



# Stress Less

We all make New Year's resolutions that eventually fizzle out – hands up if you've already broken a no-alcohol vow; but this is one pledge that we really should abide by. Stress is a word thrown around flippantly, but managing and minimising stress is something positive we can and should do for our health, relationships and career. To start the year on an optimistic note, we asked some local specialists about the impact of stress on the mind and body, and advice on what changes to make.

*By Katie Roberts*

**Y**our pulse races, the breath shortens, blood pressure rises and the body is flooded with cortisol and adrenalin. Whether it's after a run-in with a taxi driver, the kids misbehaving or a bad meeting with the boss, this fight-or-flight response is our body's natural mechanism to meet life's challenges, big and small.

### Expat afflictions

Expats on international postings can be stressed by different factors from

those in their home country. For some, it's a more demanding career involving frequent international travel and late-night conference calls. **Jessica Lamb**, Assistant Director and Counsellor at **The Counselling Place**, explains this it can feel impossible to manage everyone's expectations and that this can put pressure on family relationships.

"Downtime can be infiltrated by work demands," she says, "making it hard to switch off, relax and focus on family activities. "Non-working spouses often face the pressure of 'single parenting',

while helping their family to adjust to the transition and making the adjustment themselves.

"For some who have previously had a career, there may be an identity crisis along with the ups and downs of making friendships and building up a support network in the expatriate community."

The competitiveness of expat life adds to the pressure. People feel obliged to make the most of their overseas posting by earning more, progressing professionally, exercising, living a healthy lifestyle and socialising.





### Stress and kids

Children find stress much harder to articulate but demonstrate behaviour similar to that of adults, such as irritability, agitation, worry and over-thinking. They may also withdraw, experience disturbed sleep, start wetting the bed or appear anxious and clingy. They may complain about physical symptoms such as stomachaches, headaches, loss of appetite or nausea.

Children often experience academic and social pressure, which can be compounded by missing family and friends. And, although Singapore is very westernised and largely English-speaking, there are still cultural

differences that, while interesting, can be testing on occasions.

### Boiling point

Jessica says alarm bells should ring when you feel overwhelmed. "Symptoms include preoccupation, a lack of focus on the present, over-thinking and worrying, mental exhaustion and a lack of enjoyment of life, irritability and high sensitivity to criticism. There may be a focus on the negative and an inability to enjoy activities that were previously enjoyed. Other reasons for concern include unhealthy coping behaviour such as addictions, isolation, over-eating or under-eating.

"People often place very high expectations on themselves and, while many expats are high achievers with successful careers, their efforts can be undermined by irrational negative beliefs such as 'I have to be perfect', or constantly trying to prove themselves because of a deep-down insecurity."

A qualified counsellor can help identify stress triggers. "Making changes in one's life, or shifting unhelpful beliefs and expectations, can relieve stress and enable a person to manage their life and life pressures in a healthier way," she advises.

Jessica also suggests stress mitigation techniques that can start immediately:

