

Stress and COPD

FACT SHEET prepared by Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

Stress can be created by any change, positive or negative. Having Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is often stressful. It may be hard to accept that your breathing limits your daily life. Different things stress us all. If you can work out what triggers your stress you may be able to build awareness of how stress affects your body, thoughts and behaviour and work on changing this.

How do I respond to stress? Physical – this reaction is often called “fight or flight”

Chemical changes occur in our bodies as we prepare to confront or avoid stress, which may lead to:

- ❖ a faster heart beat and breathing rate
- ❖ tense/sore muscles
- ❖ urge to go to the toilet
- ❖ sweating/shaking
- ❖ inability to keep still

Thoughts

- ❖ racing thoughts
- ❖ difficulty thinking or making decisions
- ❖ anticipating or magnifying problems which may not exist
- ❖ thinking more about ourselves and forgetting other people's needs

Emotions

- ❖ feeling irritable or angry
- ❖ feeling anxious or panicky
- ❖ feeling overwhelmed, helpless or hopeless

Behaviours

- ❖ disturbed sleep
- ❖ decreased ability to say no to quick but unhelpful fixes such as alcohol and cigarettes
- ❖ more aggression towards people and objects
- ❖ unable to complete goals

What can I do about stress?

1. Action. Sort out things you worry about by writing them down

Action Now	Action this week	Can't do anything
Eg. Call someone to clarify a worry about your medication	Eg. Going to a concert- Plan your trip in advance. Read theatre plan to get the best seat for you	Try to work out if there are any advantages in worrying about these events. If not, try to focus on things you can take action on.

Coping

- ❖ change your pace or do something different
- ❖ try to keep as active as possible. Ask a health professional about exercise and COPD
- ❖ share the load with a friend or counsellor
- ❖ when you feel overwhelmed by tasks, write a list and halve it
- ❖ if you feel angry with someone distract yourself: go to another room, put on music
- ❖ pursue interests. You may benefit from taking on less demanding jobs at home

2. Accepting the limits of your condition

- ❖ let go of unrealistic beliefs such as THE WORLD SHOULD BE FAIR AND JUST
- ❖ learn to accept responsibility for your own feelings. Even when things seem unfair the meaning you attach to this can determine whether you retain control over your feelings
- ❖ make sure your goals are **flexible**. You may need to adopt new goals if the old ones cannot be attained. Always have a plan B and emotionally prepare yourself for it
- ❖ talk yourself into being patient. Setbacks and delays do happen to people with COPD
- ❖ everyone has times when they do not get what they want or deserve. Unpleasant experiences are only permanent setbacks if you allow them to be
- ❖ remember we are not robots, so why do we expect to always perform faultlessly?

Relaxation can lessen the degree of tension you experience. Start before the tension becomes intense, by doing a mental check of each part of your body especially shoulders, neck, face, back and hands when you feel stressed.

Try this, in order, while sitting down

- 1) move and stretch all parts of your body
- 2) realign body into correct posture. Check that your shoulders are down
- 3) try the breathing techniques you were taught by your health professional. For more about breathing techniques read the fact sheet "Asthma and breathing", the booklet "Breathe easier with COPD" or visit asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz
- 4) shut your eyes if you can and try to visualise a pleasant scene. Water scenes are often very relaxing. Try putting some music to your visualisation and note details in your scene. Your mind will learn to associate that music with relaxation
- 5) stay put for a while, and then open your eyes when you are ready. Rescan your body

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

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