

STRESS

What is Stress?

Stress is an unpleasant and unwanted reaction to excessive pressure and demands which exceed our ability to cope.

Stress is a human reaction, not a feature of the environment. Recognising this opens the way to change. It is a set of physical reactions, thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

Many situations in life involve pressure

Pressure can be positive

A certain amount of pressure is useful and even necessary. It can help spur us on, focus our concentration and help us **get the job done.**

Coping

Human beings cope with pressure by assessing the situation and organising their resources. We problem solve.

Stress is negative

If demands and pressure exceed our ability to cope, the resulting stress can lead to a range of problems.

Improve your coping

You can control the effects of too much pressure and avoid stress by

- understanding how stress affects your body, thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- organising your resources to cope with situations better

Recognise the symptoms of stress

Physical signs - Tiredness - Headaches - Backache and other muscular pain - Dizziness - Change in appetite - Upset stomach - nausea - Weight loss or gain - Sleep problems - Dry mouth and throat - Shortness of breath - Muscle tension - Increased blood pressure - Palpitations (racing heart) - Skin complaints - Period problems	Emotional signs - Tension - Anxiety and nervousness - Loss of self-esteem and confidence - Irritability - Anger - Frustration - Resentment - Tearfulness - Not being able to enjoy life - Low mood - Feelings of emptiness - Feeling helpless and hopeless
Negative thinking 'I can't switch off' 'I am failing' 'Everyone's watching me' 'I should be able to cope' 'This is awful' 'I've got to get out of here' 'I can't go on - there's no point' 'This isn't fair - why me?' 'Nobody cares' 'No one else feels like this' 'I'll go mad if this carries on'	Behaviour changes - Relationship problems - Loss of sex drive - Withdrawing from friends and relatives - Inability to deal calmly with situations - Conflict with colleagues - Under/overeating - Too much smoking, or alcohol and drug misuse - Increase in accidents - Avoiding work - absenteeism - Loss of concentration - Loss of interest

People are often very worried by the physical signs. The natural response of the body to threat is arousal, the 'fight or flight' mechanism. Literally, 'the adrenalin is flowing' and the body is being geared up to react to survive. In stressed people, this arousal persists when it is no longer appropriate.

Although the reactions listed above are well recognised symptoms of stress, they may have other causes - check with your doctor to make sure.

The causes of stress

Personality

Some people are resilient – they cope well with change and have realistic views on what they can and cannot control, what they can tackle and what to let go.

However, people who are extremely competitive, perfectionist, ambitious or impatient may be especially prone to the effects of stress. This is largely due to the way they think when confronted by events. Some of the pressure that troubles us therefore comes from inside ourselves.

Typical life events and changes

Other pressures are the events that happen to us:

- Bereavement
- Relationship problems
- Divorce
- Problems with children
- Health worries
- Money problems
- Legal difficulties

Even happy events such as marriage or promotion can make you feel stressed – they require a lot of change and adaptation.

Improving your coping

1. Identify what causes you stress

Now you are more aware of the range of stress reactions, make a list of anything in your life that causes you stress. You can add to it, as you become more aware of these.

Keep a stress diary for a week - writing down everything in the day that has been stressful. Do this for both your personal and professional life.

Note down what happened, what you thought, felt and did. For example:

Situation	Thought	Emotion	Behaviour
Husband criticised how I managed a problem with one of the children	I'll never get anything right, I'm a failure	Angry, tense, tearful	Avoided talking to husband all evening

2. Plan how to tackle stress – be SMART

Set **SMART** goals. Your goals should be:

Specific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ewarding **T**imely

- Be specific about your goal. Be clear about what you want to achieve. Write it down in as much detail as you can, the more specific the goal, the more realistic the chance of success. It may be that you end up with a set of goals rather than a single one.
- Goals must be measurable. Set out some criteria that tell you when they have been achieved.
- Goals must also be attainable. Given that you probably have a set of goals, make a hierarchy of them, from least to most difficult. Take the least difficult one first and work upwards. You will see progress by making specific gradual changes.
- Make sure any goal is rewarding – specify the benefits in advance and keep reminding yourself of them. Remember to acknowledge your successes. Praise yourself and celebrate them!
- Lastly, set a time limit. Know by when you want to have achieved the goal, this will help you avoid delay.

