

A guide to managing stress

We all know what it is like to feel stressed, but it is not easy to pin down exactly what stress means. We can feel stressed when we have lots to do, or when we feel we can not cope with a situation. Stress is the body's reaction to feeling threatened or under pressure. It is very common and can be motivating to help us achieve things in our daily life, and can help us meet the demands of home, work and family life. But too much stress can affect our mood, our body and our relationships – especially when it feels out of our control. It can make us feel anxious, irritable and affect our self-esteem.

It can become overwhelming and that is when stress could start to affect your mental health.

Living with stress can be very difficult, but there are steps you can take that might help. Try our Quick Read (if you are in a hurry) or Detailed Read (if you have more time) for more information.

If you are struggling to cope, we highly recommend that you seek professional advice. Please do not suffer in silence.

Quick read

Got five minutes? Take these simple steps to help manage your stress – just remember that different things work for different people, only try what you feel comfortable with.

- Work out what triggers stress for you, so you can anticipate problems and think of ways to solve them. You might not be able to avoid the situations that trigger stress but, reflecting on them (alone or with someone you trust) could help you prepare for them.
- Organize your time. For most people, there is a time of day when it is easiest to concentrate. Schedule important tasks for your best time of day. Make a list of everything you have to do and prioritize the tasks, you could even assign a time to complete each one. Break each big task into smaller steps, take breaks, ask for help and vary the kinds of task you do throughout the day.
- Accept that you can not change or control everything that happens to you.
- Look after your overall wellbeing, or emotional resilience. You can do this by making some changes to your lifestyle including:
 - Being straightforward and assertive in communicating with others and say “no” if you feel you need to.
 - Some people find that yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbal treatments or hypnotherapy help them to relax.
 - As well as keeping in touch with your friends and family, you could try to meet new or different people by joining a class, a club or becoming a volunteer. Online or in-person, you can make new connections with people who share your interests or values.
 - Find balance. If one activity or responsibility is taking up almost all of your time and energy, try to focus at least some of your energy on other parts of your life.
 - Look after yourself. Physical exercise, a balanced diet, time spent outdoors,

and sleep can all help manage anxiety levels. <<Find out more about how to improve your sleep here>>.

- Give yourself a break. Rewards for small achievements (be that a treat, or some time to yourself) can help you control the amount of pressure you are under. Resolve any conflicts with colleagues or family members and be forgiving, of yourself and others.
- Build your support network. Talk to someone you trust. Having someone listen to you can help relieve feelings of anxiety. If you can not talk to someone you know, contact a charity or organization that offers a helpline or peer support group. You might be able to talk to someone at work, a HR representative, or you could seek support through an Employee Assistance Programme if there is one in place in your region. If you need to, talk to your doctor or healthcare practitioner.

Detailed read

What are the signs of stress?

We all experience stress differently in different situations. Sometimes you might be able to tell right away when you are feeling under stress, but other times you might keep going without recognizing the signs. Stress can affect you both emotionally and physically, and it can affect the way you behave.

How you might feel

- irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
- over-burdened
- anxious, nervous or afraid
- like your thoughts are racing and you can not switch off
- unable to enjoy yourself
- depressed
- uninterested in life
- like you have lost your sense of humor
- a sense of dread
- worried about your health
- neglected or lonely.

How you might behave

- finding it hard to make decisions
- constantly worrying
- avoiding situations that are troubling you
- snapping at people
- biting your nails

- picking at your skin
- unable to concentrate
- eating too much or too little
- smoking or drinking alcohol more than usual
- restless, like you can not sit still
- being tearful or crying.

How could stress affect me physically?

You might find that your first clues about being stressed are physical signs, such as tiredness, headaches or an upset stomach.

There could be many reasons for this, as when we feel stressed we often find it hard to sleep or eat well, and poor diet and lack of sleep can both affect our physical health. This in turn can make us feel more stressed emotionally.

Also, when we feel anxious, our bodies release hormones called cortisol and adrenaline. (This is the body's automatic way of preparing to respond to a threat, sometimes called the 'fight, flight or freeze' response). If you are often stressed then you are probably producing high levels of these hormones, which can make you feel physically unwell and could affect your health in the longer term.

How you might be physically affected

- shallow breathing or hyperventilating
- you might have a panic attack
- muscle tension
- blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares
- tired all the time
- grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw
- headaches
- chest pains
- high blood pressure
- indigestion or heartburn
- constipation or diarrhea
- feeling sick, dizzy or fainting.

What causes stress?

Feelings of stress are normally triggered by things happening in your life which involve:

- being under lots of pressure
- facing big changes
- worrying about something
- not having much or any control over the outcome of a situation
- having responsibilities that you are finding overwhelming
- not having enough work, activities or change in your life
- times of uncertainty.

