

ARE WE MORE STRESSED THAN IN THE 60s?

LIVING IN THE 21ST CENTURY IS REPORTEDLY TWICE AS STRESSFUL AS LIVING IN THE 1960s. BY Katherine Chatfield

We have appliances to do our chores, more leisure time than ever before and the technology to do almost anything we want at the push of a button. Compared to life 40 years ago, surely we have it easy. Or not.

In 1969, 36 per cent of women reported being stressed, according to The Prospective Population Study of Women. Fast forward 40 years and that figure has more than doubled to 75 per cent. But is life in the 21st century really so stressful, or has "stress" simply become an exaggerated phenomenon that gives advertisers a licence to push anti-stress remedies down our throats?

"It's important to differentiate between feeling a bit frazzled and being chronically stressed," says psychologist Sally-Anne McCormack. "Real stress can cause physical symptoms such as anxiety, depression and insomnia. It's common to feel overworked and busy, but true stress is much more serious."

However, McCormack adds that most of us can feel overwhelmed by our everyday lives, and this can easily be perceived as stress.

"Generally we have more everyday stressors now than in the 60s," she says. "Yes, we have appliances to do jobs for us, but the presence of email and mobile phones in our lives means boundaries between work and home are blurred, meaning it's difficult to truly relax."

"Because today's society is so competitive, many people feel pressured to be a perfect partner, friend, mum and colleague... which is impossible. Today's stress problem is definitely a big issue."

We look at whether it's really twice as stressful to live in the noughties as in the 60s.

AT HOME

■ **1969:** Washing machines and fridges were just becoming affordable for most homes.

■ **2010:** Dishwashers, microwaves, vacuum cleaners and irons are in most houses.

Despite having appliances to help with every major household chore today, studies show these might not save us any time. While washing machines reduce the time it takes to wash clothes, today we own more clothes than ever, so there's simply more washing to do.

McCormack adds: "Household chores used to require a lot of physical activity. Women at home stayed in shape by doing strenuous jobs around the house. Exercise reduces stress, so this physical work was good for getting rid of frustrations. But today we still do the housework as well as fit in time at the gym."

■ **The solution:** "Dedicate 15 minutes a day to packing in as much housework as you can," says Abbie Allen, personal concierge at Lifestyle Elements. "This feels less overwhelming than spending two hours cleaning the whole house. It's important to prioritise these tasks, too. Remember, nobody is going to die if you haven't done the ironing."

TECHNOLOGY

■ **1969:** The phone. If it rang when you were out, tough.

■ **2010:** Mobiles, email, BlackBerries and the internet mean we're available all the time.

"Everyone is expected to be accessible 24/7," says clinical psychologist Louise Adams.

"Although this has its advantages, it can also act as a big stressor. It's hard to relax if emails and texts are constantly beeping through. It also forces you to multi-task; if you're out and your phone rings, it can mean juggling talking to your boss with looking after your kids. These constant interruptions can leave you feeling overwhelmed."

■ **The solution:** "Set boundaries," Allen says. "Put a message on your voicemail saying your phone is switched off between 7pm and 8am. Then you can enjoy being at home without anticipating calls coming through. At work, turn your phone to silent and cancel email alerts so you're not distracted. Concentrating on one task at a time helps reduce stress."



SLEEP

■ **1969:** People slept an average of eight hours a night in the 60s, a Sleep Journal study reports.

■ **2009:** Thirty per cent of people get less than seven hours of sleep a night.

It's easy to forgo sleep when you've got a million other things to do, but it's not worth missing out on shut-eye. "Sleep deprivation is one of the worst culprits when it comes to feeling unable to cope," McCormack says. "Constant lack of sleep can result in both physical and mental illness."

■ **The solution:** "Schedule sleep into your diary," McCormack advises. "You wouldn't miss an important meeting, so why miss out on something that's vital to your ability to function well? Between seven and eight hours a night is ideal. A 10-minute cat-nap on the bus home will pep you up too."

MONEY

■ **1969:** Household debt was just five per cent.

■ **2009:** Australia has one of the highest rates of debt in the world; for every \$100 we earn, we owe \$130.

"Money is one of the leading causes of stress," McCormack says. "Working to fuel materialistic lifestyles is extremely pressurised."

■ **The solution:** "List the five most important things in your life. Chances are your family comes above having a flat-screen TV. Seeing your priorities written down helps you reassess what's important."

If you owe money on credit cards, pay it off quickly by consolidating your debts, says Katrina Pulbrook, ANZ senior financial planner. "Transfer your debt to a low- or no-interest card and pay off more than the minimum each month. Getting rid of debt is the most liberating thing you can do."

NOW AND THEN: WHO'S MORE STRESSED? *These mothers and daughters compare the differences between the stresses felt today and in 1969.*



■ **Mother: Carole Castle, 59, Brisbane, Qld**

"I was a full-time mum. I enjoyed it but it was

isolating sometimes. Working mums are under a huge amount of pressure today. I think Tara has it much harder than I did. There wasn't the same pressure on women to look like celebrities that there is now."



■ **Daughter: Tara Castle, 33, Brisbane, Qld**

"As a working mum of two, life is a juggling act. I

feel I'm expected to keep the house tidy and cook as well as hold down a job. I think there's a lot of pressure on mums today. We see so many celebrities with great bodies and that makes me feel I have to look the same."



■ **Mother: Ava Guilfoyle, 63, Corinella, Vic**

"I was a sole parent and juggled part-time work with

raising two children. I wasn't earning a lot of money but we survived. Housing was affordable and we drove our car until it ran into the ground. I hardly ever felt stressed. There wasn't the same materialistic aspect to life then."



■ **Daughter: Genine Howard, 36, Maroochydore, Qld**

"I run my own business and find there are no boundaries

between home and work. My husband and I need two incomes to maintain our lifestyle. The biggest stress in my life is the expectations placed on me. I feel I'm expected to be successful, drive a nice car and give back to the community."