

Why are we so stressed out?

New technology makes it harder than ever for us to switch off, and is causing us to lose sight of what really matters in life

Work emails sent at weekends, text messages received past midnight, a report due yesterday, money tight in the run-up to pay day, a bad-tempered colleague, train delays and traffic jams. We're surrounded by causes of stress, from minor frustrations – a broken printer or a cancelled meeting – to global catastrophes such as the ongoing financial crisis.

Living in a society that is flooded with information, we can rarely switch off. 'We're always on the go,' says Dr Michael Sinclair, clinical director of City Psychology Group. 'The advantages of new technology are tempered by the fact that we always feel we should reply to emails. We suffer increasingly from presenteeism, even when we're not in the office. And as the economic crisis deepens, we feel even more inclined to keep our smartphones on and to be in touch with work because we fear for our jobs.'

Sinclair is seeing an increasing number of clients who are battling stress. 'Some stress is inevitable,' he says. 'But we add to it by trying to hide it. In the workplace, for example, we hold it in for fear we'll be seen as not being able to cope. And then we feel stressed about being stressed.'

LIFE AT HIGH SPEED

Our fascination with social media can fuel the problem, particularly if it causes us to neglect our real world social bonds. And life online unfolds at high speed. 'It all happens so fast,' says Sinclair. 'You can put a post on Facebook and five minutes later it's had thousands of comments. At the same time, we're exposing ourselves to far more social interaction, some of which

can be negative. We receive lots of messages from others about ourselves, and some can feel like rejection, which adds to our stress.'

The complexity and accelerating pace of our world are not the sole reasons for our increased stress. The first-century stoic Epictetus said, 'It's not the events themselves that upset people, but the way we perceive these events.' So we are not just stressed by what happens, but by the feelings provoked ('I'll never manage that, what will they think?') and a sense of powerlessness (we can't make the traffic jam disappear, or the trains run on time, or solve the world's economic or environmental crises).

And this is where the great paradox of modern society lies – just as we develop newer, smarter and faster ways of getting things done, so we find it increasingly hard to tolerate even the small delays or difficulties in our daily lives. We're suffering from what psychologists call low frustration tolerance, which leads us to become stressed far more easily.

This is why we sometimes need to take a step back, and to examine how we react to what's happening around us. Instead of constantly fighting stress, we need to find ways to quieten the inner fears and negative emotions that can overwhelm us. One of the ways to do this is to think about what really matters to us. 'We're failing to connect to the things that are meaningful in life, and spend a lot of time pursuing external goals rather than asking ourselves what sort of person we want to be,' says Sinclair. 'We're so busy looking ahead that we can forget what's important.'

