How to...

Manage and reduce stress



Mental Health Foundation

How do you define stress?

In brief, stress is a feeling of being under abnormal pressure, whether from an increased workload, an argument with a family member, or financial worries.

What is stress?

Stress affects us in a number of ways, both physically and emotionally, and in varying intensities.

Research has shown that stress can sometimes be positive. It makes us more alert and helps us perform better in certain situations. However, stress has only been found to be beneficial if it is short-lived. Excessive or prolonged stress can lead to illness such as heart disease and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

During situations that make you feel threatened or upset, your body creates a stress response. This can cause a variety of physical symptoms, change the way you behave, and lead you to experience more intense emotions.

Physical symptoms

People react differently to stress. Some common symptoms of stress include: sleeping problems, sweating, or a change in appetite.

Symptoms like these are triggered by a rush of stress hormones in your body which, when released, allow you to deal with pressures or threats. This is known as the "fight or flight" response. Hormones called adrenaline and noradrenaline raise your blood pressure, increase your heart rate and increase the rate at which you perspire. This prepares your body for an emergency response. These hormones can also reduce blood flow to your skin and reduce your stomach activity. Cortisol, another stress hormone, releases fat and sugar into your system to boost your energy.

As a result, you may experience headaches, muscle tension, pain, nausea, indigestion and dizziness. You may also breathe more quickly, have palpitations or suffer from various aches and pains. In the long-term, you may be putting yourself at risk from heart attacks and strokes.

All these changes are your body's way of making it easier for you to fight or run away. Once the pressure or threat has passed, your stress hormone levels usually return to normal. However, if you're constantly under stress, these hormones remain in your body, leading to the symptoms of stress. If you're stuck in a busy office or on an overcrowded train, you can't fight or run away, so you can't use up the chemicals your own body makes to protect you. Over time, the build-up of these chemicals and the changes they produce can be damaging for your health.

Behavioural and emotional effects

When you are stressed you may experience many different feelings, including anxiety, irritability or low self-esteem, which can lead you to become withdrawn, indecisive or tearful.

You may experience periods of constant worry, racing thoughts, or repeatedly go over the same things in your head. Some people experience changes in their behaviour. They may lose their temper more easily, act irrationally or become more verbally or physically aggressive. These feelings can feed on each other and produce physical symptoms, which can make you feel even worse. For example, extreme anxiety can make you feel so unwell that you then worry you have a serious physical condition.

Identifying the signs of stress

Everyone experiences stress. However, when it is affecting your life, health and wellbeing, it is important to tackle it as soon as possible. While stress affects everyone differently, there are common signs and symptoms you can look out for:

- Feelings of constant worry or anxiety
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Difficulty concentrating
- Mood swings or changes in mood
- Irritability or having a short temper
- Difficulty relaxing
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Eating more or less than usual
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Using alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs to relax
- Aches and pains, particularly muscle tension
- Diarrhoea and constipation
- Feelings of nausea or dizziness
- Loss of sex drive

If you experience these symptoms for a prolonged period of time, and feel they are affecting your everyday life or making you feel unwell, you should speak to your GP. You should ask for information about the support services and treatments available to you.

What causes stress?

All sorts of situations can cause stress. The most common involve work, money matters and relationships with partners, children or other family members.

Stress may be caused either by major upheavals and life events such as divorce, unemployment, moving house and bereavement, or by a series of minor irritations such as feeling undervalued at work or arguing with a family member. Sometimes, there are no obvious causes.

Relationships

Relationships are a great support in times when we feel stressed. However, from time to time the people close to you, be it a partner, parent, child, friend or colleague, can increase your stress levels.

Events such as ongoing minor arguments and disagreements, to larger family crises, such as an affair, illness or bereavement are likely to affect the way you think, feel and behave. This may consequently have an impact on your stress levels.

You can find out more about investing in healthy relationships at: mentalhealth.org.uk/relationships

Work-life balance

The pressure of an increasingly demanding work culture in the UK is one of the biggest contributors to stress among the general population.

While traditional working hours are 37 hours a week, the recent and dramatic rise in Britain's working hours suggests this is likely to increase. 20.1% of the UK working population work 45 hours or more per week.

The human costs of unmanaged work related stress is extensive. Feeling unhappy about the amount of time you spend at work and neglecting other aspects of life because of work may increase your vulnerability to stress. Increased levels of stress can, if not addressed early enough, lead to burn-out or more severe mental health problems.

Mental health problems such as anxiety and depression are thought to be the leading cause of work absences, accounting for up to 40% of sickness leave. In 2008, mental health accounted for 442,000 cases of work-related illnesses and had an estimated cost of £13.5 million. As a result, mental ill health now accounts for a significant proportion of long-term sickness and early retirement, cited as the leading cause of illness for 20% of NHS employees.

Money

Money and debt concerns place huge pressure on us, so it comes as no surprise that they have a marked effect on our stress levels.

The effects of the economic crisis have affected everyone in some capacity. Recent statistics from StepChange Debt Charity found an increased demand of 56% for debt advice and support from 2012-2014. Citizens Advice have seen a similar increase in the number of people experiencing stress about finances, dealing with 6,407 debt problems every working day.

