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STRESS busting

Dr Jeni Worden looks at how to stay in good mental health during these tough economic times

We live in stressful times. High unemployment, pay freezes and short-term working are causing serious financial hardship for many people. Concerns over how to pay the household bills and mortgage on a reduced family income often lead to anxiety, stress and sleepless nights which, if untreated, can lead to serious physical and mental health problems. The economic downturn has also produced rising stress levels among UK's shrinking workforce as many workers have found that they've had to take on a much heavier workload. A recent study from 2009 shows that 415,000 people reported work related stress problems that they felt were making them unwell. Already one in five visits to the GP are for symptoms related to stress, anxiety or depression; and with the economic future still uncertain it is feared that these figures will increase.

What is stress?

Stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as "an adverse reaction to

excessive pressures or other demands" and produces symptoms such as a pounding heart or palpitations, dry mouth, headaches, generalised muscle and joint pains, loss of appetite for food or sex, tiredness and poor concentration. The hormones responsible for making us feel so bad are released by the adrenal glands, of which we have two, situated just above the kidneys (hence their alternative name of suprarenal glands). Cortisol is responsible for causing raised blood pressure, reduced effectiveness of our body's immune system and the release of fat and sugar into the blood stream. Adrenaline and norepinephrine are the "flight or fight" hormones, causing our heart rate and blood pressure to rise and making us sweat more. Already it can be seen why rising stress levels makes us feel the way we do. If stress is left unchecked, it can cause physical problems such as a stroke or a heart attack due to hypertension (raised blood pressure) or mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, frequently with accompanying insomnia.

First line of defence

So what can be done to eliminate harmful levels of stress from our lives? The good news is that there are a number of ways of combating stress and making yourself feel better. Talking therapies are advised by NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence) for the symptoms of mild anxiety or depression, but it can be difficult to access them on the NHS due to long waiting lists or lack of facilities in some areas.

However, talking to a good friend or close relative is an alternative approach and the phrase "a trouble shared is a trouble halved" is very true. Self-help groups can also be a valuable source of support but avoid those that become too introspective as it is meant to be a way out of your problems, not to further delve into them. The mental health charities MIND and NoPanic offer valuable online advice.

Apart from counselling, cognitive behaviour therapy and anger management to which your GP may be able to refer you, relaxation techniques such as

listening to music, deep breathing or muscle relaxation can help to relieve stress related symptoms. A healthy diet will always help as sugary snacks, eaten in a rush, will just make your body feel worse, and cause a “sugar dip” in both your energy and concentration. Plenty of fluids – not alcohol or caffeine – are recommended (at least 1.2 litres a day), and I can personally vouch for the calming effects of exercise. My local council run gym does an excellent programme called Healthy Horizons to which I, as a local GP, can refer anybody with a health problem, including depression, stress and anxiety, who wants to participate in an exercise regime with appropriate supervision. Fees are reduced for such patients and most people find it very beneficial as natural painkillers and mood hormones called endorphins are released during exercise. Endorphins can help to smooth out the chemical imbalance in the brain which causes depression and related anxiety symptoms.

Giving up smoking is another way to help relieve stress, although some of my patients claim smoking cigarettes is the only way they can combat stress and therefore a reason for *not* stopping!

The homeopathic approach

Furthermore, there is a whole range of homeopathic medications that can be used for a wide variety of symptoms in conjunction with all the therapies mentioned above and without affecting the effectiveness of conventional medicines.

For stress related symptoms such as chest pain, indigestion and heartburn/acid reflux, dizziness, diarrhoea, sweating, tension, breathlessness and anxiety, feelings of restlessness and worries about health, I find myself advising patients to try one of the most common remedies, Arsenicum album (white arsenic). If taken in a toxic dose, arsenic causes the symptoms mentioned above which is why it is such a good homeopathic remedy for this situation. It is especially useful if the underlying personality is that of a tidy person who worries about their own health and that of their family or loved ones. They feel worse when alone and want people around them. There may be perfectionist traits or even an element of obsessive compulsive disorder. Patients admit to wanting to feel in control and becoming very depressed if they feel that is no longer possible, for whatever reason.

Generally, Arsenicum album suits someone who feels the cold and is chilly in nature, hardly ever feeling too warm. Heat makes them feel better and they often feel worse at midnight or in the early hours of the morning.

One of my female patients came to see me some years ago as she wanted to stop taking her conventional antidepressant medication but was worried about her depression returning. She was a very tidy and precise sort of lady and I felt she would do well with Arsenicum album, so I prescribed a 30C tablet to be taken daily while she reduced her Prozac. She remained well after stopping the antidepressant and has done so to this day, using Arsenicum album very occasionally for a short while to control any recurrent symptoms. Another patient had an outbreak of severe eczema which had coincided with him losing his job. He was a worrier by nature and Arsenicum album worked amazingly to restore his skin and mental state to full health.

If you are more of a “hot and bothered” type of person, being impulsive rather than guarded (as described in the Arsenicum album picture) but sharing the concern about health and having anticipatory anxiety (worry about forthcoming events), then Argentum nitricum (silver nitrate) may well be the answer to your stress levels. People who do well with Argentum nitricum tend to be suggestible and sympathetic, preferring company and becoming anxious when alone. They are warm-blooded and are worse for heat, the opposite of the Arsenicum album picture. They can suffer from palpitations and are plagued by digestive problems, such as belching and wind. And they have a liking for sweets and salty foods, in contrast to people possessing the Arsenicum album characteristics who prefer sour and fatty foods.

