



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #09:

SURVIVING SEPTEMBER



For many people, it's hard to find a reason not to treasure our summers. Time seems to move differently. We tend to slow down and relax more, enjoying outside spaces, and basking in the bands of sunlight that stretch effortlessly right into the evening. Summer typically represents a time to gather with family and friends and enjoy each other's company, too, usually enjoying outdoor spaces. We play games, splash, paddle and swim in the water, and stay up late around bonfires looking at the stars lighting up the night sky. It's a chance for us to renew our spirits and build-up our mental health. As August rounds the bend, it's a bit like we're savouring the last moments of that summertime vibe. We're then faced with the new challenges and goals September brings. It requires a new focus and preparation. It's a month full of change and transition, and we don't just mean the leaves.

While many people manage transition well, for others, change and getting back into the September swing of things can build cumulative stress to the point of feeling completely overwhelmed.

We're sharing some ideas about how to recognize those stressors at this time of year, not just in ourselves but also in the people we care about; how we can move through the month feeling well supported; and how the COVID-19 pandemic has and is affecting our mental health. Perhaps we need to re-evaluate how we don't just survive the month, but thrive.

Have you ever experienced Stresstember?

It's natural to feel emotional, physical, and mental stress, and there are certain times when pressure tends to be heightened. September, with all of its anticipation, expectations and realizations that we're in the bottom third of the year, can trigger stress responses during all of the preparation to get back or into new routines. But being able to recognize how we react and respond to stress is most important to learn so that we can shape a response and not let anxiety or fear take over.



Stress affects "your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behaviour" and can contribute to more complicated health problems like "high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes."¹

Stress shows up in our bodies as:

- Headaches
- Muscle tension or pain
- Chest pain
- Fatigue
- Upset stomach
- Sleep problems

Stress shows up in our thoughts and feelings as:

- Anxiety
- Restlessness
- Lack of motivation or focus
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritability or anger
- Sadness or depression

Stress shows up in our behaviour as:

- Changes in appetite – overeating or undereating
- Angry outbursts
- Drug or alcohol misuse
- Tobacco use
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in exercise and reduced frequency²
- Changes in sex drive

In children, stress can appear in behaviours such as moodiness, clingy or uncharacteristically emotional or aggressive behaviours. Being afraid of the dark, afraid to go to sleep because of nightmares, of being alone, or being around strangers can all be signs of stress in children. Look for nail-biting, hair twisting, cheek chewing or other nervous habits too. Also, having trouble focusing or concentrating and toileting accidents may be signs your child is under too much stress.

Stress can show up in your co-workers behaviour as changes in performance or productivity, increased consumption of coffee or alcohol, being away an unusually high number of sick-days, an increase in workplace accidents, being defensive, being argumentative, or even sharing a low mood and cynicism.

September typically introduces a trifecta of stress response triggers: time, school or work, and finances. It's been recognized as one of the most "anxiety-inducing" months of the year – even leading to a new social media #Stresstember hashtag in recent years.³ Commutes can be unpredictable as everyone is adapting to revised schedules. There's a fear of the unknown with new routines and new people – at school, it's new teachers and new classmates, and at work, it could be new job duties, new bosses or co-workers and a rush towards end-of-year objectives. It can also be an expensive month with increased spending on items such as school supplies, seasonally appropriate clothing for cooler weather, and fees for new or resuming activities. It can also be a mental shift for people and show up as seasonal affective disorders that coincide with seasonal changes.

What's happening to a stressed-out brain?

It's interpreting your stress as a threat. It's kicking your behavioural and emotional responses into high-gear by flooding your nervous system with hormones like adrenaline and cortisol to get you ready to react to the perceived emergency as quickly as possible. Your blood pressure rises, your breathing becomes more rapid, and your heart beats faster. Your senses are then primed to take in the slightest change in your surroundings so you can make a split-second decision to either fight, flee, or freeze. Once you determine that the threat has passed, it can take you up to 30 minutes to clear those stress hormones from your body and return to feeling calm.⁴

Why September 2020 is a really big deal

Let's face it. This year has not turned out as anyone expected. With the reality of the global pandemic response to the Novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, and subsequent upheaval of the lives we led before mid-March, we collectively have been experiencing extremely high stress on many levels, and it has been taking its toll.

The lockdown; quarantining; self-isolating; physical distancing; online learning; working from home; losing a job, business, or other sources of income; cancelling unessential travel; missing graduation and rites of passage; postponing special events; mass social reaction and protests; dealing with financial challenges and so very much more that we haven't even accounted for the traumatic, stress-inducing events that are affecting people's lives seemingly all at once, without any chance to pause, reflect, and process what has happened. What we thought we'd be doing this summer was not what we did. In many instances, things we thought we would be doing this spring didn't happen, leaving many loose ends that may never be tied. Everyone is sensitive, wary, tentative, frustrated, upset, and angry, and it can be awkward.

