

Mental Health Awareness Week

2016

MENTAL HEALTH
AWARENESS WEEK

'Relationships'

16 – 22 MAY





Your Validium service is available 24/7 and provides counselling support which can be helpful when managing common mental health issues like stress and anxiety or when dealing with difficult situations.

This new booklet includes information about how counselling can help and covers a range of topics and issues that are linked to the theme of mental health along with some practical self-care strategies. Other resources about relationships and mental health can be found in the Mental Health Awareness Week 2016 folder on vClub, and you can also access a suite of audio podcasts online that support mental wellbeing with guided relaxation exercises, deep breathing and mindfulness.



Mental Health Awareness Week is a campaign organised by the Mental Health Foundation. For over 60 years, the MH Foundation has worked to promote **‘Good Mental Health for All’** by challenging inequality around mental health, influencing policy-makers and undertaking research and practical studies into mental health issues in the UK.

Mental health issues can affect people at all stages in life, from children to the elderly and with 1 in 4 people experiencing poor mental health, the issue impacts individuals and families across the UK so it is appropriate that the theme for the 2016 campaign is **‘Relationships’**.

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Mental Health

Mental health is not only the absence of mental disorder, but is defined as a state of wellbeing – having the ability to cope with the stresses of everyday life, and to live and work productively.

There are different levels of mental health issues, with only 1-2% of the population suffering mental illness with severe mental health problems. The more common mental health issues like anxiety, depression and stress are experienced by around 1 in 10 people at any one time, while 1 in 4 of us will experience some kind of mental health issue in any given year. Anyone, at anytime, may also be affected by acute psychological distress, which is temporary and can usually be stabilised within a short time, for example a panic attack or a response to a traumatic incident.

You can help keep yourself in good mental health by:

- Talking about your feelings
- Keeping active
- Eating well
- Drinking sensibly
- Keeping in touch with friends and loved ones
- Asking for help when you need it
- Taking a break
- Doing something you are good at and enjoy
- Accepting who you are
- Caring for others



Do men and women respond differently to mental ill-health?

Yes, but qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

It is generally agreed that gender affects the power and control that we have in society. Most of the low-paid, insecure and casual roles in our workforce are held by women, most of the chief execs, senior managers and decision-makers in our workplaces are men.

It has been well-documented that mental health is significantly influenced by our sense of personal autonomy, self-worth, physical, sexual and psychological safety, essentially how much power and control we feel we have in our environment and our relationships. Those with less power and less control over their lives will suffer from more mental ill-health than those with power and control.

“Mental health is inextricably linked to our status in society. It benefits from equality, and suffers from discrimination” WHO (1998)

Whilst this is an interesting concept to debate, some of the statistics around gender and mental health are more concrete and help to explain gender differences:

- Women are more likely to be treated for a mental health illness than men (29% compared to 17%)
- Twice as many women than men are diagnosed with anxiety each year (of all people with phobias and Obsessive Compulsive Disorders, 60% are female)
- Twice as many women than men are diagnosed with depression each year
- If men and women present the same depressive symptoms to their GP, women are still twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression. Men are more likely to be diagnosed with one aspect of depression, i.e., sleep disorders, migraine, muscle-pain
- Men are more likely to go to their GP with alcohol related disorders. (67% of people who drink alcohol to a 'hazardous level' are men, and 80% of those dependent on alcohol are men)
- Men are the heaviest users of cannabis and other illegal drugs (75% of cannabis users are men and 69% of those addicted to illegal drugs are men)



Do men and women respond differently to mental ill-health?

- Three times as many men commit suicide, than women, but women are far more likely than men to make suicide attempts
- Women are more likely to seek help from their GP, men are more likely to use inpatient facilities
- 90% of people who experience anorexia nervosa are women
- Women are twice as likely to suffer with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, than men. However, rape and sexual violence can be the most difficult traumatic events to recover from, and 1 in 5 women are likely to be subjected to sexual violence sometime in their lives
- There are certain times during women's lifecycle when they are at risk of mental illness, for example after childbirth and during the menopause



There are no marked gender differences in the rates of severe mental disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder that affect less than 2% of the population. However, in schizophrenia, men appear to have a more severe form of the illness, characterised by an early age of onset and poor outcomes in terms of recovery, while in women the onset is later and recovery is more likely (Castle & Murray, 1991).

There have been many explanations for these gender differences, including physiological, sociological, and biochemical differences between men and women. The most recent explanation has come from Professor Daniel Freeman of the University of Oxford (2013), who believed that the increase in some mental illnesses in women is due to pressure on women to fill many different roles; employee, parent, carer, and at the same time being bombarded by images of the “perfect” woman. Hence the common feelings of failure, and never being able to achieve the socially acceptable required results. Whatever the specific reasoning, this information provides the workplace with important evidence for planning and targeting mental health services appropriately. For example, it may be useful to focus on alcohol when discussing mental health issues with men. Alternatively, it may be useful to advertise services for women around symptoms of depression and anxiety. Proactive work to build positive mental health and resilience, however, must begin with recognising the specific areas where workers feel powerful and in-control, and building on those.

Anxiety & Depression

While anxiety and depression are both common mental health concerns, they can feel quite different to experience. Anxiety is the normal feeling where you might be worried, fearful or distressed about something that may or may not happen. Everyone feels anxious from time to time, but this is usually temporary. For example, we might be anxious about changes to our job, an appraisal, giving an important presentation at work, driving on a busy motorway or making a speech at a wedding.

Anxiety problems can include stress, phobias, panic attacks or generalised anxiety. Some people are born with a tendency to become anxious, but everyone can become anxious if they are put under enough pressure or stress.