A personal anecdote may help to illustrate to effectiveness of the Argentum nitricum remedy. I used to have a large black tom cat who spent his life avoiding getting too hot, disliking the sun intensely. He was a terrible traveller, getting panicky even when placed in the car, and going on a journey was horrendous as he would frequently pass a motion. Argentum nitricum stopped his anxiety and meant a calm journey home from a trip to Wales without any unscheduled stops or mishaps!

Melancholy moods

Sometimes, I have to prescribe medication such as antidepressants or sedatives



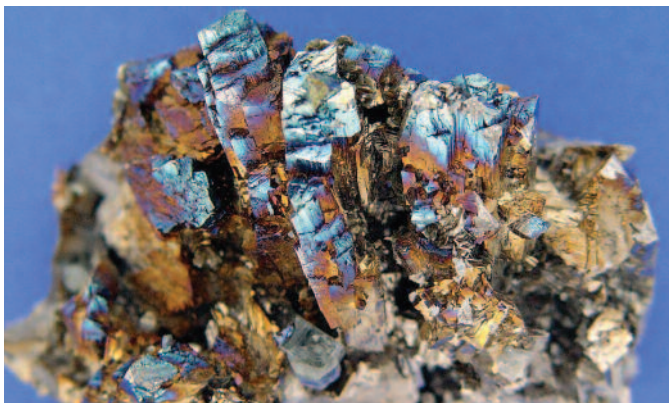
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to relieve the severity of my patients' depression and occasionally a consultant psychiatrist is needed for advice. But homeopathy can also be used to treat this only too common form of mental illness.

When it comes to depression, one of the medications I find myself prescribing most often is *Natrum muriaticum* (sea salt). *Natrum muriaticum* is a very deep acting remedy, especially in the sphere of mental health. Because deep grief and sorrow are typical of the feelings *Natrum muriaticum* can help to relieve, and these are emotions that every single one of us will have felt at some stage in our lives, it is not surprising that it is used as regularly as it is. Typically, *Natrum muriaticum* will help those people who are sensitive but who have learnt to keep their feelings in check, a perfect paradigm of the very

great to relieve the depression or stress feelings due to an ever increasing level of responsibility, if the responsibility starts to be overwhelming, then *Calcarea carbonica* (oyster shell) is probably a better option for you. *Calcarea carbonica* suits the sort of person who is methodical and determined but has to achieve success through hard work rather than natural brilliance. Obstinate may be another word used by relatives and friends to describe them. These people have a strong sense of duty and are inclined to become overworked by trying to keep up with an increasingly heavy workload. It's not uncommon for them to work themselves to exhaustion and they may even have to give up their job all together as a result. Anxieties exist about health and they feel that they will never recover.

sufferers to analyse what is causing their sleep problem to help me prescribe the most suitable homeopathic medicine. A remedy derived from *Coffea cruda* (coffee bean) has often been advised for insomnia and is worth trying. But if they cannot stop their mind from racing, then a low dose of *Gelsemium* (yellow jasmine) taken at night should help. The herbal remedy *Valerian* is often recommended for sleep problems, and it can be taken in a homeopathic dose as *Valeriana*. As with the *Gelsemium* I would again advise a low dose of 6 or 12C strength at night. If you are waking up at 3 or 4 am and cannot sleep due to thoughts of work or how to manage the next day, then *Nux vomica* (strychnine) will be a good choice. *Nux vomica* is often associated with the "A" type personality who is prone to



Arsenic (photo: BHA Photo Library)



Gelsemium (photo: BHA Photo Library)

British "stiff upper lip". They tend to be stoical and to get on with things, to "bottle things up" regardless of how unhappy they are feeling. They are often good listeners and confidantes, without their friends realising how much they themselves are hurting inside. Receiving a hug can help them feel better, but they tend to be happier without physical contact from people outside their immediate family. Being nice to them when they are upset makes them feel worse or cry more and they hate breaking down in front of you. Music may make them cry but often such patients complain to me that they *cannot* cry, even though very sad or recently bereaved. They may suffer from migraines and have back pain which is made better from hard pressure. I find that because of the psychological nature of these problems I have to use a higher potency such as 200C or 1M; but I would always advise seeing a Faculty qualified homeopath before using these doses as a whole range of emotions can be raised by this remedy and may require further treatment with counselling.

Whereas *Natrum muriaticum* can be

They fear heights and think they are going mad. While cold, damp weather makes them feel worse and they tend to feel physically weak when they get stressed. Breathing problems such as asthma or bronchitis are common. Excess perspiration is another feature, both of the head/neck and feet. *Calcarea carbonica* in a 30C dose taken daily can help restore balance into a sufferer's life and to give perspective to their problems.

Lack of sleep

My final section is on the treatment of insomnia. We all suffer from sleeplessness at some time in our lives but for those with anxiety and stress problems, lack of sleep exacerbates their worries and impairs their ability to overcome their problems. As a GP, I try to encourage

stress caused by overwork or overindulgence with caffeine or alcohol. If you just cannot "let go" of the day try *Kali carbonicum* (carbonate of potassium), for this medicine can help when you are waking between 2 and 4am or you wake only four hours after falling asleep with muscle twitches or have problems talking in your sleep.

There is always help available, no matter how bad you are feeling. Please make an appointment to see your GP if you feel you are suffering from anxiety or depression which is affecting your work or home life, and talk about how you feel – I can assure you, it will help!

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Further information:

www.mind.org.uk • www.nopanic.org.uk



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