



Managing Stress

A Self-Help Guide



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What is stress?

Stress is a perfectly normal response that we all experience, and is an emotional response to demands that are made to us by ourselves, others, the world around us. Some situations that are particularly common in causing high levels stress are reacting to a major life event, coping with difficult situations, feeling overwhelmed and over-burdened at work.



Some people find that they are able to manage the inevitable stress that occurs in day-to-day life, but for others stress can start to intrude into other areas of everyday life and can create difficulties within relationships with others. Stress can create a strong physical reaction in our bodies.

This guide aims to give you an understanding of stress and help you to think about how lifestyle changes and changing the way you think about things can aid you in reducing this stress reaction. It will also teach you techniques such as relaxation and controlled breathing that can help you to manage and reduce the physical symptoms of stress.



How may stress affect

Causes of stress

Stressful event:



You may experience a stressful event such as needing to pay a large bill, an important deadline at work, getting married, starting a new job. How you perceive the event can impact on how much stress you experience. If we perceive the event to be out of our control, or overwhelming, this can increase our stress levels.

Several small difficulties:

You may have several small situations or events that can add up to create a large amount of stress. Examples of how stress can build up can be; commuting to work, your child is having difficulties at school whilst you are having problems in your relationship.

Examples of positive events that can be potentially stressful are:

- Getting married
- Moving house
- Having a baby
- Christmas
- Starting a new job
- Retirement



There is a tendency for people to turn to other things in order to deal with stress, such as: caffeine, smoking, alcohol, fast food, which can all have a negative impact on mental health and physical health.



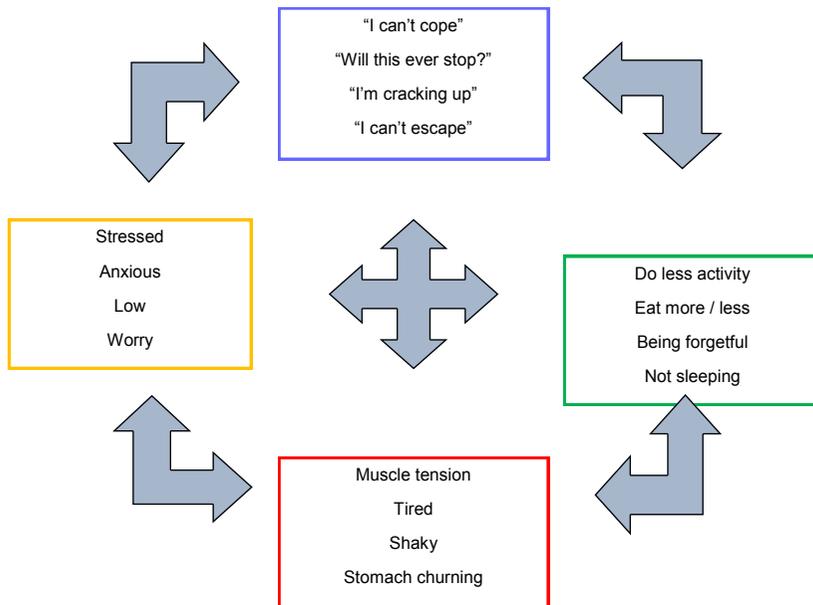
When you experience stress on a recurrent basis, other areas of our lives can start to be negatively impacted upon. Constant stress often means we put looking after our physical health on the back burner, and we tend to spend less time engaging in exercise and activities that may have usually become involved in.





When stress starts to impact on other areas of our lives it can change the way we think about ourselves, the world around us and our future. We view these areas in a more negative light, which in turn creates further stress. If the cause of our stress appears to be something that we can't escape from, this can make thinking about the future very difficult. We can start to withdraw from activities we would usually enjoy and withdraw from people. As a result we can get trapped in a negative cycle.

Example of a Vicious Cycle



How may stress affect me?

Think back over the past year, what were the most stressful events in your life? Once you have noted this in the table below, decide whether they were major causes of stress, smaller difficulties that added to your stress levels, or a positive event that you found stressful.

Stress Event	What type of stressful event was this?
1.	
2.	
3.	

