

R U O K ?

Ongoing earthquakes in Canterbury are scary for us all and it's no surprise that many of us are suffering from huge stress. Many people have had to move houses or take in displaced family and friends, and are living in unfamiliar, uncomfortable or crowded conditions. Kids have had to move schools; some parents have lost jobs and families may be split. This loss and change on top of the shaking itself makes the stress even worse.

Stress is a normal reaction to a challenging situation but when you suffer intense stress for a long time it can affect your physical and mental health, wellbeing, and enjoyment of life. The signs that stress is affecting you may not be obvious. You should try to recognise stress and learn what you can do to protect yourself from its worst effects.

Stress will show up as a combination of these feelings and behaviours:

- Anger
- Helplessness
- Fearfulness
- Disappointment – that years of hard work has turned out like this
- Guilt – for being better off than others
- Shame – for being exposed as helpless, “emotional” and needing others
- Sadness
- Numbness
- Irritability
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Feeling “wired”, nervous or tense
- Listlessness
- Anxiety or panic – racing heart, rapid breathing
- Increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs

You can't fix all of the symptoms or the cause, but you can learn strategies that will help you cope and reduce the impact of stress.

Recognise it – recognising the signs is the first step in doing something about stress.

Talk about it – talking calmly and openly to someone you trust about how you are feeling can help release pent-up feelings. Everyone is in the same boat and together you may come up with practical ways of managing stress and dealing with the situation.

Seek and accept help – it's hard to accept financial, practical or emotional help from others but research shows that people with strong social connections (friends,

family, community) cope best in times of crisis. Strengthen your support network. It will make you feel less alone and you will have someone to talk to when things get rough.

Ongoing stress can lead to feelings of helplessness or worthlessness and even build to thoughts of self harm or suicide. Take such thoughts seriously and seek immediate help by talking to someone you trust, calling LifeLine on 0800 543 354, or visiting your GP.

In an emergency call 111.

Things to do that will help:

- Establish a daily routine with regular times for sleep, meals, being sociable and physical activity.
- Explain to your children the need to reduce expenditure – they will cope.
- Try to keep up your normal family activities as much as possible.
- Limit the amount of media coverage you are exposed to.
- Do breathing exercises to help relax. Inhale fully, then proceed without pausing to exhale slowly – repeating as many times as possible.
- As we get anxious and stressed we retreat into ourselves and start to almost physically curl up. This subconscious action compresses your internal organs and means shallower breathing. To relieve this, try progressive muscle relaxation – alternately tense and relax muscle groups, starting at your toes, and move up your entire body.
- Take time out to do something enjoyable – it won't change your situation but will increase your ability to cope and make decisions.