

## Recognising stress and knowing what to do next?

Kelly Miller | 2nd November 2020 | Caritas Schools' Service

This week is International Stress Awareness Week. We all experience different levels of stress in our lives and have different capacities of coping with stress. Some people thrive on stress, whilst other people become overwhelmed and this can shift and change depending on a range of variables in your life. Different things can cause each person stress, for one person it may be performing a presentation whilst for another it may be lots of paperwork.

Working in schools can be a very stressful job with high demands and expectations. A study by the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) highlighted how education professionals report some of the highest work-related stress, depression and anxiety rates in Britain. Due to COVID-19 teachers and school staff are dealing with constant change and as well as managing their daily tasks and educating children there is an increase in the emotional and social care that they are expected to provide to children & young people (CYP).

When stress does become overbearing we often receive warning signs which can help us recognise stress. This article explores some of those warning signs so that you are able to understand your stress levels, reduce them, and seek help and support if needed.

### Signs of stress

Signs of stress can come in many different forms and are made up of feelings, behaviours and physical changes to our bodies. We may feel more irritable, impatient or aggressive, anxious or nervous. Some people may experience feelings of depression and hopelessness. Things that used to inspire joy and enthusiasm may begin to leave us feeling empty and uninterested. We may feel as though our thoughts are running away from us, leaving us feeling muddled and overburdened.

Alongside this, we may notice changes in our behaviour – for example – we may begin to avoid situations such as going into the staff room or speaking to parents. We may notice an increase in how much we are drinking or smoking; we may be more tearful or restless and notice nervous ticks or habits developing such as biting nails or picking skin. Some people may eat more than usual, whilst others may experience a loss of appetite and eat less.

Our bodies can be impacted heavily by stress as it can cause our blood pressure to rise; it can increase muscle tension and cause problems with posture. Our breathing may become shallower and some people will have panic attacks. Headaches, chest pains and problems with our digestive system such as indigestion, constipation or diarrhoea are also physical symptoms we may experience. Many people report problems with sleep and this in turn can increase our stress levels as we need sleep to function at our full potential.

Some people will notice their stress levels increasing immediately whereas for other people it may be difficult to notice that this is happening. It is important that we take time to reflect on our feelings and behaviour so that we can address our own needs. When you begin to notice the stress signals that impact on you it is important to take a step back and to think about what you need to do next.

### **Ways to reduce stress**

Self-care is vital when it comes to reducing stress and this looks different for everyone. For some people relaxation can be achieved by going for a walk in the countryside or having a long bath, for others they may enjoy cooking a tasty meal or spending time with a loved one. Take some time out to do what makes you feel happy and relaxed.

You can also apply self-care in work by taking allocated breaks, managing your time and identifying triggers so that you can be more prepared. Is your stress caused by a particular issue that arises, ongoing stressful events or a one-off event? Are you able to address the problems to effect change? If not - are you able to accept that you are unable to do anything about it, and therefore focus on redirecting your time and energy to feel happier and more productive?

By identifying triggers you may be able to understand more about your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, this can help us to recognise what could be better and allow us to think about how to establish that.

One way to feel more in control of our stress is to be organised. Stress can often be caused by a lack of control and periods of uncertainty. By being organised we can reduce our problems in to smaller bite size chunks and deal with them step by step. It can also help us to recognise whether this is achievable or whether we need support from others.

Accessing help when we are feeling stressed may be necessary for some people, in some situations. Stress can be overwhelming and we are not always able to move forward by ourselves. Support can be accessed through our management teams at work, through our family and friends, and through the GP. Your GP can help in a range of ways, as you may benefit from a talking treatment such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or through medication.

We can also access help through helplines such as this helpline service for school staff 08000 562 561. This is a 24/7 service where trained counsellors are there to listen to you without judgement, and to help you find a way forward whatever your worries or concerns. If your school has access to the Caritas Schools' Service, you may be able to access support from your schools allocated social worker or counsellor.

Over time you will become more adept at recognising stress and your personal triggers. You will also have more awareness of the steps you need to take to improve how you're feeling. Building resilience is important when thinking about stress as it enables us to bounce back quickly and reduce

the impact that stress has on our lives. Keeping a journal or logging your mood with an app can help you to manage stress long term, to identify triggers quickly and therefore work on reducing them before they become unmanageable.

During International Stress Awareness Week take some time to think about how you are feeling. During this unusual school term with all of the added pressures following school closures and COVID-19, is there anything you could do for yourself that would make your life easier? Remember that there is always advice and support available.