We still need practice getting back to the business of being around others socially, even if that means adopting virtual or telephone routines and/or learning how to interact safely. We need to acknowledge that for some people, what they expected for their September has put their lives on a completely different path than where they assumed they would be. Post-secondary students, eager for their first taste of young adulthood and campus life, maybe in programs that are still learning off-campus. People who were looking at retiring are now wondering how they can manage to do so with the economic situation potentially, a long way from returning back to pre-pandemic levels. Everything has changed so significantly, it's almost like we can add the "lost summer of 2020" to a very long list of disappointments that have accumulated throughout the year. It's emotional. It's not okay. One of the worst parts of this shared collective experience has been the uncertainty. Even now, we don't have all of the answers or solutions that feel airtight yet. But we can recognize that we are experiencing stress. We can realize that this is all a part of grieving that needs to happen. However, we can still very much determine how we respond.

Tried and true coping strategies that can always help

There are always things we can do to help us move forward through this challenging month. Being aware of what could potentially heighten stress and create those body, mind, and actions that are our stress-detecting alarms is one way to feel better supported and more in control. Creating small goals that break down everything that happens in

September into more manageable pieces can help too. By looking at how you are moving through the small stuff, you can feel like you can keep moving forward.

You should also try to recognize the need for flexibility in your life and the lives of others as well. Being able to press pause on something and pick it back up later can release some of the pressure we put on ourselves or others. Flexibility can make people feel less anxious, happier, grateful, and more satisfied.

Getting enough sleep, especially now that routines are potentially restarting, is essential to help you feel well-rested, confident, and attentive. Sleep can help with creativity, as your brain will be ready to be stimulated and can be both focused and relaxed when you need it to be. One study showed that people who doodled while they were "listening to a list of people's names were able to remember 29 percent more of the information later."⁵

Taking time to get organized in advance for what might cause the most considerable stress during the month will help immensely. Make a list of your top priorities and top problems. If it's time, look at your schedule on a calendar. Add others' schedules there too. If it's finances, work on a budget and create a financial roadmap for yourself for the rest of the year. Having a big picture view of everything will allow you to break everything down into those smaller, more manageable parts and relieve you of the stress in the moment of feeling like you've forgotten something.

It's okay to say no. September tends to bring on a mindset that overwork is routine and just part of what happens during this month. Stop before it starts. Don't take on more than you need to. You don't have to participate in something that isn't a right or comfortable fit for your time or your feelings. Know that you're full, and you don't need to feel pressured to take on any more.

Take time for yourself to be present. Breathing, meditation and visualization exercises, and yoga are all important activities that heal your mind, body and spirit.

Eat well, with foods that nourish rather than foods that create stress. Putting healthy fuel into your system will give you more endurance, stamina and energy to keep going. Partnering proper nutrition with a simple exercise — such as walking — is even better, making you more resilient and helping you feel that you're at your best.

Other considerations to help

Recently, we've been relying on technology to provide a kind of surrogate connectivity, a way to stay in touch socially. But it's important to recognize that in combination with some other not-so-healthy activities and/or behaviours, it can also be responsible for increasing stress triggering anxiety and depression. Spending a lot of time online is exhausting. People may be feeling fatigued and experiencing eye strain. Watch how much time is spent on social media, video conferencing, and playing games. It's all screen time, and it can wear you down, zapping your energy because it "doesn't completely fill the void of socializing."⁶ Make time to get outside and get a change of scenery. If you can do it with a friend in a safe and permitted manner, that's even better. Try talking about subjects other than what's been happening in the news. Listen to one another and simply enjoy each other's company.

It's also important to acknowledge our losses – social, environmental, assumptions and safety, trust in systems and institutions, and recognize that you may also be empathic for what other people may be grieving. Talking about how you feel and what has been happening from your experience is a necessary step to take in working through that grief. You may want to explore different workshops that can transform your feelings into a work of art, or help you create something that captures the "intense, painful energy...[and placing it] into an inanimate object that [can] be symbolically" thrown away.⁷ A part of healing from the pain and processing the grief is to recognize things you are grateful for in your life. It can go a long way towards helping you shift perspective to a more hopeful position.

Help is available for mental health and substance use support

In addition to your EFAP program, all Canadians can access Innovative resources funded by Health Canada, such as Wellness Together Canada. Free to use, there are online and texting-based supports, coaching and communities, counselling and courses, self-assessment tools, and other helpful resources to explore. If you aren't familiar with these services, yet, they are worth looking into. You might find what you've been looking for and feel better and more supported.

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