



EPILEPSY NEW ZEALAND®

THE NATIONAL EPILEPSY ASSOCIATION OF NEW ZEALAND

kia titiro ki te tangata - see the person

Stress and Epilepsy

The link between stress and epilepsy

It is a given that we live in a stressful society. The pressure put on us daily by financial survival, our jobs, education, travelling from point A to point B in cities where you can spend large amounts of time stuck in traffic jams, fulfilling our responsibilities to name just a few. All of it adds up, and our response to it is, over time, to become overloaded and stressed out.

For people with epilepsy, there are extra stresses that may be present involved with their condition. Issues such as having to take medicine regularly with the consequence of a seizure if they miss a dose, uncertainty about when a seizure will occur, struggles with employment, struggles with driver licensing or the inability to ever get a license, having to rely on others, again are just a few.

The effect of this stress, and the anxiety and emotions that come with it, can trigger seizures. An Australian study found that 63% of respondents believed there was a relationship between stress and seizure control (Hayden et. al 1992).

Stress management cannot replace anti-epilepsy drugs (AEDs), but stress management and regular use of AEDs can be an effective method of reducing seizures

How stress develops and how it affects the body

Stress is a natural physical response by the body. It is believed to be link to the primitive fight or flight instinct. When confronted by a challenge, the body responds by producing a chemical called adrenaline which gives extra strength to our muscles and sharpens our responses.

This physical reaction is supposed to provide a quick short term response to an immediate challenging situation. If this response is becoming triggered constantly over a long period of time, the stress reaction can become a problem.

Just how much stress is too much stress is different for each individual. You can recognise when you have too much stress by watching for certain changes in your

behaviour. These changes might include eating too much or lack of interest in eating, increase in consumption of alcohol or being unable to rest or relax.

Techniques that can help to reduce stress

There is a wide range of techniques that can be used to help you manage and reduce stress. Some of these techniques are provided here.

- *Relaxation and breathing techniques:* These techniques involve focusing on your breathing, consciously relaxing your muscles, deepening your breathing and allowing your thoughts to pass without attempts to control them.
- *Meditation:* Meditation emphasises relaxing the mind, using techniques such as observing thoughts and emotions without trying to change them, and focusing on your breathing.
- *Exercise:* Physical exercise helps keep you fit and can induce better sleep and a healthier appetite.
- *Time Management:* This approach addresses excessive demands within work and personal time. It involves techniques such as establishing priorities, using lists, notes, and a diary, taking time for yourself and rewarding yourself for a job well done.
- *Assertiveness Training:* Assertiveness is an approach that helps you better communicate your feelings and needs without aggression, in both the personal and professional areas of your life. This technique also emphasises the importance of listening to and respecting the other person or people in the discussion.
- *Improving Self-esteem:* By becoming aware of the power of your own thoughts in creating your self-image, this technique builds up positive thoughts and reduces negative ones. It involves actively learning about yourself and taking more control of your life.
- *Anxiety Management:* Anticipating problems can also cause stress. A range of approaches can help to diminish anxiety. These include identifying your fears and learning to take control of your life, to name just two.