



# Psychotherapy and Counselling



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## **Do you thrive on stress or feel overwhelmed by it?**

Stress presents itself in unique and individual ways for different people. A certain degree of anxiety can be a focussing motivating force in people's lives. Stress in itself need not necessarily be harmful. What is crucial to how successfully people deal with stressful situations is their capacity to adapt. This is relevant in today's society where there is much uncertainty and pressure, continual institutional/ organisational reform, families increasingly far flung and life roles and expectations are a juggling act for many. High levels of prolonged, unchecked stress, pump harmful levels of Cortisol into the blood stream causing physical health problems and mental dissociation. People suffer greatly in overdrive or burn out.

Our central nervous system still does exactly what it was designed to do many thousands of years ago when our ancestors prepared to fight or run away from the danger of a larger predator - the commonly referred to "flight or fight response". However, in today's modern life it is often much more difficult for people to necessarily identify the source of threat in their lives and to fight or run away.

"I was just in the work canteen for lunch time and I started to feel very anxious and have a panic attack, sweating with heart palpitations - I thought I was going to die. I couldn't understand why. I enjoy my job and I have supportive family and friends." (C in Portsmouth.)

With acute anxiety associated with failure to adapt, the source of conflict for many seems hard to define, yet the body does exactly as it is designed to do, even though it feels at the time hugely inconvenient and distressing. Irreconcilable conflict holds us, overwhelmed like a frightened rabbit in car headlights, freezing our ability to respond productively, function and process normally. In this state unhelpful, distorted ways of thinking develop that actually fuel this anxiety further. It is as if we are in full throttle and with our brakes fully on. Both pedals must be released gradually and systematically to reduce fear based decisions to freedom based decisions.

What may at first seem irrational, invariably makes good sense when explored in depth, as the source of threat becomes identified. Threats in modern life are just as real as a thousand years ago but are very different indeed in nature. Emotional help enables us to 'play out the conflict' on an equal conscious playing field. By talking about significant events, thoughts and feelings we increase our own self knowledge. Internal conflict cannot be resolved where a cause of the conflict remains largely unconscious.

Every day our senses are bombarded with stimuli from our environment and to process all of this at the time it arises would be impossible, so we develop handy defence mechanisms for 'shelving' particular thoughts and feelings we may have, until a time it feels more convenient to us. These defences often only help us in the

immediate short term as they can undermine our future happiness as things get 'put on the shelf' to the back of our minds. The weight of this avoidance grows until it seeps down in ways that then begin to disturb us.

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