Depression is different from anxiety or from feeling fed-up or unhappy. It is a medical condition where there are experiences of enduring misery that make it harder than normal to cope with life's demands. Anyone can be affected by depression, including children. However, in a mild episode of depression a person may find that they are able to help themselves to break out of the condition and experience shows that 80% of people suffering from depression will get better with little or no professional help. The key is to recognise the signs and not to wait until an ongoing anxiety or depression becomes overwhelming.

Symptoms of depression can be physical as well as emotional. Sometimes physical symptoms, such as constant headaches or sleep difficulties, can be the first indication that something is wrong. Other symptoms include very low self-esteem or self-confidence, a loss of interest in everything and sometimes a desire to hide away and retreat from the world.

It is easy to be confused about the distinction between anxiety and depression because many medications prescribed for anxiety are a type of anti-depressant, which works well for both. It is also common for people with an ongoing anxiety disorder to feel depressed because of the way their anxiety is affecting their lives.

It is a known fact that one in five of us will experience anxiety or depression this year, so if you are feeling anxious or depressed don't wait until the feelings overwhelm you.

Help is available and there are also strategies you can use to help yourself including:

- Talking to someone you can trust
- Eating sensibly and well
- Avoiding excessive alcohol intake
- Being more active, by taking regular exercise
- Spending time outdoors
- Finding something you enjoy doing
- Spending time with family and friends who value you



Tips for managing stress

Spotting the Signs

The sooner you spot the signs of stress, the easier it is to deal with it. If you have experienced excessive pressure over a period of time it is likely that you will have some unpleasant reactions to that pressure. Everyone reacts slightly differently to stress, so it is important that you identify your own stress reactions. Here are some of the common signs of stress:

- **Physical signs** – Headaches, muscle tension, nausea, digestive problems, crying, recurring illness and infections.
- **Behavioural signs** – Taking risks, being irritable with family, withdrawing from friends and colleagues, increased alcohol/smoking, changes in eating patterns.
- **Psychological signs** – Feeling fearful, angry, anxious, overwhelmed and out of control. Having difficulty concentrating and making decisions. Feelings of failure and helplessness.

If stress is making it difficult for you to enjoy life or function effectively it is time to take action.

Tackling the Causes

When you are experiencing stress, it can be very beneficial to take a step back and review what is happening in your life, what changes have taken place for you over the last few months and who is putting pressure on you. It is also important to check out how you are feeling about yourself, and how much pressure you are putting yourself under to achieve and complete everything. Can you?:

- Identify the causes of your stress. What has been happening within work and outside the workplace? Have there been any significant changes in your life, either expected or unexpected? What has been the impact of those changes?
- Discuss the causes of your stress with a helpful person. Maybe your manager, friends, family or colleagues. If you would like a confidential discussion, call the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) where one of Validium's counsellors will listen, guide and support you with your stress.
- Identify if you are contributing to your own stress. Do you have high expectations of yourself? Are you agreeing to do things that can be done by others?

There are times when we can't control what is happening to us and stress is an inevitable consequence. At these times you need to introduce some healthy habits to manage yourself through the situation.



Tips for managing stress

Healthy Habits to Cope with Stress

There are some actions and activities that you can do on a regular basis to balance the unpleasant consequences of stress. It is important that you identify healthy habits that work for you and your lifestyle. You might, for example:

- Take regular breaks, on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis
- Eat healthily, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Keep hydrated, without overusing caffeine or alcohol
- Explore relaxation techniques that work for you (e.g. deep breathing, muscle relaxation, visualisation exercises, relaxation CDs, yoga or meditation)
- Check that you have sufficient sleep for the amount of activity you have
- Reward and treat yourself
- Exercise regularly, doing something that you enjoy to encourage maximum release of feel good hormones

Talking and Off-loading

One of the worst things to do when you are feeling stressed is to bottle it up. It may be hard to imagine how it can be helpful to talk to anyone, as you feel so out of control that once you start to talk you might not be able to stop. However, talking in a trusting, confidential relationship is helpful. Off-loading destructive, circular thoughts and feelings will help you feel calmer and more in control. It may be hard at first to pick up the phone or start the conversation, but this challenge to make the first move, to describe what is happening in your inner world and to put your thoughts and feelings into words will help you apply logic, context and rationale to your stress. Once you can talk and off-load, you can begin to think about self-help and solutions. Talking about your stress can help in other ways too, it can:

- Build confidence in dealing with the problem
- Identify recurring patterns of behaviour in yourself and others
- Release the urgency and panic associated with the situation
- Articulate thoughts you've been avoiding
- Develop a plan of action for managing the situation



Mindfulness and stress

Work-related stress is defined as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work.

