

STRESSED OUT? BEHIND THE 21ST CENTURY EPIDEMIC OF STRESS

Words by Dr Kate Middleton

How big a problem is stress?

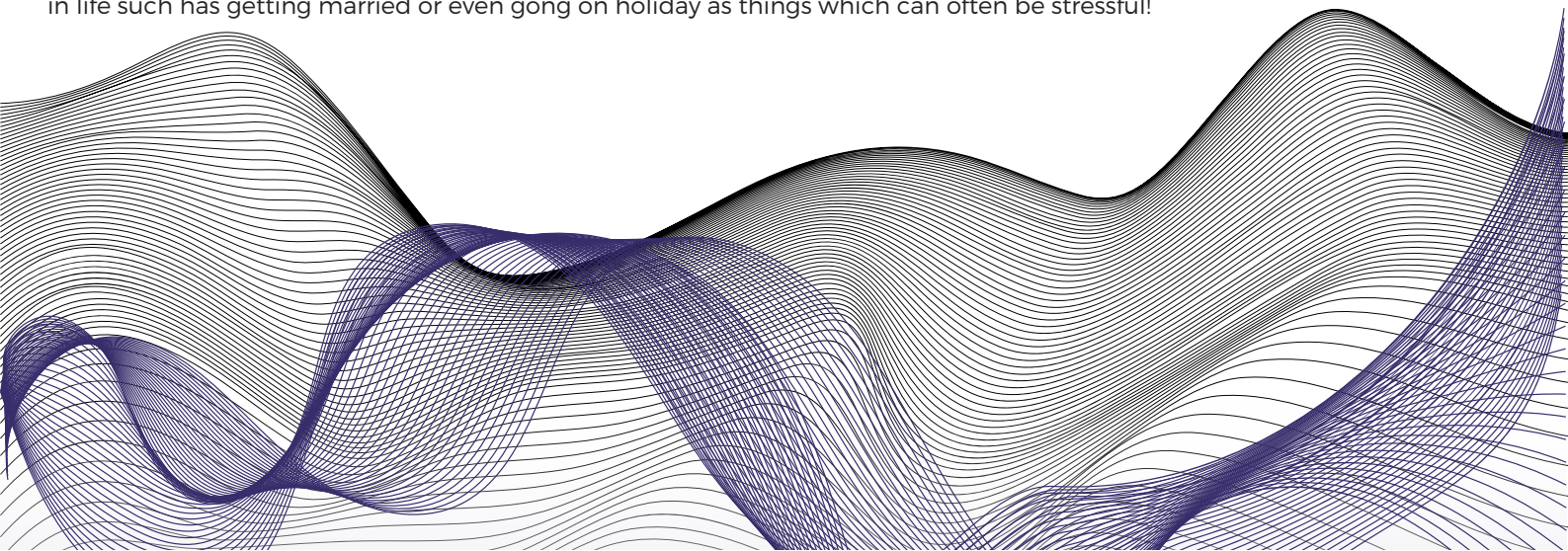
According to the survey run by the Mental Health Foundation, 3/4 of adults report feeling so stressed that they feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. 80% of people admitted feeling stressed at some point during a typical week, and 8% said they felt stressed all the time.

Stress certainly takes its toll on your mental health. according to these latest figures, over half of adults struggling with stressed also reported feeling depressed. in fact about 1/3 said that this had become so severe that they had experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings.

Why are we all so stressed???

This is the big question where stress is concerned, and the main debate comes down to two main questions: is there something about the way we approach life now which has made us struggle more with stress? OR is there something about our culture and 21st century lifestyle which means we experience more stress and pressure?

Certainly many experts would argue that there are features of 21st century life which have left us under more pressure and exposed to more stress. Its important to appreciate that stress isn't just about experiences that are distressing. Stress is anything that requires a response from your brain and body - and any demand on you requires a stress response of some level. So, for example we know that commuting for more than 45 minutes each day statistically raises your risk of struggling with stress. It might be really boring - but it places a demand on your brain and body and requires a response from your stress system. So do other things that life can throw at us - busy times in our work or home lives, periods when we are juggling a lot of demands on us, or where a lot of people are dependent on us, exams or periods where we need to get the best out of our minds and study. Even good things can raise our stress levels - classic measures of stress rate some of the happiest moments in life such as getting married or even going on holiday as things which can often be stressful!