There might be one big thing causing you stress, but stress can also be caused by a build-up of small pressures. This might make it harder for you to identify what is making you feel stressed, or to explain it to other people.

Why do certain things make me feel stressed?

The amount of stress you feel in different situations may depend on many factors such as:

- **your perception of the situation** – this might be connected to your past experiences, your self-esteem, and how your thought processes work (for example, if you tend to interpret things positively or negatively)
- **how experienced you are at** dealing with that particular type of pressure
- **your emotional resilience** to stressful situations
- **the amount of other pressures on you at the time**
- **the amount of support you are receiving.**

We are all different, so a situation that does not bother you at all might cause someone else a lot of stress. For example, if you are feeling confident or usually enjoy public speaking, you might find that giving a speech in front of people feels comfortable and fun. But if you are feeling low or usually prefer not to be the center of attention, this situation might cause you to experience signs of stress.

What kind of situations can cause stress?

Stress can be caused by a variety of different common life events, many of which are difficult to avoid. For example:

Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • illness or injury • pregnancy and becoming a parent • bereavement • long-term health problems • organizing a complicated event, like a group holiday • everyday tasks such as travel or household chores.
Friends and family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting married or civil partnered • going through a break-up or getting divorced • difficult relationships with parents, siblings, friends or children • being a carer for a friend or relative who needs lots of support.
Employment and study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • losing your job • long-term unemployment • retiring • exams and deadlines • difficult issues at work • starting a new job.
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • housing problems such as poor living conditions, lack of security or homelessness • moving to a new house • problems with neighbors.
Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • worries about money or benefits • poverty • debt.

Can happy events cause stress?

Some of the situations listed above are often thought of as happy events – for example, you might feel expected to be happy or excited about getting married or having a baby.

But because they can bring big changes or make unusual demands on you, they can still be very stressful. This can be particularly difficult to deal with, because you might feel there is additional pressure on you to be positive.

How can I deal with pressure?

There are various steps you can take to cope with being under pressure. This page gives some tips that people have told us they find useful, but it is important to remember that different things work for different people. Only try what you feel comfortable with.

For example:

- identify your triggers
- organize your time
- address some of the causes
- accept the things you can not change

Identify your triggers

Working out what triggers stress for you can help you anticipate problems and think of ways to solve them. Even if you can not avoid these situations, being prepared can help.

Take some time to reflect on events and feelings that could be contributing to your stress (you could do this on your own or with someone you trust). You could consider:

- **Issues that come up regularly**, and that you worry about, for example paying a bill or attending an appointment.
- **One-off events** that are on your mind a lot, such as moving to a new house or taking an exam.
- **Ongoing stressful events**, like being a career or having problems at work.

You might be surprised to find out just how much you are coping with at once. Remember that not having enough work, activities or change in your life can be just as stressful a situation as having too much to deal with.

Organize your time

Making some adjustments to the way you organize your time could help you feel more in control of any tasks you are facing, and more able to handle pressure.

- **Identify your best time of day** and do the important tasks that need the most energy and concentration at that time. For example, you might be a morning person or an evening person.
- **Make a list** of things you have to do. Arrange them in order of importance and try to focus on the most urgent first. Some people find creating a timetable useful so they can plan when they can spend time on each task. If your tasks are work related, ask a manager or colleague to help you prioritize. You may be able to push back some tasks until you are feeling less stressed.
- **Set smaller and more achievable targets.** When you are under a lot of pressure it is easy to set yourself large targets that are often unachievable. This can make you feel more stressed and if you do not reach them, it can make you feel disappointed and frustrated. Setting smaller more achievable goals can make you feel in more control and you can see

your achievements more easily.

- **Vary your activities.** Balance interesting tasks with more mundane ones, and stressful tasks with those you find easier or can do more calmly.
- **Try not to do too much at once.** If you take on too much, you might find it harder to do any individual task well. This can make you feel like you have even more pressure on you.
- **Take breaks and take things slowly.** It might be difficult to do this when you are stressed, but it can make you more productive.
- **Ask someone if they can help.** For example, you could ask a friend or family member to help with some of your daily tasks so that you have more time to spend completing your tasks that are causing you to feel stressed.

Accept the things you can not change

It is not easy but accepting that there are some things happening to you that you probably can not do anything about will help you focus your time and energy more productively.

How can I be more resilient?

Taking steps to look after your wellbeing can help you deal with pressure, and reduce the impact that stress has on your life. This is sometimes called developing **emotional resilience**. Resilience is not just your ability to bounce back, but also your capacity to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing. Resilience is not a personality trait – it is something that we can all take steps to achieve.

For example, you can:

- make some lifestyle changes
- look after your physical health
- give yourself a break
- build your support network

Make some lifestyle changes

There are some general changes that you can make to your lifestyle that could help you feel more able to cope with pressure and stressful situations.

