



South Staffordshire and  
Shropshire Healthcare



NHS Foundation Trust

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# Stress

A self help guide

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## **What is stress?**

Here are the thoughts of some people who are experiencing stress.

“I just don’t get a task finished any more before I move on to the next thing. I keep forgetting where I’m up to, I have 20 things on the go at once and I’m not getting anywhere with any of them...”

“I keep meaning to get a little time for myself but I never manage to. Someone always asks me to help out and I never have the heart to say no, but I end up feeling really tired and irritable ...”

“It just seems to be one crisis after the next in my life. I’ve got a constant headache and stomach problems, I keep expecting something else to go wrong, I’m at the end of my tether ...”

Stress is the word that many people use when they are describing how the demands of their life seem to be becoming too great for them to cope with. This ability to cope varies from person to person and what one person finds stressful may not be a problem for another. Whilst many of us suffer with stress at times in our day to day lives, long-term stress is known to be bad for our health and many of us would like to find ways to gain some control over it.

## **How can this guide help me?**

This booklet will tell you more about stress, it will help you to see whether stress is a problem for you. It makes simple suggestions about how to overcome stress and what other help may be available.

## What are the signs of stress?

The signs of stress vary from person to person but here are some of the most common ones. **Do you recognise any of them in yourself?**

### Physical signs (please tick if appropriate)

- Headaches
- Muscle tension or pain
- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Feeling dizzy
- Bowel or bladder problems
- Breathlessness or palpitations
- Dry mouth
- Tingling in body
- Sexual problems
- Tired all the time

### Emotions

- Feeling irritable
- Feeling anxious or tense
- Feeling low
- Feeling lack of interest
- Feeling bad about yourself

### Effects on what you do

- Temper outbursts
- Drinking or smoking too much
- Changes in eating habits
- Withdrawing from usual activities
- Becoming unreasonable
- Being forgetful or clumsy
- Rushing around
- Not sleeping

If you have some of these signs it may be you are experiencing stress. These are some of the short-term signs but long-term

health risks from stress can be serious. For example, heart disease, high blood pressure, severe depression, stroke, migraine, severe anxiety, asthma, low resistance to infection, bowel problems, stomach problems especially ulcers, fatigue and sleep problems.

### **Can life events cause stress?**

Some things that happen in your life can be stressful, particularly life changes. If you have had one or more of the following life events occurring over the last year, you will probably be more likely to be stressed and should take care to avoid further stressors, and try to take 'extra care' of yourself.

(Please tick if appropriate)

- Death of partner
- Divorce or relationship breakdown
- Jail term
- Death of close family member
- Getting married
- Loss of employment
- Health problems
- Pregnancy/childbirth
- New employment
- High financial commitments
- Serious debts
- Major changes at work
- Partner stops or begins work
- Death of close friend
- Change in living conditions
- Disagreement with friends
- Problems at work (e.g. lack of job security, several jobs, no satisfaction at work)
- Change in leisure activities
- Change in church/spiritual habits
- Minor legal problems
- Problems with neighbours/noise
- Family gatherings for holidays/Christmas

## Is there a type of person who is more likely to experience stress?

Studies have shown that some people are more likely to experience stress than others. These people are known as 'type A' personalities. They tend to be more competitive and impatient and have tight time schedules compared to 'type B' personalities, who are more relaxed and 'laid back' in their style. If you would like to know which type you are, ticking the following boxes may help you to decide:

### Type A

- Must get things finished
- Never late for appointments
- Competitive
- Can't listen to conversations, interrupt, finish sentences for others
- Always in a hurry
- Don't like to wait
- Very busy, at full speed
- Trying to do more than one thing at a time
- Want everything perfect
- Do everything fast
- Hold feelings in
- Not satisfied with work/life
- Few social activities/interests
- If working will often take work home

