly may be dangerous and is not recommended. Doing so may result in withdrawal symptoms such as:

- fits and convulsions
- blackouts and fainting
- headaches
- anxiety and panic attacks
- stomach pains, nausea and vomiting
- dizziness and confusion
- disturbed sleeping patterns
- depression.



Your doctor can help you to gradually reduce the dose of benzodiazepines you are taking, preventing any serious withdrawal effects.

There is no evidence that antidepressant drugs cause tolerance or dependence. However, when stopping antidepressant use, it is recommended that the dose be gradually reduced under the direction of your doctor to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Some people may experience short-term withdrawal symptoms after using antidepressants. These symptoms may start within one to ten days of discontinuing use, but usually occur within three days of stopping use. Common symptoms include stomach upsets, dizziness and vivid dreams at night.

## *Where can I get more information?*

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for further information or contact:

### **Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)**

Information counselling and advice for people concerned about their own or another's drug use.

This is a 24-hour, statewide, confidential telephone service.

ADIS: (08) 9442 5000

Toll Free (country callers only): 1800 198 024

Email: [adis@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:adis@health.wa.gov.au)

### **Parent Drug Information Service (PDIS)**

The Parent Drug Information Service is a 24-hour telephone support, counselling, information and referral service for parents.

PDIS: (08) 9442 5050

Toll Free (country callers only): 1800 653 203

### **HealthInfo**

Additional copies of this brochure or other benzodiazepine resources are available through HealthInfo. Other benzodiazepine resources include:

- About benzodiazepines
- Using benzodiazepines, sleeping tablets or sedatives with medicines or drugs
- Using benzos
- Stopping benzodiazepine use.

The Department of Health has produced the 'Do-It-Yourself Guide to a Good Night's Sleep' resource containing a relaxation tape, brochure and booklet. This resource is available for \$5.00 (GST inclusive). A free booklet titled 'A Good Night's Sleep' is also available.

To obtain copies, telephone HealthInfo on 1300 135 030.



**Drug and Alcohol Office**  
Government of Western Australia

Produced by Prevention Branch,  
Drug and Alcohol Office  
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HP 8198