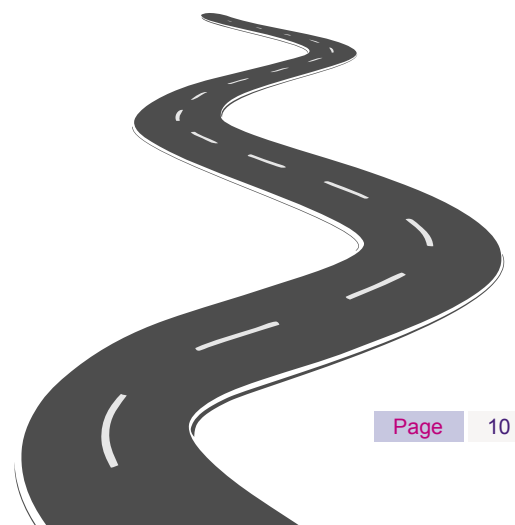
The latest estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which is detailed on the HSE website, show:

- The total number of cases of stress in 2011/12 was 428,000 (40%) out of a total of 1,073,000 for all work-related illnesses
- The estimated cases of work-related stress, both total and new cases, have remained broadly flat over the past decade
- The industries that reported the highest rates of total cases of work-related stress (three-year average) were human health and social work, education and public administration and defence
- The occupations that reported the highest rates of total cases of work-related stress (three-year average) were health professionals (in particular nurses), teaching and educational professionals, and caring personal services (in particular welfare and housing associate professionals)
- The main work activities attributed by respondents as causing their work-related stress, or making it worse, was work pressure, lack of managerial support and work-related violence and bullying

There are many causes and conditions that create stress and the types of response will vary from person to person from mild agitation right through to anger, fear and even depression. Regardless of the nature of the “stressor,” stress originates in the mind (it is often more to do with the meaning we attribute to events rather than the event in itself) and therefore can be countered using mental techniques of which mindfulness has shown to be very effective.

Mindfulness can be translated as awareness. To be fully aware even for a few moments of our daily routine is a rare event. There may be occasions when we intensely concentrate on a particular project but even then there is a part of our conscious mind that wanders and is distracted away from the object of focus.

A good example is when we drive a vehicle using the same route on a daily basis. We know the road, the particular turns and one-way systems. We know how to drive the vehicle instinctively, and indeed a part of our mind is aware of the traffic, when to change gear, brake, etc. However at the end of the journey we may not remember actually driving the route at all. This is a good example of a lack of mindfulness.



Mindfulness and stress

There are other examples such as reading the page of a book and having to go back to the first sentence again because we cannot remember what we read, or that important introduction when we are told the name of the person we meet, only to almost instantly forget. These are illustrations of a lack of awareness when our minds are not fully engaged in the subject of attention. This is a habit and the more that we allow our mind to wander the more the habit is reinforced and the stronger it will become. However as with all habits, these can be changed through a gradual process of mind training.

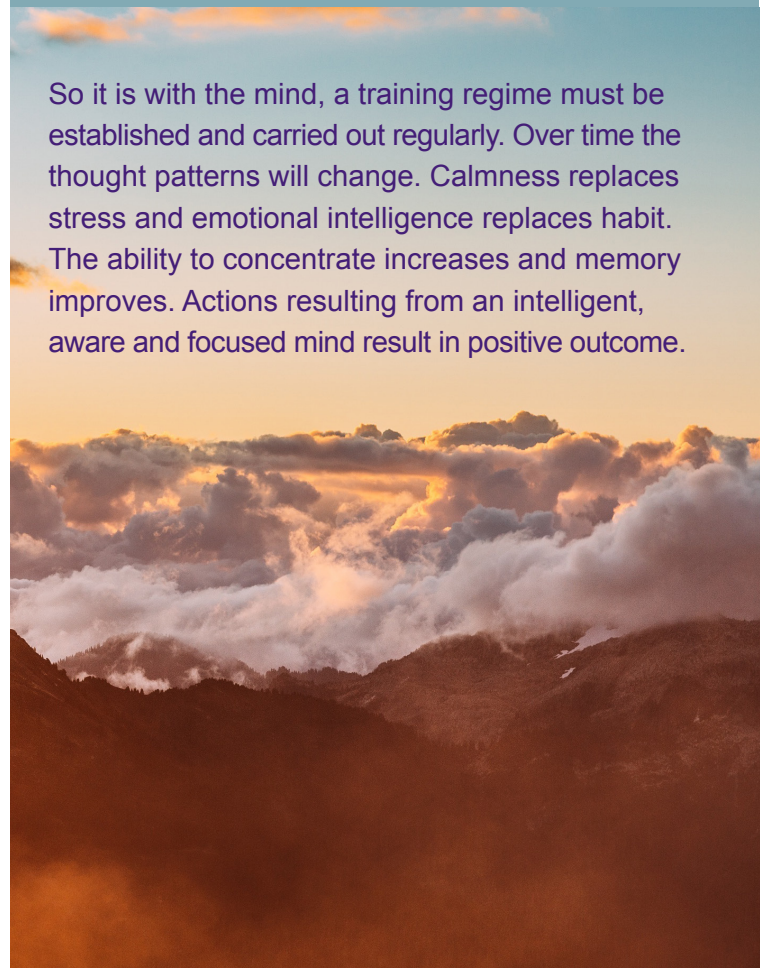
The response to a stress-inducing situation is also habitual. If we have a propensity towards impatience for example, then every time we encounter a situation that challenges our patience the habitual behavioural response causes us to become impatient which induces stress. This principle can be applied to almost every stressful situation. Through our habit we respond to almost all stressful situations in a similar way thereby reinforcing the habit. Eventually habits can become so powerful that there is virtually an instantaneous reaction to situations that will bring about stress. Through a programme of mindfulness training we can begin to become more aware of the circumstances and conditions that will bring about a potentially stressful response and change the pattern of behaviour from a negative “stressful” state to a more controlled positive mindset. Mindfulness is the key to mind training. Through mindfulness we reduce the amount of time our thoughts wander to events that have passed (rumination) or events that have not yet happened (anticipation). By becoming more aware of the present we can develop a more calm and collected mind and more importantly take control of our emotional responses to reduce stress in our lives.

Clinical studies have shown that mindfulness techniques actually cause the brain to develop new neuronal pathways; these new pathways change the way we think and ultimately act. If we create an action under the influence of stress it is not difficult to see that the results of such an action will most likely result in a negative or unpredictable outcome.