### Type B

- Don't mind leaving things unfinished for a while
- Calm and unhurried about appointments
- Not competitive
- Can listen and let the other person finish speaking
- Never in a hurry even when busy
- Can wait calmly
- Easy going
- Take one thing at a time
- Don't mind things not quite perfect
- Slow and deliberate speech
- Do things slowly
- Express feelings
- Quite satisfied with work/life
- Many social activities/interests
- If working, don't take work home

If most of your ticks are on the **A** side, then you will be more prone to stress, if both **As** and **Bs** then you are a little prone to stress, if mainly **Bs** then you are less likely to suffer from stress. Those people who are more prone to stress may have to try harder to use some of the stress management approaches suggested here in order to tackle their natural tendency to a stressful lifestyle.

## **How can I help myself to cope with stress?**

Studies have shown that the first step in tackling stress is to become aware that it is a problem for you. The next stage is to make a plan to take control of the causes and effects of stress. Here are some practical ways to take control of stress.

**Holiday** – try to plan at least one each year with a change in activities and surrounding.

**Open up** – if your relationship is part of the problem. Communication is very important.

**Work** – is that the problem? What are your options? Could you retrain? What aspects are stressful? Could you delegate? Could you get more support?

**Try to concentrate on the present.** Don't dwell on the past or future worries.

**Own up to yourself that you are feeling stressed** – half the battle is admitting it!

**Be realistic about what you can achieve.** Don't take too much on.

**Eat a balanced diet.** Eat slowly and sit down, allowing at least half an hour for each meal.

**Action plans** – try to write down the problems in your life that may be causing stress, and as many possible solutions as you can. Make a plan to deal with each problem.

**Time management** – plan your time, doing one thing at a time and building in breaks. Don't make too many changes at once in your life.

**Set priorities** – if you could only do one thing, what would it be?

**Talk things over** with a friend or family member or someone else you can trust and share your feelings with.

**Relaxation or leisure time** each day is important. Try new ways to relax such as aromatherapy, reflexology or yoga. Relaxation exercises are described more fully further in this booklet.

**Exercise regularly** – at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on five or more occasions per week is excellent for stress control. Walking is good – appreciate the countryside.

**Say no** and don't feel guilty.

**Seek professional help** if you have tried these things and still your stress is a problem.

## **Can I learn to be more relaxed?**

Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension.

### **Deep muscle relaxation**

It is helpful to read the instructions first and eventually to learn them by heart. Start by selecting a quiet, warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. To begin with, choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed, then lie down and get comfortable. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly – in-two-three and out-two-three. Say the word "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax.

Start with your hands. Clench one fist tightly, and think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop.

Do the same with the other hand.

Each time, you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they are relaxed. Don't try to relax but just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they are relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

It is useful to stick to the same order, as you work through the muscle groups:

**Hands** – clench fists, then relax.

**Arms** – bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.

**Neck** – press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.

**Face** – there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.

**Shoulders** – shrug your shoulders up – then relax them.

**Chest** – take a deep breath, hold it in for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.

**Stomach** – tense your stomach muscles as tightly as you can and relax.

**Buttocks** – squeeze your buttocks together and relax.

**Legs** – straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face then relax.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practice daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense your muscles first.
- Use parts of relaxation to help in difficult situations, e.g. breathing slowly.
- Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.
- Practice in public situations (on bus, in queue etc).
- Relaxation cds are available at most bookshops and libraries.

## **Mindful breathing**

This is a different approach to managing stress. The goal of mindful breathing is calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is to concentrate only on the present moment, not the past and not the future. Much of our stress is linked to thoughts and feelings about the past and the future. Follow these instructions:

Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed or lowered and your back straight.

- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach. Every time you breathe in, the balloon inflates. Each time you breathe

out, the balloon deflates. Notice the sensations as the balloon inflates and deflates. Your chest and stomach rising with the in-breath, and falling with the out-breath.

- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the mind does. Just notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You can notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, and again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Don't follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts to be there. Just notice those thoughts, and let them drift on by; bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

Thoughts will enter your awareness, and your attention will follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. The more you can practice this exercise the more it will help you to manage stress.

### **What further help is available?**

Sometimes a good source of help is to talk to family or close friends, but there are also other ways you may get help.

Your family doctor is probably the best person to discuss your difficulties with in the first instance. This is particularly important if your problem is not going away or is getting worse. You could also talk to your Health Visitor or Practice Nurse if you are in touch with either.

You may be offered counselling or if your problem seems to become more severe you may be referred to a mental health worker.

## Useful organisations

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

Tel: 01455 883 316

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth,  
Leicestershire, LE17 4HB

Offers an information service providing contacts for  
counselling in England and Wales.

- **Healthwatch**

[www.healthwatch.co.uk](http://www.healthwatch.co.uk)

Healthwatch England is the independent consumer champion  
for health and social care in England. Working with a network  
of 152 local Healthwatch, we ensure that the voices of  
consumers and those who use services reach the ears of the  
decision makers.

- **International Stress Management Association (ISMA)**

Tel: 01179 697 284

[www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk)

PO BOX 491, Bradley, Stoke, Bristol, BS34 9AH

Provides information about recognising and reducing stress.

- **Mental Health Matters**

Tel: 0191 516 3500

[www.mentalhealthmatters.com](http://www.mentalhealthmatters.com)

Avalon House, St Catherines Court, Sunderland Enterprise  
Park, Sunderland, SR5 3XJ

A national organisation which provides support and  
information on employment, housing, community support and  
psychological services.

- **Mind Infoline**

Tel: 0300 123 3393 Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm.

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

15-19 Broadway, Stratford, London, E15 4BQ

Provides information on a range of topics including types of  
mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative

treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.

- **National Debt Line**

Tel: 0808 808 4000

[www.nationaldebtline.co.uk](http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk)

Tricorn House, 51-53 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B16 8TP

Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.

- **NHS Choices – Your health, your choices**

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.

- **No Panic**

Helpline: 0800 138 8889

[www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)

Unit 3, Prospect House, Halesfield 22, Telford, Shropshire, TF7 4QX

Support for sufferers of panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, general anxiety disorder and tranquilliser withdrawal.

- **Relate**

Tel: 0300 100 1234

[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

Premier House, Carolina Court, Lakeside, Doncaster, DN4 5RA

Help with marital or relationship problems.

- **Rethink**

Helpline: 0300 500 0927

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7TP

Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.

- **Samaritans**

Tel: 0845 790 9090

Email: [jo@samaritans.org.uk](mailto:jo@samaritans.org.uk)

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Freepost: RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, Chris, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

## **Useful books**

- **Feeling good: the new mood therapy**

David Burns

HarperCollins 2000

A drug-free guide to curing anxiety, guilt, pessimism, procrastination, low self-esteem, and other depressive disorders using scientifically tested methods to improve mood and stave off the blues.

- **Stress management: a comprehensive guide to wellness**

Edward A. Charlesworth

Souvenir 1997

This guide helps you identify the specific areas of stress in your life - familial, work-related, social, emotional - and offers proven techniques for dealing with every one of them.

- **Mind over mood**

Christine Padesky and Dennis Greenberger

Guilford 1995

Draws on the authors' extensive experience as clinicians and teachers of cognitive therapy to help clients successfully understand and improve their moods and alter their behaviour.

- **Self help for your nerves**

Claire Weekes

HarperCollins 2000

Guide for everything you need to know to keep relaxed through every day life. Offers comprehensive insight and advice into coping with nervous stress.

- **Anxiety and depression: a practical guide to recovery**

Robert Priest

Ebury Press 1996

Robert Priest has written this book especially to provide help for those feeling anxious and depressed. In particular, he covers the practical self-help methods to reduce stress and offers an explanation of the causes and effects of anxiety and depression.

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