A survey conducted in 2013 found that 42% of those seeking debt help had been prescribed medication by their GP to help them cope, while 76% of those in a couple said debt had affected their relationship.

The combination of chronic stress and debt can result in depression and anxiety, and has been highlighted as a factor linked to suicidal thoughts and attempts. It is important if you are worried about your finances and debts that you do not try to deal with them alone. There is a lot of help and support available to you through organisations such as www.StepChange.org and www.citizensadvice.org.uk.

You should also talk to your GP or a trusted health professional if you are worried about how debt is affecting your mental and physical health.

Smoking, drinking and drug use

Some people smoke, drink alcohol and use recreational drugs to reduce stress. However, this often makes problems worse.

Research shows that smoking may increase feelings of anxiety. Nicotine creates an immediate, temporary, sense of relaxation, which can then lead to withdrawal symptoms and cravings.

Similarly, people may use alcohol as a means to manage and cope with difficult feelings, and to temporarily reduce feelings of anxiety. However, alcohol may make existing mental health problems worse. It can make you feel more anxious and depressed in the long run. It is important to know the recommended limits and drink responsibly.

Prescription drugs, such as tranquillisers and sleeping tablets, which may have been prescribed for very good reasons, can also cause mental and physical health problems if used for long periods of time. Street drugs, such as cannabis or ecstasy, are usually taken for recreational purposes. For some people, problems start as their bodies get used to repeated use of the drug. This leads to the need for increased doses to maintain the same effect.

How can you help yourself?

Stress is a natural reaction to difficult situations in life, such as work, family, relationships and money problems.

We mentioned earlier on that a moderate amount of stress can help us perform better in challenging situations, but too much or prolonged stress can lead to physical problems. This can include lower immunity levels, digestive and intestinal difficulties such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or mental health problems such as depression. It is therefore important that we manage our stress and keep it at a healthy level to prevent long-term damage to our bodies and minds.

When you are feeling stressed, try to take these steps:

- **Realise when it is causing you a problem.** You need to make the connection between feeling tired or ill, with the pressures you are faced with. Do not ignore physical warnings such as tense muscles, over-tiredness, headaches or migraines.
- **Identify the causes.** Try to identify the underlying causes. Sort the possible reasons for your stress into those with a practical solution, those that will get better anyway given time, and those you can't do anything about. Try to let go of those in the second and third groups – there is no point in worrying

about things you can't change or things that will sort themselves out.

- **Review your lifestyle.** Are you taking on too much? Are there things you are doing which could be handed over to someone else? Can you do things in a more leisurely way? You may need to prioritise things you are trying to achieve and reorganise your life so that you are not trying to do everything at once.

You can also help protect yourself from stress in a number of ways:

- **Eat healthily.** A healthy diet will reduce the risks of diet-related diseases. Also, there is a growing amount of evidence showing how food affects our mood. Feelings of wellbeing can be protected by ensuring that our diet provides adequate amounts of brain nutrients such as essential vitamins and minerals, as well as water.
- **Be aware of your smoking and drinking.** Even though they may seem to reduce tension, this is misleading as they often make problems worse.
- **Exercise.** Physical exercise can be very effective in relieving stress. Even going out to get some fresh air and taking some light physical exercise, like walking to the shops, can help.

- **Take time out.** Take time to relax. Saying 'I just can't take the time off' is no use if you are forced to take time off later through ill health. Striking a balance between responsibility to others and responsibility to yourself is vital in reducing stress levels.
- **Be mindful.** Mindfulness meditation can be practiced anywhere at any time. Research has suggested that it can reduce the effects of stress, anxiety and other related problems such as insomnia, poor concentration and low moods, in some people. Our 'Be Mindful' website features a specially-developed online course in mindfulness, as well as details of local courses in your area:
  bemindful.co.uk
- **Get some restful sleep.** Sleeping problems are common when you're suffering from stress. Try to ensure you get enough rest. For more tips on getting a good night's sleep read our guide 'How to...sleep better' at:
  mentalhealth.org.uk/howto
- **Don't be too hard on yourself**. Try to keep things in perspective. After all, we all have bad days.

Seeking help

It is okay to ask for professional help if you feel that you are struggling to manage on your own. It is important to get help as soon as possible so you can begin to get better.

The first person to approach is your family doctor. He or she should be able to give advice about treatment, and may refer you to another local professional. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Mindfulness based approaches are known to help reduce stress. There are also a number of voluntary organisations which can help you to tackle the causes of stress and advise you about ways to get better.

Anxiety UK
Anxiety UK runs a helpline staffed by volunteers with personal experience of anxiety from 9:30-5:30, Monday to Friday. Call 08444 775 774.

Citizens Advice
Citizens Advice provides free, independent and confidential advice for a range of problems as well as providing information on your rights and responsibilities. Visit www.citizensadvice.org.uk for more information and advice.

StepChange
StepChange provides help and information for people dealing with a range of debt problems. Freephone (including from mobiles) 0800 138 1111 or visit the website on www.stepchange.org.