Probably the most challenging aspect of our culture now therefore is the relentlessness of many of the demands we experience. The boundaries around different aspects of our lives such as work and home life have become much more blurred. So flexible working allows us to sometimes work at home - but also means that home becomes associated with work stresses in a way it didn't used to be. Many of us don't work set hours any more either and may catch up on email or extra work at home after our 'set' work hours. Smartphones mean that wherever we go many of us carry our work with us - and even though we might not be checking emails, psychologically this means that we are much less likely to have periods of time where we are totally switched off from work. Time and space for genuine relaxation has become harder to find - and our stress levels show it.

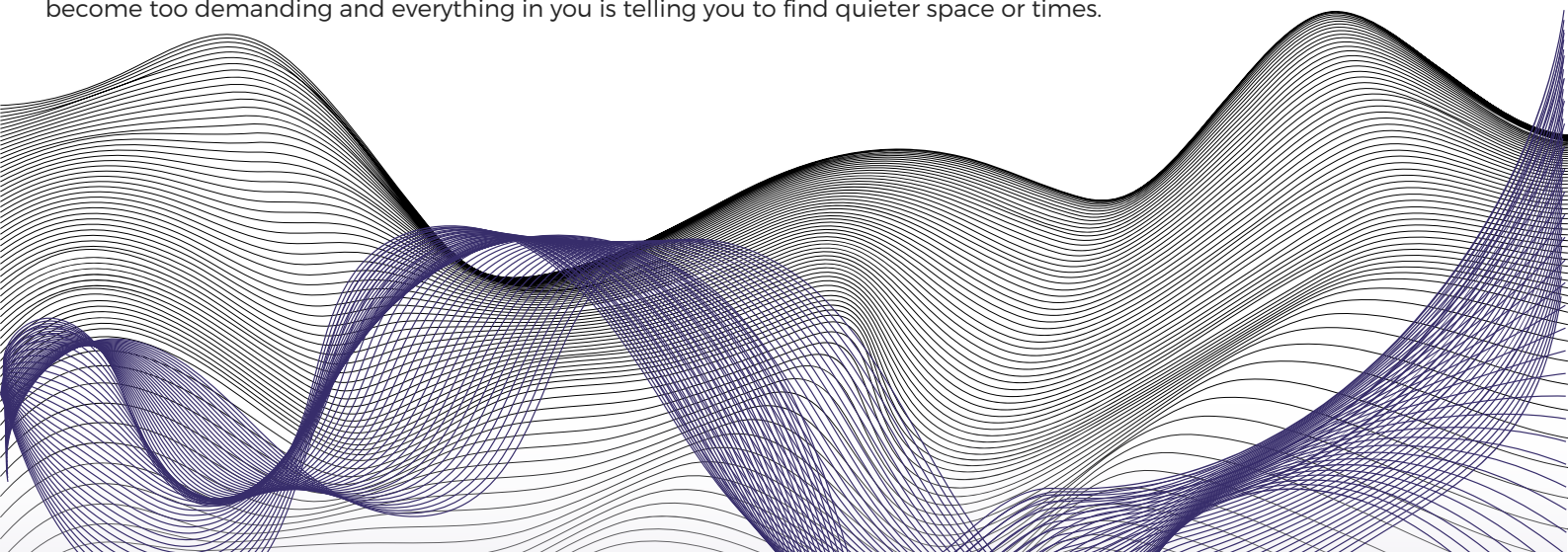
It isn't all about work though - and it is important we recognise that just as much stress in our life comes from our social interactions with other humans. Once again, 21st century life has raised the complexity and the frequency of these interactions, with social media and phones meaning there are very few moments in most days where we are not connected and communicating with someone. You may love having so many contacts on Facebook or Instagram - and studies show that when you get direct feedback such as likes or follows your brain shows an immediate response that boosts your motivation to be on these sites - but it isn't relaxing for your mind.