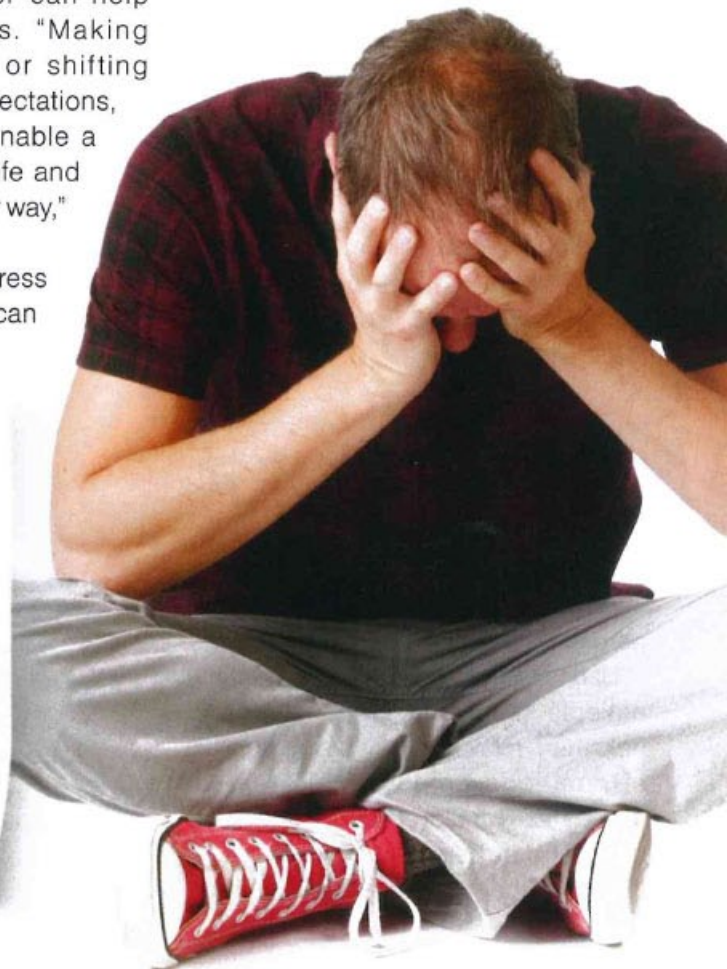
### Stress Trivia

1. Stress has only been recognised recently as a phenomenon. Scientist **Hans Selye** coined the term in the 1940s, and here's how he described it: "Stress, in addition to being itself, was also the cause of itself, and the result of itself."
2. Stress is one of the few English words to appear in languages that don't use a Romanised alphabet script.
3. In Chinese the symbol is made of two characters, one for opportunity and one for danger.

Learn to relax and self-soothe. Deep breathing exercises, visualisation, meditation and exercise can all help. Work on time management. Structure your lifestyle into manageable chunks and give yourself permission for recreational activities and free time.

### Let it go

Clinical hypnotherapist **Nancy Ho**, from the **Regional Hypnosis Centre**, believes the underlying factor behind much of the stress that people experience is fear. "Fear comes from our thoughts, especially the 'what if' thoughts. These thoughts create negative emotions which trigger subconscious thoughts," she says. As many of us know, our worries and anxieties can be magnified a thousand times by constantly rehashing and replaying them in our mind – sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously – and it can become overwhelming if this persists.





Despite the signals people don't often identify their problems as stress



Nancy says unchecked mental stress has negative consequences, sometimes resulting in physical symptoms and even psychosomatic illnesses. While some people view hypnotherapy sceptically, much research has shown it to be successful in behaviour modification and change.

"Hypnotherapy is a safe, effective and practical way to work with the mind directly. While in a hypnotic, trance-like state, people are calm, focussed and often more receptive to suggestion," says Nancy. She believes hypnosis unlocks subconscious information, such as our fears. "Finding the root cause, especially the fear factor, is the first step to deprogramming and then reprogramming the subconscious mind to deal with the fear, instead of perceiving it as a 'sabre-toothed tiger'."

Nancy reinforces her work by teaching patients self-hypnosis techniques to help them relax mentally. Using positive affirmations helps people remain optimistic. "I believe having a positive mindset can help people to view and deal with their problems as situations,

rather than as life-and-death issues," she says.

### Unlocking the spine

Stress is the most prolific problem that **Dr Lynelle Kerr** sees at her private practice, **Innate**. But despite the signals, she says, people don't often identify their problems as stress. "Often, during

a consultation the high-achieving, type-A people say, 'I'm not stressed, but I have some physical symptoms going on and I can't sleep'. I say, 'Are you stressed?' They often say, 'No'."

But, Lynelle says, deeper discussion reveals a stressful lifestyle that requires juggling a career, intensive travel and family. "Even high achievers complain

*The next time you are feeling stressed, try this:*

- 1. Focus on the moment.** Ask yourself: Will this really matter in two or five years' time?
- 2. Keep the situation in perspective.** A child's daily spelling mistakes may be inconsequential when children in the Philippines have lost their schools in a typhoon. Gratitude for what you have can mitigate stressful thoughts.
- 3. Breathe.** Even if you can't close your eyes, perhaps because you're driving, take 10 deep breaths. Try to relax the muscles in different areas of your body as you do so.
- 4. Look at the situation from a different point of view.** There's a flipside to every situation, and perhaps even a hidden opportunity if you open up your mind.