

Managing stress and anxiety

Kareem's story (fictional)

Kareem has worked in a Commonwealth Parliamentary workplace for the past five years. Recently, Kareem's workload increased due to departures within the office and a looming public deadline. Kareem has noticed that he can't switch off from work. He's finding it harder to get good sleep and often wakes up in the middle of the night with a tight chest and racing heart. Kareem has also started to lose his appetite and is skipping meals most days. He feels like he has no control over his workload and doesn't know how to change his stress levels. Kareem feels anxious when driving to and from work, and has noticed that he is arguing with his family and friends more often than usual.

Concerned, and hoping for support, Kareem contacts the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (PWSS). The PWSS case coordinator is able to discuss Kareem's concerns, and work with Kareem to develop and practice some extra coping strategies. In time, and following several further discussions, Kareem feels as though his coping strategies are working effectively and notices improvements to his mood, health, and performance.

What are stress and anxiety?

! **Stress** is a normal response to pressure, such as moving home or a busy period at work. It usually resolves once the challenging situation is over, and a certain level of stress is even necessary to help us perform to our full potential.

Our body and brain prepare us to deal with pressure by activating our natural survival mechanisms (known as fight, flight or freeze). We don't all respond to stress the same way, and we might find different things more or less stressful depending on factors like our past experiences, other life demands, and the level of support around us.

When stress is higher or continues for a while, we might notice signs such as:

- muscle tension, pain or a tight chest
- gastrointestinal issues
- difficulty with concentration and memory
- disturbed sleep
- feeling tired, spacy or shut down
- racing thoughts and/or focusing on the worst-case scenario
- avoiding stressful situations or withdrawing from people, and/or
- feeling more impatient than usual.



Feeling anxious can be part of stress – however, it's different to anxiety.

! **Anxiety** is when feelings of stress or panic persist for some time after a challenging situation has ended, or arise for no clear reason. The feelings, thoughts and behaviours that come with anxiety can seriously impact our life, relationships and work. Anxiety is the most common mental health issue in the community – according to the 2022 ABS National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, anxiety is experienced by around 3.3 million Australians, or 16.8% of the population, in any given year.



How do I manage my own stress or anxiety?

There are many effective strategies and techniques that can help us to manage stress and anxiety. Here are some places to start:

- **Check your toolkit** – think about how you've gotten through stress or anxiety in the past, and if those strategies are still useful now. Asking ourselves, 'What advice would I give to a friend in my situation?' can also help us clarify our next steps.
- **Create a routine** – a degree of predictability helps life feel more manageable. Consider writing down a schedule for your typical week, including time for important activities that support your health and wellbeing.
- **Practice sleep hygiene** – regular sleep and wake times support more restful sleep, as well as a cooler room temperature (around 18°C). Avoid caffeine, sugar or large meals close to bed time, and if you're not asleep within 20 minutes of going to bed, don't just lie awake – try a calming activity such as listening to a podcast or reading.
- **Limit substances** – reducing or avoiding caffeine and alcohol (even just for a few days) can make a dramatic difference to our mood. One strategy is to substitute with gentler alternatives like tea or non-alcoholic drinks. If you want to cut down but you're finding it hard, reach out – there are plenty of strategies that can help.
- **Stay socially connected** – healthy relationships of all kinds are an important part of reducing stress and anxiety. Know the right balance for you of alone time and time spent with others.
- **Movement is medicine** – regular exercise, however it works best for you, is one of the most effective strategies for balancing stress levels and managing anxiety. Exercising with others is a great way to stay on track. If you manage chronic pain, injuries or other physical health conditions, professionals like exercise physiologists or physiotherapists can assist with finding the best techniques and approach for you.
- **Eat well** – making time to eat nourishing food, even when we're busy, gives us the essential building blocks for good mood and mental health. Planning ahead and bringing healthier snacks or pre-prepared meals makes it easier to stick to our plans.
- **Seek support** – getting the right professional support earlier means we can recover more quickly and continue with the things that matter most to us. Professionals such as PWSS Case Coordinators, your GP, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providers, counsellors, social workers and psychologists can help you develop additional strategies and techniques to manage stress and anxiety.

How do I support someone experiencing stress or anxiety?

If you notice that someone else's stress and anxiety levels are heightened, or are interfering with their ability to perform their work or enjoy life, reaching out to that person can make a huge difference.

- Approach the person at a suitable time and location. You might suggest meeting in a quieter part of the office or building, or going for a walk together outside.
- Let the person know what you have noticed, and ask them if they're ok.
- Listen to what things are like for the person without expressing judgement – this is often the most powerful way we can help.
- Check what the person is already doing to manage their wellbeing, and ask if they would like help accessing other supports.
- Suggest to the person that they contact the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (PWSS), and offer to help connect them with the service if needed.

Support

The PWSS can assist you with your own wellbeing, or support you to help someone else. Our service provides independent and confidential support to all Commonwealth parliamentary workplace participants. We build on what's already working for you, and can help you find extra strategies to boost health and wellbeing.



www.PWSS.gov.au



24/7 Support: 1800 747 977



SMS: 0487 112 755