

# Address the stress

by Jennifer Cosgrove

**C**HANCES ARE most of us will have uttered the word "stressed" in the last week to describe how we've been feeling in work, or life in general. It seems the "S" word is becoming increasingly prevalent these days and, according to recent research, the UK's stress levels have doubled in the last four years.

Work absences related to stress have soared in the last 12 months and are said to be the main cause of long-term absenteeism in the public sector. The Health and Safety Executive describes stress as, "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them".

For the last 12 years, the International Stress Management Association has been running National Stress Awareness Day on the first Wednesday of November. Described as the "stress management event of the year" there is an annual theme and tomorrow people will be encouraged to start living — and stop stressing!

For one day only, specially trained stress advisors make their services available to public, private and voluntary organisations throughout the UK, providing stress workshops and one-to-one sessions free of charge.

Last year's event was an overwhelming success with the NSAD website temporarily overloaded due to the volume of traffic and a large number of people booking with stress advisors.

ISMA is the leading professional body that promotes sound knowledge and best practice in the prevention and reduction of stress. Founded in 1974 as the American Association for the Advancement of Tension Control, the association was renamed as the International Stress and Tension Control Society (ISTCS) in 1981 due to international interest.

By 1984, the UK and French branches had been formed and the organisation was rebranded the International Stress Management Association five years later. It now has branches in 10 countries and members in a number of others.

Jessica Smyrl is a NSAD stress adviser co-ordinator based in Glasgow. She

has been with the organisation for two years and her remit covers the whole of the UK.

She said, "the campaign is mainly to do with stress in the workplace, but we also want to include other aspects of people's lives because it does involve everyone — no matter what age you are.

"Stress can be a combination of factors and, particularly just now with the financial crisis, people are feeling extremely vulnerable and overwhelmed with their commitments.

"Not everyone realises that they are stressed and it can be difficult to recognise. It's in four broad categories: psychological, emotional, physical and behavioural.

"When it comes to the workplace, it's commonly behavioural and the person affected often doesn't realise it's happening. They can become quite aggressive and short-tempered and can snap when they really don't mean to."

Stress is not an illness, it is a state. If it becomes excessive and prolonged, however, mental and physical illness may develop. Pressure in work can be positive, motivating factor but stress occurs when this pressure becomes extreme.

Jessica went on, "when there is a build-up of pressure it gets to the stage where people can't cope. Each year, we have a different theme and what we are aiming to do in 2010 is promote Start Living, Stop Stressing.

"We want to look at the positive side of things and encourage people to better look after themselves. When you are under stress you can lose your confidence, self esteem and almost feel worthless."

Jessica puts the prevalence of stress down to the heightened pace of our lives. We are bombarded with so much information and technology and there are no longer clear boundaries between people's work and personal lives.

"If people can't get you on the house phone, they'll get you on your mobile or by Email or text message. Nobody has any patience, they won't wait until the next day, everything is rush, rush."

According to Jessica, this year's campaign is all about making small, positive changes in your life and being kinder to yourself.

"People should try to start putting themselves first and identify what's



really important to them, they should also keep active because this helps everything about your body. It gives you better circulation and the brain releases neurochemicals giving you a feel-good factor. It could be something like taking the stairs instead of using the lift or parking a bit further away from the supermarket so you have to walk.

"People should also prioritise tasks and set goals — but make sure they give themselves a pat on the back for what they have managed to achieve, because it's impossible to do everything in one day."

The NSAD website has resources for people who want to find out more or try out activities, such as a sleep diary or an activity sheet.

"Different departments in a workplace could decide to do a certain task and it's about encouraging them to do things together, Jessica said. "It's not a case of stopping, just slowing down, looking after yourself — and others."

Last year, the Scottish Government launched the Steps for Stress campaign to help people avoid developing more serious health problems. Simple advice and quizzes on the campaign's website can help users recognise the signs of everyday stress and stop it getting out of control.

Three quarters of people surveyed as part of research for the campaign admitted to experiencing stress — but only one in four felt happy to talk

about it. Public Health Minister Shona Robison said, "stress can affect all of us, and sometimes in ways that we might not even notice to start with.

"Life can be very busy nowadays — we have all kinds of commitments and it's easy for things to get on top of us.

"But if we allow stress to snowball, it can risk leading to other problems that can be much more serious — unhealthy eating,

drinking too much or smoking heavily.

"That's why it's so important to be aware of stress. If we're aware of how problems and difficulties are affecting us when they're at a manageable level, then we can do an awful lot to help prevent them becoming bigger.

"Doing something positive for someone else or simply talking to a friend can also make a big difference to how we feel."

## Start living

### ■ START TO PUT YOURSELF FIRST:

If you eat and drink healthily, schedule regular physical activity that you enjoy and manage your time effectively, you'll be in a better position to help others.

### ■ START TO PRIORITISE TASKS:

There are only so many things we can do well during each day, so choose your top three most urgent tasks each morning and make them your priority. Reschedule, renegotiate your commitments or delegate — you can make it happen.

### ■ START TO MAKE TIME TO RELAX AND MENTALLY UNWIND:

Relaxation, breathing and meditation exercises have been proven to be effective in reducing

stress and anxiety. They are ideal ways to switch off, plus they boost your immune system. Just a few minutes a day will pay huge dividends

■ **START TO EMPATHISE WITH OTHERS:** There are many different behaviour styles that affect how we communicate with each other. Be aware that different people can perceive your words and actions in a way you didn't always intend. Take time to listen to others and look for solutions.

■ **START TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL:** Bring some fun into your life and spend a few minutes each day appreciating the good things you have in your life. This will help you to see opportunities for growth and learning.

## Stop stressing . . .

### ■ STOP IGNORING YOUR NEEDS:

Know what is expected of you and what is reasonable. Take short breaks throughout the day and know when and how to say "no" both at work and home.

### ■ STOP GETTING DISTRACTED:

If you're experiencing too much pressure or just have a lot going on in your life, staying focused isn't easy. It may help to ask for support from colleagues or friends and prioritise urgent,

important and non-urgent tasks

### ■ STOP ALLOWING OTHERS TO MAKE YOU FEEL INFERIOR:

The key to stress-free living is to accept yourself for exactly who you are today, including past mistakes and things you might not be so proud of. Work on your self-belief and confidence and just go for it!

### ■ STOP BEING JUDGMENTAL:

Try to adopt a more flexible thinking style which will improve your mental well-being, whilst reducing unnecessary pressure for both you and those around you. Practice being objective and understanding.

### ■ STOP AVOIDING THE THINGS YOU LEAST WANT TO DO:

We often put off tasks that can become a recipe for worry. Take control and promise yourself a reward when you get it done.