And what about your phone - could that be stressing you out? Remember, stress is not necessarily something we find negative and for many of us the drive to use our mobile phones and to be constantly connected could be contributing to stress. Ask yourself how many hours per day are you on your phone on average? Specific phone habits may contribute to stress - for example checking social media apps or emails last thing at night (studies suggest about 80% of us do this) or within minutes of waking up (well over half of adults admit to this). Mobile phones also rob us of empty space and time - those moments in the day when pre phones we would have been doing ... well nothing! Boring maybe but good chances for your brain to refresh. We love the buzz and energy of modern life, but do we find it too hard to actually walk away from our phones and switch off?

Stress and anxiety

One interesting link with stress is the increased levels of anxiety many people are reporting. As a modern day phenomena anxiety is close on the heels of stress, with increasing numbers of children, young people and adults reporting high levels of anxiety and associated problems like panic attacks.

In physiological terms stress and anxiety share a common pathway and system. What this means is that levels of both are often closely linked. So anxiety triggers a stress response as part of the fight or flight response. But because stress is on the same system, if our stress levels are chronically raised, this can make us much more prone to anxiety. Think of it like this - if you imagine your stress level on a scale of 0-10, much like the water in a pool, when your baseline level is low, little waves of stress or anxiety are no problem. However as your baseline rises, it is like the waterline starts to creep up - from your ankles up your legs, over your waist - even moving towards your neck. There's a point at which this reaches a crisis level - where even a little wave of stress can literally leave you at risk of going under. This is an uncomfortable place to be for any length of time, but if life leaves you there long term it is very hard. Even small challenges can trigger severe anxiety, and leave you at risk of panic. People in this place talk of feeling overwhelmed, of fleeting thoughts of needing to run away or escape. Life has simply become too demanding and everything in you is telling you to find quieter space or times.



Managing stress well

So what do you do if you know you are under long term stress? Here are 5 top tips:

1 - Schedule rest:

In busy times it can feel like there just isn't time to chill out and rest - but actually it is more important than ever. Schedule rest in your diary: block it out and resist the temptation to overwrite it with jobs or chores. Remember rest isn't time when you are doing nothing: it refuels you for all the other things you do.

2 - Learn to relax:

Many of us, if we are honest, struggle with relaxation. We try to relax but it doesn't come easy, or we fill our spare time with things which whilst fun or distracting are not relaxing. Killing zombies on your Xbox may be very cathartic but it does not give your brain a chance to switch off! Be intentional about finding things to do which are physically relaxing and try as many different things as you can think of to see what works best for you. And remember - stress isn't necessarily distressing! You may love the buzz and drive of your life but your body and brain still need some time to recharge.

3 - Be mindful not mindless:

Multitasking has left many of us rushing around trying to do several things at once, so what difference might it make to your day if you learned to find time and space to stop and just 'be' for a while? Mindfulness is an innate skill: a choice we can make about what our minds focus on, but many of us need to learn to override the modern busyness and find pools of calm in the chaos. Think about going on a mindfulness course, download an app or read one of the many excellent resources available on mindfulness.

4 - Watch your boundaries:

I know what you are thinking - flexible working is great because it means you can work from anywhere and at any time of day. The problem with it is that you can work from anywhere and at any time of day! Ever found yourself thinking about work when you should be relaxing? Catching up on work when you are supposed to be on a day off? Feeling guilty for not working when actually you should be resting or spending time with family or friends? Try to find some times in your week which are clearly set part for not working - and stick to it. Maybe even think about turning your phone off or (gasp) leave it at home for the day!!

5 - Get out more!

Did you know one of the most effective antidotes to stress is the Great Outdoors? Studies show that people who start to spend more time outside getting good old fresh air and connecting with nature experience both a reduction in stress and an increase in happiness. In fact some studies suggest that it is as powerful an impact as some anti-depressant medications. And yet how often do we get outside? Many of us, even if we do take exercise, go to the gym, and spend most of our days inside. So - when you can, why not get out there? It doesn't need to be a days hiking in the mountains - even grabbing 15-20 mins to go for a walk in your lunch hour can help you counteract a stressful morning at work and revive you, dropping stress levels so you are more ready for the next challenge.