Therefore if we can develop a more balanced response to situations that cause stress by becoming more aware, we can then create actions that have a more helpful outcome, this in turn reduces emotional instability resulting in reduced stress.

Therefore the refinement of mindfulness allows us to develop an inner strength. The mind is ‘trained’ to behave with emotional intelligence rather than habit. When we want to gain a body that is fit and healthy we must establish a regular routine of physical training and diet. This is not an instant process and requires motivation, commitment, and dedication. After time we develop a good physique and healthy body.

So it is with the mind, a training regime must be established and carried out regularly. Over time the thought patterns will change. Calmness replaces stress and emotional intelligence replaces habit. The ability to concentrate increases and memory improves. Actions resulting from an intelligent, aware and focused mind result in positive outcome.



Mindfulness and stress

Key advantages

- Improved Ability to Focus
- Increased Creativity
- Deeper Level of Relaxation
- Improved Perception and Memory
- Decrease in Stress Hormones
- Lower Blood Pressure
- Decreased Cigarette, Alcohol, and Drug misuse

Key advantages

- Improved motivation
- Improved health and fitness
- Better inter-personal communication
- Reduced accidents-incidents
- Enhanced relationships
- Increased Relaxation and Decreased Stress
- Improved Health and Positive Health Habits

What can mindfulness do to me?

The practice of Mindfulness can help us optimise our ability to handle life's unavoidable difficulties. Mindfulness is about knowing what is going on inside and outside ourselves. We can become more aware of the present moment by noticing the sights, smells, sounds and tastes that we experience, as well as the thoughts and feelings that occur.

Mindfulness doesn't start by trying to change or fix something. It is about allowing ourselves to become more aware of the present moment and to be non-judgemental rather than dwelling in the past and therefore projecting this negativity into the future.

So where did Mindfulness originate from? The practice was taught by the Buddha, a title that means "awakened one." However, in 1944, Jon Kabat-Zinn was born. He became a Professor of Medicine Emeritus and creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine. His practice of yoga and studies with Buddhist teachers led him to integrate their teachings with those of science.



There are many benefits to Mindfulness, it can help us reach new and different depths in our understanding of ourselves. Mindfulness exercises are ways of paying attention to the here and now, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. The benefits of this can include:

- Having more balance and resilience
- Learning the distinction between you and your thoughts
- Becoming less disturbed by and less reactive to unpleasant experiences and emotions
- Increasing self-awareness
- Learning that everything changes; that thoughts and feelings come and go
- Having more direct contact with the world, rather than living through your thoughts

The practice of Mindfulness doesn't necessarily always mean meditation, breathing or yoga, it can also be practiced by enjoying one of the following:

- Connecting and building relationships with the people around you
- Becoming more active. Take a walk, go cycling, have a game of football with the kids
- Keep learning new skills, experience a sense of achievement and build a new confidence.
- Giving to others. Even the smallest act can count, whether it's a smile or a kind word.

By being mindful you can become more aware of the present moment, including your feelings and thoughts, your body and the world around you. Start today and experience a stress free you!

Confidence building

While we may be confident some of the time, most of us find that there are times, or certain situations, when we have moments of self-doubt and negativity. We might be having an off-day and are more sensitive to negative comments, or we could believe we are not good enough or not worthy.

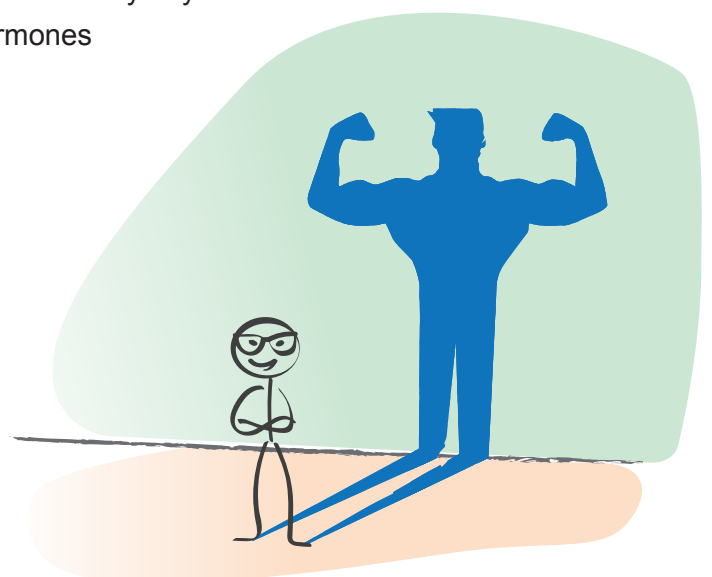
Having a lack of confidence can affect your mood, anxiety levels, relationships, work life and leisure time. People who are more confident are usually more positive about life. Try to live in the present and don't dwell on past mistakes. However, it is useful to think about the future and set goals and targets as this can help to build competency.

Think about things that you have already achieved in your life and enjoy that success. Identify your strengths and things that you are good at, as well as those things you enjoy doing. What can you build on and improve – or learn to live with? Don't try to overthink situations but start to set some goals and think about your life and also what you might want to achieve or change in the future. Think of those things that you are naturally confident about doing – get used to those situations and feelings – then extend that to other situations and challenges, and new ventures.

Listen to your inner thoughts and how you talk to people. Negative thoughts can eat away at your confidence if you let them. Replace negative thoughts and words with positive ones. Be aware of your language and how you are portraying yourself. Take a look at yourself from outside to see yourself as others might see you. What do you see? Think about others so you aren't fixated on yourself or what people might think of you – then try to walk tall, look at people and smile!