- **Practice being straightforward and assertive** in communicating with others. If people are making unreasonable or unrealistic demands on you, be prepared to tell them how you feel and say no.
- **Use relaxation techniques.** You may already know what helps you relax, like having a bath, listening to music or taking your dog for a walk. If you know that a certain activity helps you feel more relaxed, make sure you set aside time to do it.
- **Develop your interests and hobbies.** Finding an activity that is completely different from the things causing you stress is a great way to get away from everyday pressures. If stress is making you feel lonely or isolated, shared hobbies can also be a good way to meet new people.
- **Make time for your friends.** When you have got a lot on this might seem hard, but it can help you feel more positive and less isolated. Chatting to friends about the things you find difficult can help you keep things in perspective – and you can do the same for them. Laughing and smiling with them will also produce hormones that help you to relax.
- **Find balance in your life.** You may find that one part of your life, such as your job or taking care of young children, is taking up almost all of your time and energy. Try making a decision to focus some of your energy on other parts of your life, like family, friends or hobbies. It is not easy, but this can help spread the weight of pressures in your

life and make everything feel lighter.

Look **after** your physical health

Taking steps to look after your physical health can help you to look after your mental health and reduce feelings of stress.

- **Get enough sleep.** Stress can often make it difficult to sleep and can cause sleep problems. Getting enough sleep can help you feel more able to deal with difficult situations.
- **Be active.** Being physically active is important for both our physical and mental health. Even making small changes such as going for a regular walk outside may help you to feel less stressed.
- **Eat healthily.** When you are stressed, it can be tempting to skip meals or eat too much of the wrong kinds of food. But what you eat, and when you eat, can make a big difference to how well you feel.

Give yourself a break

Learning to be kinder to yourself in general can help you control the amount of pressure you feel in different situations, which can help you feel less stressed.

- **Reward yourself for achievements** – even small things like finishing a piece of work or making a decision. You could take a walk, read a book, treat yourself to food you enjoy, or simply tell yourself "well done".
- **Get a change of scenery.** You might want to go outside, go to a friend's house or go to a café for a break – even if it is just for a short time.

- **Take a break or holiday.** Time away from your normal routine can help you relax and feel refreshed. Even spending a day in a different place can help you feel more able to face stress.
- **Resolve conflicts,** if you can. Although this can sometimes be hard, speaking to a manager, colleague or family member about problems in your relationship with them can help you find ways to move forward.
- **Forgive yourself** when you feel you have made a mistake, or do not achieve something you hoped for. Try to remember that nobody's perfect and putting extra pressure on yourself does not help.

Build your support network

Remember that whatever you are going through that is causing you stress, you do not have to cope with it alone.

- **Friends and family.** Sometimes just telling the people close to you how you are feeling can make a big difference – and they might be able to help you out in other ways too.
- **Support at work,** such as your line manager, human resources (HR) department, or employee assistance schemes. Try not to worry that talking to your manager or colleagues about stress will be seen as a sign of weakness – your wellbeing is important and responsible employers will take it seriously.
- **Peer support.** Sometimes sharing your experiences with people who have been through something similar can help you feel less alone. Online communities are available where you can talk openly about stress and your mental health.
- **Your Doctor or Health professional.** If you feel like you need some professional support, you can speak to your doctor. They can check your overall health, and help you access support and treatments.

How can other people help?

This section is for friends and family of someone who is experiencing stress, who want to support them.

If someone you are close to is feeling stressed there are lots of practical things you can do to support them – even though you probably can not change the situation they are in.

- **Help them reflect on whether they are stressed.** Often, people do not notice that some physical symptoms and behavior (such as not being able to get to sleep or drinking more than usual) are actually signs of stress. Sometimes you may be able to see it before they recognize it themselves. If you have noticed that someone seems particularly busy, anxious or unwell, you could gently let them know and ask how you can help.

- **Listen to how they are feeling.** Having a chance to talk openly could help someone to feel calmer and more able to move forward. Just being there for them will probably help lots.
- **Reassure them that stressful situations can pass.** For someone who is in the middle of a stressful time, it can be hard to see an end point. Let them know that situations change and can get better.
- **Help them identify their triggers.** You can be specific about things you have observed but try to stay open-minded and non-judgmental. Your perspective might be valuable, but your friend or family member could find this conversation stressful and being patient will help.
- **Help them address some causes of stress,** if you can. You might be able to help your friend or family member look for support around issues like debt, housing problems or difficulties at work.
- **Help them learn and practice relaxation techniques.** You could help them research good relaxation techniques and find ways to practice them, such as a weekly yoga class, or setting aside time for breathing exercises at home. This might become something that you could do together.
- **Support them to seek professional help.** For example, you could help them contact their Doctor/Health professional, go with them to an appointment or do some research on mental health and wellbeing.
- **Look after yourself.** If someone around you is very stressed, you might become stressed too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after your own wellbeing. Being calm and relaxed will make you more able to help someone else.