

# Are you feeling tense, nervous and overwhelmed...?

### What is stress and anxiety?

Stress is a natural response to change and coping with major life events. All situations elicit some level of stress but the level and quality of stress we experience will vary. Stress can at times be helpful and motivate us to achieve goals, like when we have to complete work to a deadline. Other types of stress can be upsetting such as anxiety.

Anxiety is a feeling that is often linked with stress. It is defined as a state of apprehension, uncertainty and fear resulting from expecting a threatening event or situation. These threats may be either real or imagined. Anxiety often impairs physical and psychological functioning.

Facing stress triggers a series of chemical changes in our bodies that help us to deal with the stressful situation. This is called the 'flight or fight' response. These changes help us to prepare to face the stressful situation by either escaping from the situation (flight) or knuckling down and tackling the situation (fight). However, if the stress goes on for long periods of time, then these chemical changes can start to harm our health.

### How do I know if I am stressed?

#### Physical signs

- Headaches, heart beating faster than normal, upset stomach, tightness or pain in the chest, poor appetite, butterflies in the stomach, breathlessness, tight muscles particularly in the neck and shoulders, poor sleep, vivid dreams.

#### Feelings associated with stress can include:

- Frustration, nervousness, discouragement, negativity, anxiety, anger or irritability.

### How do I know if I am anxious?

- Feeling uncomfortable and nervous.
- Avoiding situations or people because you feel nervous.
- Feelings of fear or agitation.
- Feeling light headed or any of the physical signs of stress identified above.
- Not being able to sleep.
- Having frequent and worrying thoughts.

### 'John's' Story

'John' is a man in his late thirties who was diagnosed with a glioma. He avoids going out because he has been having seizures and is scared that he will have one in public. As a result he feels very uncertain and worried about his future. He has even had 'panic attacks' when away from home. He says that he always feels stressed and this leads to him being more irritable and aggressive. 'John's' social life has been severely affected because he hardly ever leaves the house. He now feels sad and lonely because of these problems.

## KEY FACTS

A survey of people with a brain tumour found that:

- 13% were severely or extremely stressed.
- 23% were severely or extremely anxious.

### Strategies

#### For the person with a brain tumour

- Ask for help with your finances, work, family roles and medical decisions.
- Reduce your work load if possible.
- Identify what appears to be causing your stress.
- Look realistically at what you can manage or change.
- Learn positive coping skills such as relaxation (see Resource sheet), positive thinking, meditation, controlled breathing (see Resource sheet), yoga, Tai Chi, mindfulness (see Resource sheet).
- Do some light exercise.
- Spend time with people who help you feel good.
- Do something you enjoy.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Lower the number of cups of coffee (tea, coke or chocolate) that you drink, because high levels of caffeine also cause similar feelings of stress in the body.
- Avoid people or situations which add to your stress, such as travelling in peak hour traffic.



### **For the carer or family member**

- Manage your own stress so you are better able to assist your family member.
- Don't take things personally.
- Provide support and reassurance when needed.
- Encourage some level of independence.
- Help the person overcome their fears in a controlled and supportive manner.
- Seek assistance if you don't know what to do.

### **Questions to ask your Health Professional**

- What is the cause of the stress/anxiety?
- Is it related to the tumour itself?
- Is it related to the treatments given for the tumour or other medications?
- Could the stress/anxiety be an unrelated medical condition and does this need treatment in itself?
- Do I/we expect the stress/anxiety to get better or worse over time?
- Are there any medications that can help the problem?
- Are there any diet or lifestyle factors that can help the stress/anxiety?
- Who else could I speak with to help with the stress/anxiety?
- Will a psychologist be able to help treat this problem?

### **Links to other information:**

- <http://braininjury.org.au/portal/fact-sheets/stress-and-acquired-brain-injury---fact-sheet.html>
- Resource Sheet – Stress Management
- Resource Sheet – Relaxation
- Resource Sheet – Mindfulness