Here are some tactics to help you to feel and become more confident:

- Act confidently
- Stop and refocus any negative thoughts
- Think positively and use positive words
- Love yourself
- Move out of your comfort zone and try something new every day
- Take regular exercise – it can boost feel-good hormones
- Admit your mistakes and learn from them
- Practice and build competency
- Accept compliments



What is Altruism?

The word 'altruism' was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte. Altruism is the opposite of selfishness and is a form of prosocial behaviour – a voluntary act of giving to others without thought of self-benefit or gain.

However, some psychologists say altruism doesn't really exist as we do get something from our unselfish acts: an altruistic act may give us a good feeling about ourselves, a sense of connection with others, or a word of thanks or a smile from the person receiving our 'gift'. Therefore, in reality, both parties involved in an altruistic act benefit from the 'gift', whether this is giving our time, undertaking a random act of kindness and care, putting coins in the hat of a busker, giving money to The Big Issue sellers or a favoured charity or a few empathetic words to someone having a tough day.

As we develop and gain more experience of life and its challenges, our ability to put ourselves in 'other people's shoes' and understand other people's subjective experiences also develops; sometimes we may even have been in similar situations ourselves. This can give rise to feelings of empathy, the desire and ability to show understanding and concern, but not pity, to another individual. It follows that the more we feel empathy the greater will be our tendency to be altruistic.

It is an accepted premise that the more we care for others, the less we will be concerned with any rewards we might receive from them. For example, love is a powerful emotion that we can all experience and, as it is based on the care and concern we have for another, it naturally leads us to exhibit altruistic behaviour. But, would altruism exist if we didn't have the motivation, means and opportunity to love and care for another?

In 2008 a Harvard Business School study by Professor Michael Norton found that giving money to someone else lifted participants' happiness more than spending it on themselves! In the same year

the National Economic Foundation identified 'giving', whether money, time or a smile as one of the 5 foundations of 'wellbeing'.

The film Pay it Forward, based on the book of the same title by Catherine Ryan Hyde, has now set in motion an annual event in April where people are encouraged to perform random acts of kindness to 3 or more people and ask them to do the same, or Pay it Forward. But why wait for April?

There is no time like today to be altruistic; buy a homeless person a coffee, pay for someone's bus ticket when they don't have enough change, say 'Hello' to that colleague you see most days but have never spoken to, or laugh it off when someone is worried that they might have made a mistake that you will be angry about. You never know, it might even make you feel better too.



For more information go to:

www.greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/5_ways_giving_is_good_for_you | www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being

Getting on with people

We communicate and interact with people every day so it can be really beneficial for us all if we actually get on with them too!

Often known as good 'interpersonal' or 'social' skills, the ability to get on with people can have a positive impact on many aspects of life, often leading to better understanding and happier relationships, both professionally and personally. Getting on with people also makes us feel good, reduces stress and can enhance feelings of self-worth. However, there are plenty of situations where we don't know, or may not particularly like, the person we are dealing with, but still need to get on with them to get the job done or achieve our own personal goals.

Like all life-skills, we can learn how to get on with people better and there are plenty of ways to put this into practice so that over time it becomes second-nature. Firstly, think about the image you project to others so that they also want to get on with you! Being polite and considerate in your dealings with others can help to avoid conflict or arguments, and smiling and making eye contact when you speak will help you to be seen as friendly and approachable. If the thought of talking to new people makes you anxious, take a few deep breaths to compose yourself and try to have a couple of easy-to-answer questions in mind so that there are no awkward silences to make you feel worse. If you appear to be interested in the other person, they will be put at ease and be more willing to engage with you. Remember the words of the Irish poet WB Yeats:

"There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't met yet".

Top tips to get on with people:

- Treat others as you would like to be treated. Always. It's not easy, but it's worth it.
- Smile. Be open and friendly to everyone.
- Speak in a calm, confident tone. How you say something often counts for more than what you actually say.
- If you promise to do something, make sure you do it. Being unreliable is annoying.
- Be polite. Say please and thank you, praise others for good work, pay compliments and look for the positive in people and situations.
- Make their day! Be genuinely interested in other people so that they feel that they are of importance.
- Don't whinge. Everyone has problems and issues, possibly worse than your own, so don't constantly moan or be negative.
- Keep an open mind. You can always agree to disagree without being disagreeable.
- Don't be a gossip. It is a waste of valuable time and can be extremely destructive.
- Be mindful of other people's feelings. Harsh words can cut like a knife. Be gentle.



Managing pressure

What is Pressure?

Pressure at work is a combination of the tasks we are expected to perform and our perceived ability to complete these tasks. If we feel confident in our abilities, we generally view the tasks and demands as achievable, exciting and rewarding.

Whilst the right amount of pressure is positive and increases our performance, too much (or too little) pressure has a negative effect on our performance, our mind and our body.



Stress is the experience of being under too much (or too little) pressure.

Stress is *“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them”*
HSE (Health and Safety Executive).

When we experience the right amount of pressure we feel motivated and challenged, and are able to reach our full potential. In this state our brain and body are functioning smoothly and are in balance.

When the pressure becomes overwhelming we experience stress. We feel out of control and under threat. Our threat response is a series of physiological changes that prepares us for action. These physiological changes result in the hormones adrenalin and cortisol being released into the blood system. This is commonly known as the ‘flight or fight’ response, originally named for its ability to enable us to physically fight or run away when faced with a threat. When the perceived threat is gone, our body is designed to recover. However, during times of stress, the threat response remains high and our bodies are unable to recover.

