

Mindful Work

Recognising stress habits

We all have different ways of reacting to stress. It's important to recognise the state that you're in. List out the indicators that you notice in yourself, when stress is beginning to take over.

For example, you might experience a compulsion to try to do more in a shorter space of time. It could be that you have particular physical symptoms such as getting hot, a sense of irritation, the beginning of a headache, tightness in the stomach or the jaw etc., or at home you're not sleeping well. Get these down on paper.

The next task is to recognise what you do, when the stress arrives. Perhaps you just push even harder, getting your head down and putting on the blinkers. There may be a sense narrowing the focus of your attention. It may be that you adopt mind-numbing activities such as web surfing, doing mundane tasks, or avoiding facing the issues that are causing the stress by making another cup of coffee, over-eating or under-eating, self-medicating, or talking with others as if they can magically resolve the issue for you.

Simply by becoming familiar with both your indicators of stress, and your reactions, you are already well on the road towards unravelling habits which may have built up over a lifetime.

The good news is that we can establish new ways to react, as soon as you notice the stress appearing. At this point it's useful to be clear about the kinds of activity that we know are effective for us in reducing stress.

Again, for each of us this will be different. Some of the most common approaches are to do some physical exercise, which might simply mean getting up walking around or stretching a little; getting outdoors for a breath of fresh air; talking to a friend about something else; listening to music; tidying up; or taking the time to really savour a good coffee or to eat some nourishing food.

It's useful to actually make a list of the kinds of activities that you know are nourishing and refreshing for you.

Try to create some new habits, whereby you employ these techniques intentionally when your stress indicators appear. They may appear clunky at first, as you're in the process of challenging your brain's normal reactions; but stick with it for at least a week and see if it's effective and getting easier. Build on the positives.