

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS (YOUR STRESS RED FLAGS)

When we experience an acute stress reaction to an extreme situation that is (or feels) life-threatening, we encounter symptoms like elevated heart rate, tightness in the chest, cold sweats or flushing, nausea or diarrhoea. The mental, emotional and behavioural focus is on fight or flight; threat and escape.

During a situation of lower-grade intermittent or ongoing stress (like conflict at work or home, an unpredictable person you can't escape from, hassles of the daily commute) the stress reaction is not quite as extreme so it can be missed. Until the build-up results in a first panic attack or incident of road rage!

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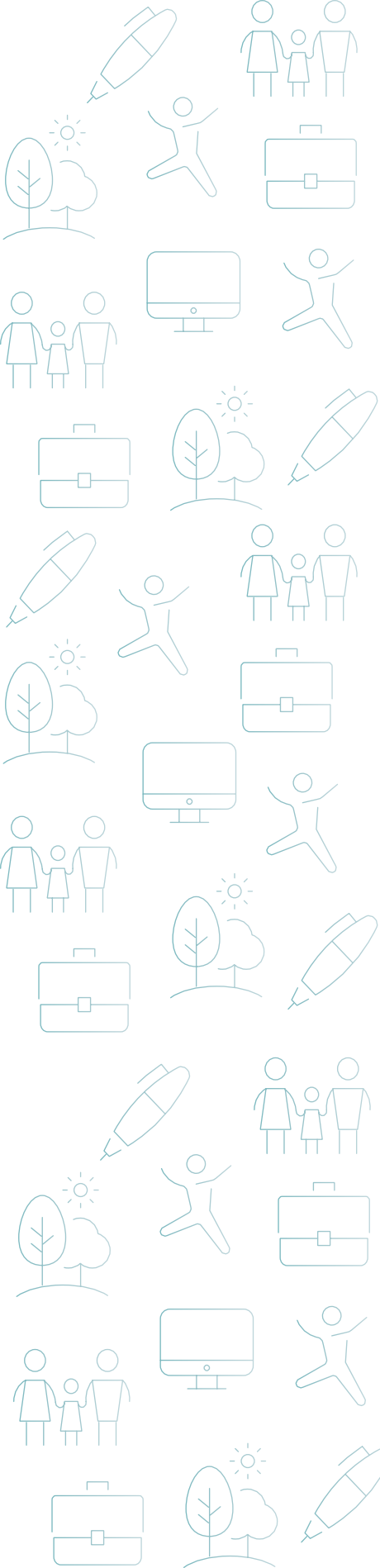
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Do you know that mine workers used to take canaries underground with them? Canaries sang constantly, and while it was singing, all was well. When the canary stopped singing, it would indicate the presence of toxic gases in the air and miners would know to evacuate. The canary, with its tiny lungs, feels the effect of the dangerous gases when the levels of toxic gases are still low enough for a person to be able to escape from underground. Wouldn't it be nice to have 'a stress canary' to give an early indication of stress build-up! The good news is, we do have indications of exactly this, if we are aware of them and know what to look out for.

Early symptoms of stress buildup

Symptoms (lasting at least two weeks more often than not) include:

- **Emotional changes:** You are more irritable than usual and find yourself swearing in traffic or shouting at your children. You stop enjoying a series you used to rush through dinner for, or you feel no joy at seeing your pets or grandchildren. Or, you may feel flat and detached, struggling to work up any emotion
- **Behaviour changes:** You crave and increase your intake of sugar, fizzy drinks, fast foods, caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. You could not be bothered to go to gym, return a call you don't have to, or go out with friends. Or, you become a party animal and go out all the time – which also tends to include the high fat chips, peanuts and alcohol!
- **Sleep changes:** Your pattern of how and when you get to sleep, your quality of sleep, and when you wake is noticeably changed. For example, you are too agitated to go to bed so you stay up late watching TV or playing games on your phone, or you pass out fully clothed on the couch after work and wake hours later with the TV blaring, then can't sleep once you get into bed
- **Body changes:** You experience inexplicable physical symptoms, like bouts of upset stomach and unexplained skin itches and rashes. Your muscles ache in various locations, which change every few days and it's not the flu
- **Mental changes:** you're struggling to concentrate or remember where you left your keys, or whether you did in fact send that email. Your thoughts are not as clear and ordered as usual, and you struggle to find words.



This is a list of common early warning symptoms of stress. These symptoms become significant when they are mostly present, for at least two to four weeks in a row, usually becoming more apparent to you and eventually others. The order and intensity they appear in will vary from person to person, also when and where they play out in your life (at work, at home or with strangers). The most important thing here is to take action when you first notice the symptoms; one match can burn down a whole house if not caught in time. If you feel that stress is beginning to impact your day-to-day functioning, contact the Healthy Company support line for further professional assistance or advice.

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