The sooner you spot the signs of stress, the easier it is to deal with it. Everyone reacts slightly differently to stress, so it is important that you identify your own stress reactions. Here are some of the common signs of stress:

- **Physical signs** – Headaches, muscle tension, nausea, digestive problems, crying, recurring illness and infections.
- **Behavioural signs** – Taking risks, becoming irritable with family, withdrawing from friends and colleagues, increased alcohol/smoking, changes in eating patterns.
- **Psychological signs** – Feeling fearful, angry, anxious, overwhelmed and out of control. Having difficulty concentrating and making decisions. Feelings of failure and helplessness.

If stress is making it difficult for you to enjoy life or function effectively, it is time to take action.

Managing pressure

Tackling the Causes

When you are experiencing stress, it can be very beneficial to take a step back and review what is happening in your life and what changes have taken place for you over the last few months.

Can you?

- **Identify the causes of your stress?** – What has been happening at work and outside the workplace? Have there been any significant changes in your life, either expected or unexpected? What has been the impact of those changes?
- **Discuss the causes of your stress with a helpful person?** – Maybe your manager, friends, family or colleagues. If you would like a confidential discussion, call Validium, where one of the counsellors will listen to, guide and support you with your stress.
- **Identify if you are contributing to your own stress?** – Do you have very high expectations of yourself? Are you agreeing to do things that could be done by others?

Healthy Habits

There are times when we can't control what is happening to us and stress is an inevitable consequence. At these times you need to introduce some healthy habits that work for you and your lifestyle:



- Take regular breaks, on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis
- Eat healthily, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Keep hydrated, without overusing caffeine or alcohol
- Explore relaxation techniques that work for you (e.g. deep breathing, muscle relaxation, visualisation exercises)
- Check that you have sufficient sleep for the amount of activity you have
- Reward and treat yourself
- Exercise regularly, doing something that you enjoy to encourage maximum release of feel good hormones
- Talk and off-load to build confidence in tackling problems and release the urgency and panic associated with the situation

Information about counselling

We hear about counselling all the time in the media but what actually happens in a counselling session? To some people the word 'counselling' suggests that this is a process in which you are given advice that helps you to resolve your problems. In reality, advice giving is only rarely a part of counselling, this helps to empower the client encouraging them to feel that they will be able to tackle future difficulties. This article is designed to give someone considering counselling an idea of what to expect.

What is counselling?

Any issues that are causing a person emotional or psychological distress can usually be helped with counselling. Typical problems that people bring to counselling are depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, stress and relationship difficulties. Generally the starting point of a piece of counselling work will involve the client describing what is causing them distress. People who seek counselling often have issues which make them feel embarrassed or guilty. It can be very tough to talk about these difficulties if you feel you are being judged. Counsellors are non-judgmental and accepting with all clients. It is not their counsellor's role to pass moral judgments. The counsellor's job is to help the client explore their difficulties.

Counselling is focused entirely on the difficulties that the client brings which the counsellor then responds to, it is not a process where the counsellor works systematically through a set plan decided in advance.

Above all else counsellors are skilled at listening - whereas a friend might try to talk a client out of, say depression, by reminding them of all the good things in their life, a counsellor will focus on what the client is actually feeling. Many people have never had the experience of being properly listened to and this aspect of counselling can be powerfully supportive.



Confidentiality

Another important aspect of counselling is that it is confidential. The client is unlikely to feel that it is safe to talk openly about their problems unless they are confident that the counsellor will not discuss them with other people. In counselling, where the employer is funding the counselling, the confidentiality rule is also strictly followed except in the extremely unlikely event of a client describing doing things that will damage the company.

As counsellors we abide by a strict code of ethics, this means that if you tell us you are likely to be of harm to yourself or others we may contact your GP, or another relevant support person, in order to ensure your safety. In this instance we would discuss our concerns with you before contacting anyone and you will be made aware of any information we are going to pass on. In situations where a client describes committing terrorist acts, drug trafficking, abuse of a child/vulnerable adult or hit and run motoring offences, counsellors are required to disclose information to a third party. However you may not be informed of this in order to protect public safety.

Information about counselling

Ethical rules

Counsellors have to follow strict ethical rules which forbid taking advantage of the client in any way. This includes a strict prohibition of a counsellor having a personal relationship with a client. Counsellors who breach these ethical rules will be subject to investigation by their professional bodies.

Counselling at Validium

Now that you know a little about counselling, it is important to understand what counselling involves here Validium. Here at Validium we use a '**Brief Therapy**' model and this means that there are a maximum number of sessions available when you engage in counselling. Our vast experience in working this way has taught us that this is a powerful way of engaging in counselling. It often involves focussing on the present and, perhaps even more, looking to the future. You might hear your counsellor asking you questions like;

'what troubles you at the moment....and how do you want this to be in the future?'
Or *'...how will you know that this problem is fixed?'*

These exploratory questions enable people to begin to look to the future and see beyond their present worries. Your counsellor will help you to do this in a supportive and empathic way. It's not necessarily about knowing the answers to these questions but about beginning to take that journey together so that you may make changes in your life. As each person is unique so each session and each situation will also be unique. There may be times when difficult memories or experiences from the past are discussed during the session. This is perfectly natural and your counsellor will help you begin to explore the role that these memories and experiences currently plays in your life.



