



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 1 October 2008

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Making mental health a priority

Sport should be a relaxing pastime, but elite sport can be quite stressful. The recent Olympic and Paralympic Games have provided both the participants and the spectators with some pretty tense moments.

Locally, the A League Soccer has just begun again, but for the other football codes, it's finals time; and for every winner there'll be thousands of disappointed fans.

Even if you supported the top team, there will often be an emotional let down after the event. Nothing unusual about that; these feelings are quite normal. We all have these emotional highs and lows – times of elation and times of disappointment.

It's also normal to feel anxious now and again. We've all had that experience of butterflies in our stomach maybe before an exam or a job interview. Anxiety is actually a normal and reasonable response to danger or stress; it's an emotion that triggers our body's nervous system to be able to make quick, and hopefully, correct decisions.

We certainly don't need to be reminded about stress, but perhaps we do need to be reminded about how best to manage it. And this is one of the messages to come from World Mental Health Day (October 10). Each year, World Mental Health Day aims to promote good mental health and aims to raise public awareness of mental health issues.

The Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) uses the flannel flower as a symbol for mental health awareness. The flannel flower, an Australian native, is commonly found growing wild in the Australian bush. To survive the extremes of climate the flannel flower has to be adaptable. And so, according to the MHCA, regardless of our life's circumstances, we also need to develop resilience and the ability to adapt to change in order to maintain and strengthen our mental health.

Just as the flannel flowers, with their open petals and their soft silky texture encourage contact, so too we need to be open and empathetic with the person experiencing mental health problems. It will not only help with the person's recovery but also help change the negative attitudes our society has towards mental illness.

Some studies suggest that we inherit the tendency to feel more stress. Other studies describe stress as a response that is learned over a lifetime. In any event, people who experience high levels of stress, tend to hold beliefs which make them feel threatened, ultra vigilant and out of control.

There is no doubt too much stress can be a health hazard; so the first important step in stress management involves being aware of when our stress levels become unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised there is a range of stress management skills available to address the problem.

If you feel tense or "stressed out" almost all the time, and anxiety is affecting your everyday activities, then it's time to have a chat with your GP. You might also benefit from the top ten Stress Less Tips from your state Mental Health Association. Check out their website at: www.mentalhealth.asn.au

For instance: go for a regular walk, or maybe a bike ride; delegate some of your work; schedule in some quiet time for yourself; relax with a good book or a movie; take regular tea breaks; catch up with friends or family; accept a compliment and give one back; cook yourself a healthy meal; book your next holiday; and don't take life too seriously – "reduce tears, increase cheers."

Your pharmacist can help too. There is a series of mental health information cards available from pharmacies around Australia as part of the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care Program. Developed with the assistance of the Department of Veterans Affairs, they cover a number of topics such as *Anxiety*, *Depression* and *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*. Whether you have been on the winning or losing side recently, it's important to be able to manage those tense times during and after the event.

And throughout life – not just sporting life – there'll be plenty of stressful situations for us to cope with. Just how we cope will determine how healthy we stay. For a little extra help on how to stress less, ask your Self Care Pharmacist for the fact card titled *Anxiety*. There are also useful cards on subjects such as *Relaxation Techniques* and *Sleeping Problems*. Phone 1300 369 772 for the location of the nearest pharmacy providing the Self Care information.