Mind Infoline
Mind provides information on a range of mental health topics to support people in their own area from 9.00am to 6.00pm, Monday to Friday. Call 0300 123 3393 or email info@mind.org.uk.

Rethink Advice and Information Service
Rethink provide specific solution-based guidance - 0300 5000927 or email: advice@rethink.org

Samaritans
The Samaritans offer emotional support 24 hours a day - in full confidence.
Call 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org

Specialist mental health services
There are a number of specialist services that provide various treatments, including counselling and other talking treatments. Often these different services are coordinated by a community mental health team (CMHT), which is usually based either at a hospital or a local community mental health centre. Some teams provide 24-hour services so that you can contact them in a crisis. You should be able to contact your local CMHT through your local social services or social work team.

101 Top tips from you

Thank you so much to those who came back with some brilliant tips on how you manage stress. Everybody is different and what works for one person might not work for another. Here are 101 tips provided by you. Why not give it a try?

1. Meeting a friend
2. Setting aside 10 minutes a day to relax and collect my thoughts
3. Watching late night TV debates that deal with the realities of the world
4. Listening to relaxing music
5. Watching funny movies
6. Taking a walk in the countryside
7. Going to the gym
8. Soaking in the bath with lavender oil
9. Meditating
10. Talking to someone just to vent a little
11. Walking the dog
12. Getting more sleep
13. Praying
14. Reading a book to distract yourself from stressful thoughts
15. Do something good for someone else
16. Writing a letter to someone to get your feelings across and vent, but not actually sending it
17. Painting or drawing
18. Book a massage or spend time in a spa with a friend

19. Write a list of things to do and cross them off as you do them
20. Try putting things into perspective
21. Unplug the phone and get some time to yourself
22. Do something you like with family or friends like going to a show
23. Dancing around in your room to your favourite music
24. Going to your friend's house with another friend and putting the world to rights
25. Have a change of scenery
26. Go out and meet new people
27. Go to a yoga class
28. Express your feelings and emotions
29. Spend time with positive people around you
30. A hot cup of something wonderful, a journal and a pen
31. Eat a healthy meal and avoid caffeine
32. Getting closer with nature e.g. have a walk on the beach, observing the sunset
33. Watch your favourite programme on TV
34. Give yourself 'me time' just a few minutes to think about pleasant things
35. Ask yourself what would other people do
36. Thinking of the work you HAVE achieved in a day, rather than what you haven't done
37. Relaxing with reflexology
38. Go to uplifting plays, operas and concerts that make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up
39. Go to bed with a great book

40. Host a dinner party
41. Cheer up someone who is feeling down
42. Spend some time doing something you enjoy, like gardening
43. Writing down my thoughts
44. Play games on the computer
45. Avoid putting things off
46. Find a quiet place and try to visualise a happy memory
47. Do something creative like knitting
48. Play a musical instrument
49. Play with your pet
50. Get some fresh air
51. Be gentle to yourself
52. Laugh!
53. Go window shopping
54. Write short stories
55. Call a loved one
56. Talk to a stranger
57. Practice CBT
58. Chat to your friends on Skype or Facebook
59. Take a nap
60. Take a break, even a short one can make a difference
61. Going for a walk at lunchtime
62. Write poetry
63. Eat or drink something you enjoy
64. Cuddle a baby (ideally one you know - cuddles with my niece or nephew are amazing for destressing)

65. Spend time with children – they really put things in perspective, like 'Wow there's a cool cloud', and remind you of simple things that used to amaze you
66. Go out to a Karaoke night
67. Imagine living in a different era, maybe wartime or before cars and trains were invented and how much harder life would be
68. Bake a cake
69. Sitting in a café with a cup of tea and a magazine
70. Go for a relaxing swim
71. Sit on a park bench and watch the world go by
72. Tidy a room or cupboard (other people might find this stressful, but I find it relaxing!)
73. Challenge a friend to a game of Scrabble
74. Breathe deeply for two minutes, and focus on your breaths
75. Bake something – knit a scarf, build an Airfix model
76. Write a list of the reasons you have to be happy with life
77. Take a minute to stretch your body
78. Use a relaxing room fragrance or scented candle to create a sense of sanctuary
79. Practicing Tai Chi
80. Looking at photos of happy memories.
81. Have a cup of tea
82. Thinking of something you're looking forward to or something that was fun
83. Go to the cinema
84. Aquafit classes at lunchtime

85. Go for a bike ride
86. Listen to the birds singing
87. Reminding yourself it could be worse and count your blessings
88. Playing board games with your family
89. Playing my favourite song and singing it out loud
90. Cleaning!
91. Practising calligraphy
92. I find moving furniture around the house very soothing
93. Write a letter to a loved one
94. Play with my children
95. Watch some programs on TV
96. Go out for a run in the park
97. Volunteer at the local homeless shelter, it helps put my worries into perspective
98. Play Sudoku or crosswords
99. Read some gossip magazines
100. Go to a salsa class
101. Get a cuddle

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The Mental Health Foundation

Good mental health for all

Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place. We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at national and local government level. In tandem, we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage. This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.



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