Information about counselling

Assessment

The assessment is an extremely important step in the counselling process and is conducted with each person that wishes to be referred. The purpose of the assessment is to firstly establish if Brief Therapy is the most appropriate intervention, and subsequently to work out with the caller what the aim of the counselling will be. For example, a person may call with problems in a relationship as well as struggling with a difficult manager at work and an elderly mother who requires a lot of care may call in to our helpline. As the assessment unfolds this person is soon able to see that, if they could better manage one part of their situation, then the other stressors would actually feel more manageable in themselves.

So, during the assessment, you may hear your counsellor say,

'I can hear how much you have going on for you just now, do you have a sense of what is causing the most difficulty?'

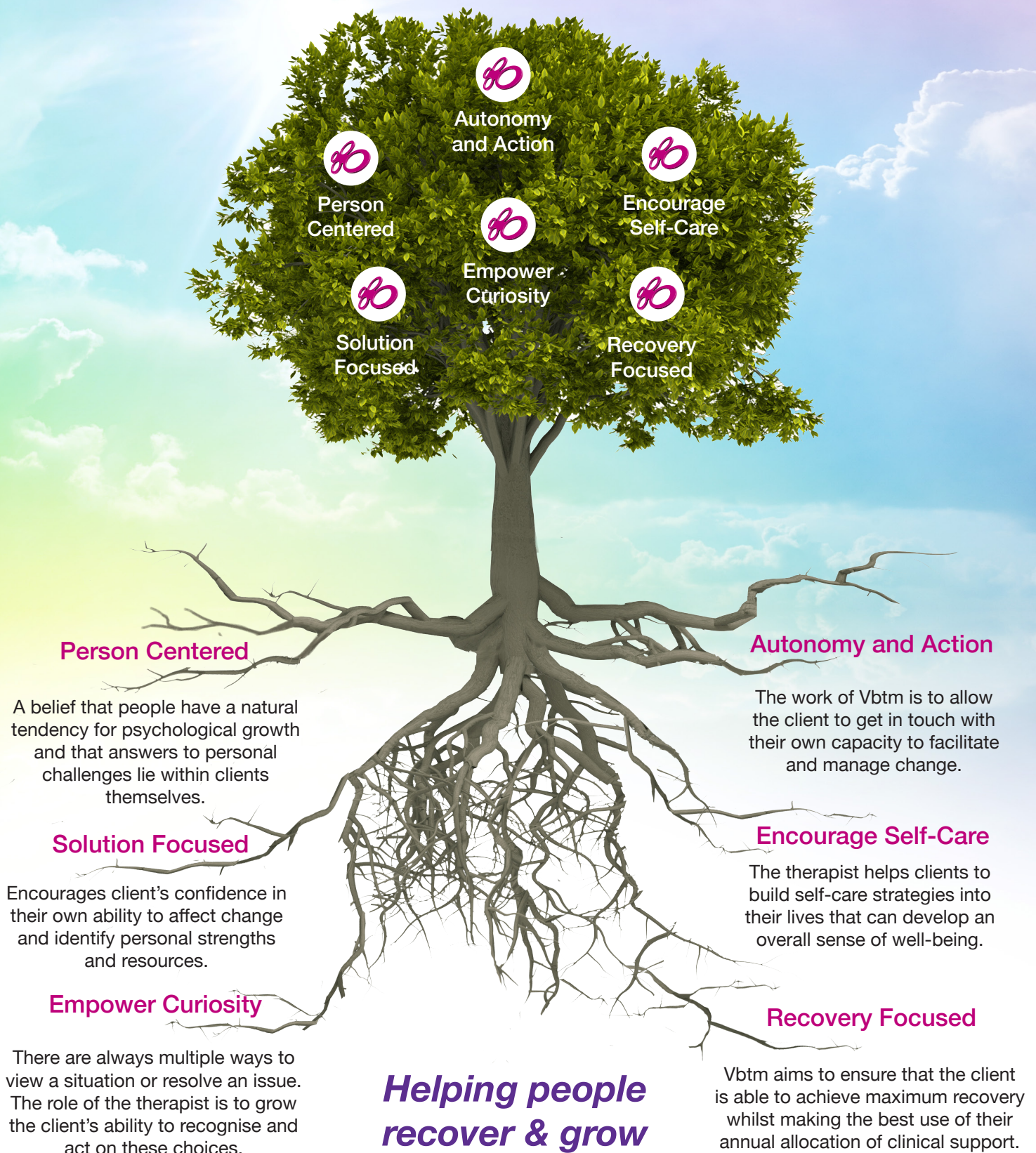
If you don't know the answer to this, and many people don't at first, then you would simply take a couple of days to reflect on that. Many people find these periods of reflection very helpful in making sense of their thoughts. After all, throughout the counselling process the most important time is the reflection between the sessions.

Next Steps

Assessment calls generally take between 30 and 45 minutes. On completion of the assessment the counsellor will refer you for sessions. Sessions usually take place on a weekly basis and it can be helpful to have an idea of your availability prior to making the call to us. In counselling the relationship between client and counsellor is of paramount importance. For this reason sessions will take place at the same time each week to allow continuity of the same counsellor throughout your sessions. Counselling sessions usually last approximately 50 minutes in total.

Validium's Brief Therapy Model (Vbtm)

aims to ensure that the client is able to achieve maximum recovery whilst making the best use of their annual allocation of clinical support



Positive thinking

We are likely to have said or heard the phrase “Think positive!” when we are offering support to someone who is feeling down or we are feeling down ourselves. Thinking positively can make a difference, but what does it actually mean to ‘think positive’?