Use the strategies set out in the following sections to plan ways to reach your goals.

3. Become aware of your thoughts and attitudes

As we have seen, people think about themselves and situations in a negative way when they are stressed and this adds to the pressure they are under. To get out of this vicious circle you need to replace the negative thoughts with more positive and constructive ones.

As part of your stress diary you noted down how you thought in situations where you experienced stress. Consider these thoughts:

- Am I making things worse by putting myself down?
- Am I making myself feel bad by blaming others or myself?
- Am I pressurising myself with 'musts or shoulds' which neither I nor others can ever live up to?

Now, consider each thought and change the negatives to more appropriate, realistic positives. For instance:

Negative thought – "I'm a failure."

This may produce feelings of anxiety, low mood, or shame - inappropriate emotions.

Alternative positive thought – "I didn't do so well on this task but I'll do things in a different way next time that will be better – I'll get feedback on what went wrong and ask for advice on how to approach it differently."

This may produce more appropriate feelings of concern, sadness, and disappointment, but may also give rise to hope.

However, you must bear two things in mind to help shape your thinking:

Accept the problem if it cannot be changed

Sometimes a situation has no immediate solution - or the solution does not lie with you. If this is the case, then accepting the situation as it really is will lessen stress, as you cease struggling to do something about it, or blaming yourself for failing to successfully change it.

Change what is within your power to change

Managing your stress about things you can change will involve you following the advice in the sections above – identifying pressures and stress, planning to tackle them, changing unhelpful thinking about situations or yourself, learning to relax and looking after yourself better in general.

4. Look after yourself

Stressed people generally feel they don't have the time to look after themselves, you are going to have to make time for this.

Look after yourself physically

Be physically active

If you are physically fit you are better equipped to handle stress and you are less likely to suffer from the long-term health consequences of stress.

Choose a physical activity you enjoy. Build up to at least 30 minutes of moderate physical exercise five days or more each week.

Eat a balanced diet

Eat a balance of foods that are high in fibre and low in fat, including fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, other cereals and potatoes, milk and dairy products, and meat, fish or alternatives (as meat is not a necessarily part of a healthy diet). This will supply all the protein and vitamins we need. Eat regular meals, never skip breakfast and don't snack.

Get enough sleep

Try to get six to eight hours sleep every night:

- Avoid tea, coffee and excess smoking in the evening
- Avoid alcohol (it produces fitful sleep)
- Don't exercise in the hours before you go to bed
- Wind down gradually, have a warm relaxing bath
- Listen to a relaxation CD or quiet music

Don't misuse alcohol or other drugs

Alcohol, tobacco and caffeine increase arousal rather than calming you down. Drugs such as sleeping pills are only effective over a short period. If you are taking prescription medication, follow your doctor's advice and never stop taking it suddenly. If you are reducing or stopping smoking, use a structured approach.

Plan your leisure – do things you enjoy

This sounds simple but it's not easy for many people. You may have to actively set aside time for something that gives you pleasure. Write yourself a schedule for the day and stick to it.

Plan ahead

Make sure there is something to look forward to – a holiday, or some other special event.

Plan to spend time with those whose company you enjoy

It is easy to take those who are close to you for granted. Plan to spend time with them, whether they are family or friends and simply enjoy their company.

Develop new interests

Meeting new people and developing new interests will put some positive challenges in your life. The change of activity will lessen stress, even if you think you are too busy already.

5. Learn to relax

Physically relaxing your body is a skill that has to be learned. CCP has a separate guidance sheet regarding relaxation techniques.

6. Ask for help!

Talk to someone you trust

Whether the person is a friend, colleague or relative, sharing your thoughts and feelings about the issues with someone who will listen to you will usually make you feel better, even if it does not resolve the problem. Evidence suggests that those people who have someone to talk to suffer less from the effects of stress.

However, limit the number of people you talk to. Talk purposefully to one person over time with some goals in mind rather than simply telling a whole range of people about the same problems over and over.

Use CCP

The counsellor to whom you spoke will have invited you to ring again, or may even have made an appointment for you to do so. Take advantage of this facility if you need to.