

Managing stress through mindfulness

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For many expatriates life in Singapore is stressful.

We often underestimate the challenges of relocation – of leaving the familiarity of our home countries and the support networks there.

Relocation, adjustment, different management styles, increased business travel and the juggling of business, family and 'self' time can all result in raised stress hormone levels and behavioural changes.

Many of us become desensitised to the real dangers of chronic stress. Stress has become normalised, as if it is something we just have to put up with, and is even glorified as something that comes hand-in-hand with success. However, the impact of chronic stress can be devastating on your health, career and relationships.

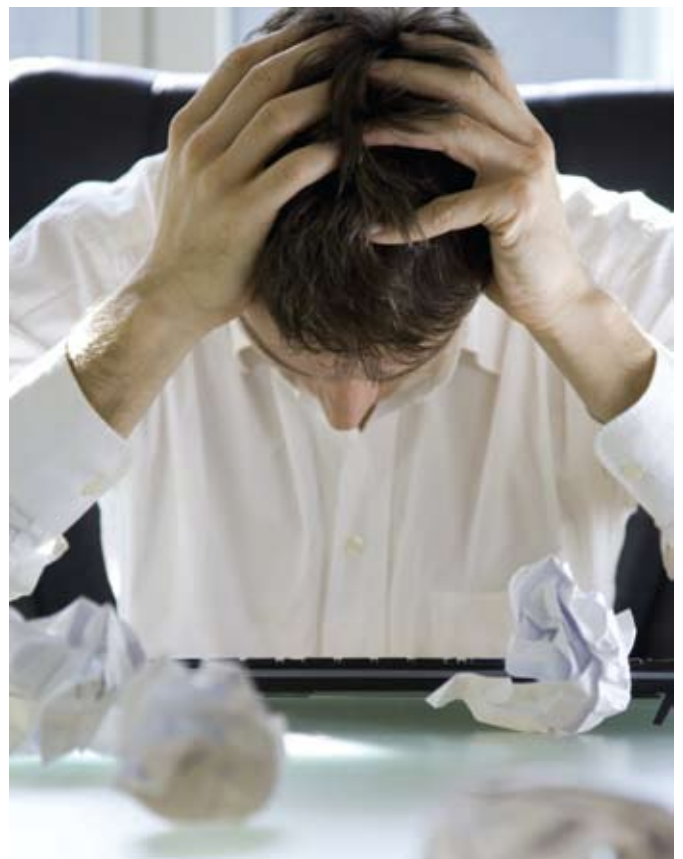
Left unaddressed, it can lead to physical disease including heart problems, ulcers, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, digestive disorders, migraine headaches and low immunity. Mental health is compromised with memory, concentration, mood and emotional regulation affected by the high levels of stress hormones accumulating in the body and brain. Anxiety, panic attacks and depression can result, leaving us unable to cope and function optimally.

We often try to deal with stress, unsuccessfully, by doing even more stress-producing behaviour: avoidance, substance abuse (over use of sleeping pills and tranquilisers) and heavy drinking.

The first step in successfully managing stress is becoming aware that your stress levels are raised. Early signs include impatience, short temper, sleep and digestive problems, decreased libido, memory and concentration impairment, indecisiveness, increased relationship conflict, flushed (red) appearance, shortness of breath and increased heart rate.

Research has shown that 'mindfulness' techniques are particularly effective in stress management and reduction.

Mindfulness means paying attention, in the present moment, in a particular way without judgement. When we get caught up in a chronic cycle of thinking about the past and anticipating the future we lose touch with the present moment and consequently we are



not present in our relationships, meetings and interactions. Our minds and our focus are elsewhere. We, in fact, are not living and functioning fully.

Activities such as yoga, meditation and other awareness exercises are all effective methods to balance the autonomic nervous system and regulate stress hormone levels. Mindfulness techniques have become widely used in the corporate, medical and educational fields as effective methods for maintaining and regaining healthy equilibrium.

At Lifesteps, I incorporate mindfulness practices and theory in my work with individuals and groups, particularly in the areas of anxiety, stress management, relationships and adjusting to change. www.lifesteps.com.sg ■