If we feel down or anxious there is always a reason why. It could be a distressing event that has happened to us, a troubling thought we can't get out of our mind, or a reason that is seemingly hard to identify. If we continue to think negatively about these events, this thinking will quickly be absorbed into subconscious area of our mind. If we do this for long enough, we start to feel down, or in a bad mood.

However, if we consider the same event or thought in a different light (a technique called reframing), we can consider the positive aspects and even consider how we can benefit from what we previously thought of as a distressing thought. To do this, we each individually need to understand how we think and what value we attach to each of our thoughts.

Try to observe your thoughts as if you were an independent observer, rather than react to them straight away. This is quite a challenging task.

Questions to ask yourself could include: ***‘Am I overreacting to this situation?’ or ‘Is there another way of me viewing this situation that will benefit me, rather than cause, distress?’***

Once the habit of doing this is formed, this positive way of thinking will be absorbed into the subconscious and you will feel much better as a result.



Building resilience

Because of the pace of life it is very difficult nowadays to avoid pressure but we can reduce the likelihood of becoming negatively affected by pressure by making ourselves more resilient.

Resilience building

Pressure can be beneficial, motivating us to perform and giving us a sense of satisfaction when we succeed. The definition of stress is the 'adverse reaction to excessive pressures of other demands'. Prolonged periods of stress can have a direct negative impact on health making us more susceptible to picking up viruses and developing other physical and mental health issues. The good news is research shows that everyone's resilience to stress can be increased and there are a number of ways of doing this.

Be in Control

If individuals feel they can control their destiny, even if that's just setting their own deadlines or owning a project or initiative it can have a positive impact when faced with life's pressures. Do you have control in your personal life? Sometimes we may feel like others are making decisions for us and in some cases this may be true. Having an assertive approach is important in letting people know who is in charge of your destiny. But remember, assertiveness does not mean arrogance. Respecting other people's boundaries is as important as respecting our own.



Boost your Vitality

Sleep deprivation and poor diet can have a huge impact on energy levels, well-being and coping with pressure. If we feel out of sorts it can impact the way we handle pressure. Eating well by having regular meals and fresh food rather than fast food will help maintain energy levels to manage challenges. Regular exercise, whether it is walking at lunchtime, taking the stairs instead of the lift or a session in the gym will help keep the body and mind strong and healthy.

Socialise

Rather than tackling an issue alone confiding in friends, family, colleagues or your Employee Assistance Programme can help you feel more supported. Feeling supported and knowing you have a network which you can turn to during challenging times, will help make you more resilient to life's pressures.

Stay Optimistic

Although our ability to thrive under pressure is largely dependent on our basic genetic disposition and principles for living imparted to us in early life, equally important is the ability to view obstacles as positive challenges to overcome. Research shows that people who view a challenge with a 'can-do' attitude rather than viewing it as a threat are less likely to suffer negative affects of pressure. Everybody needs a helping hand from time to time, so if you require support in building resilience or managing pressure don't forget your Employee Assistance Programme is free, confidential and available 24 hours per day 7 days per week.

Work-Life Balance

Tips for Improvement

Work

Plan a day in your working week where you take control of your workload, practice saying no to additional work, if you are already overloaded. Discuss any work overload issues with your direct Line Manager, who may be completely unaware of the pressure that you are under.

Learn to delegate more, trust in colleagues and other Team Members to have the skills set to complete the job and do it well. In doing this you may also be providing developmental opportunities and fresh challenges for others.

Make it clear to others, that, although you are 100% committed to your job, and want to perform well, you also have another life out of work which you also value very highly, and you consider this to also play an important role in maintaining your overall health and wellbeing.

Do not be afraid to ask for help, if you are unable to discuss issues with your Line Manager, access other sources of support such as your Human Resources or call EAP in confidence.

Schedule free time in your diary, on a regular basis, to reflect on work completed and projects finished, to assess whether you could have worked smarter during any of these tasks, whilst still achieving the same results. Use lessons learnt for future projects.

Take the time to 'Celebrate your Successes at Work'.

Personal Life

Try setting a monthly target for time allocated to work, Family, Friends and time for your self. Follow this plan as closely as possible, if you have had to stay late one day at work to hit an important deadline, ensure that you make up for it the next day by leaving on time.

Use commuting and travelling time to disengage from work, to ensure that when you reach home, your work life is left at the door.

Arrange to go out and try different things that you have not done for a while, this could be, going to the cinema, catching up with friends, going for long walks, whatever you enjoy doing. Be tough with yourself and leave the household chores for a while – the world will not end if your house is dusty for a day or two.

If you have young children, where possible, arrange for a regular evening for a friend to babysit, to enable you to go out and have some 'you' time.



Work-Life Balance Tips for Improvement

Exercise

Consider joining a gym and allocating certain time in your monthly schedule to exercise, try walking, or running and cycling from home. If you are unable to get cover, allow for regular weekly slots where you can exercise at home when the children are in bed, this could be in the form of a fitness or relaxation DVD. Regular exercise should quickly help to make you feel better about yourself - less stressed, with more energy and your sleep should also improve.

Food and Drink

Where possible, try to cook some of your meals from fresh, ensuring that you have your 5 portions of fruit and veg a day. Instead of snacking on foods which contain high levels of sugar, try healthier cereal bars or dried fruits.

Replace those endless cups of coffee, which contain high levels of caffeine by drinking more water, try fruit and herbal teas, or decaffeinated coffee.

If you make some of these changes, and actually stick to them, you should start to see an improvement in your Work Life Balance and general Wellbeing, including some time for yourself again, Good Luck!

Don't forget - you can access additional support from your EAP service.



Mindfulness colouring page





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