What other factors do you think could have also added to your overall stress levels?



How may stress affect me?

As demonstrated in the previous picture of a vicious cycle, stress can affect the way we feel, think, act (behaviours) and our bodies (physical). Some of the symptoms that people tend to report are:

Physical symptoms:

- Headaches
- Muscles tense
- Sweating
- Feeling tired
- Appetite changes

Thoughts:

- I can't cope
- I can't be bothered
- Will this ever stop?
- I can't escape



Behaviour:

- Eating more / less
- Being forgetful
- Not sleeping
- Withdrawing
- Rushing around

Physical symptoms:

- Tired
- Muscle Tension
- Headaches
- Stomach churning
- Shaky
- Restless
- On edge

Although the symptoms of stress are really unpleasant and can be overwhelming, there are a number of things we can do to help us manage our stress.



Ways to manage stress

Making lifestyle changes

Caffeine is a stimulant that can exacerbate symptoms of stress, as well as adversely affect our sleep. Caffeine can be found in coffee, tea, energy drinks, fizzy drinks, some cold and flu medication (the fast release type) and chocolate. If you feel that there may be a link between your caffeine consumption and your symptoms, you may like to consider weaning off the caffeine gradually as cutting this out suddenly can result in unpleasant withdrawal symptoms.



Diet and exercise

Eating a healthy diet and engaging in regular exercise is important for our physical health and mental health. Eating regular, healthy meals, and staying active can ease stress.



Techniques—Relaxation

Controlled Breathing

Anxiety can affect your breathing. People often tend to “over-breathe” when they are very anxious, and our breathing can become shallow and fast. This is due to the fight-or-flight response that we talked about earlier preparing the body for physical exertion.

The following side effects can occur (tick those that apply):

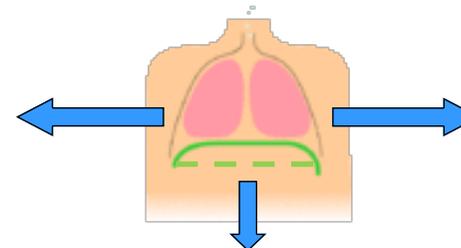
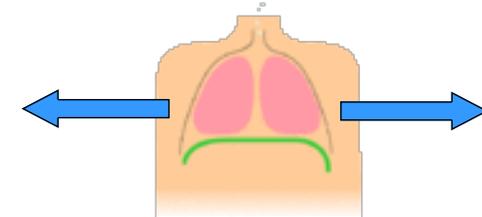
- Light-headedness
- Feeling faint
- Dizziness
- Tingling sensations in the hands or feet
- Visual changes

Breathing is much more effective when we use our diaphragms, rather than with our chest.

- Sit comfortably in a chair and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
- As you breathe in, notice which hands moves the most. Begin to practice so that your lower hand on your abdomen moves and you breathe in and out, rather than the hand on your chest. Often people think it should be their tummy that draws in as they breathe in, however it should be the opposite.

If you notice you are feeling tense, try breathing out a little more slowly and deeply, and notice a short pause before breathing in. You may find it helpful to count slowly or to use a word such as “relax” or “peace” to help extend the out-breath a little, and you can say this to yourself or out loud.

Breathing from just the chest, the lungs expand outwards. This is fine but when we “over-breathe” it can feel like not enough.



Breathing from the chest and diaphragm, we increase our capacity to take in oxygen.

You can access an audio version of this relaxation technique at: http://www.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/dont_panic/Pages/relaxation.aspx



Techniques—Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation

It is important that you are feeling calm when you practice the relaxation and ensure you have a few moments to yourself. Sit in a comfortable chair, or lie down on a bed or on the floor. Ensure you will not be disturbed by noises, but if you do become aware of sounds just try to put them out of mind as soon as they enter.



- Close your eyes. Feel the chair or floor supporting your whole body – your heads, your arms and your legs. If you notice any tension in your body, begin to let it go. Take two slow deep breaths and just let the tension start to ease out of your body.
- Start to become aware of your head and how your forehead feels. If you notice any tension, this go and feel your forehead start to become smooth and relaxed. Let go of any tension around your eyes, in your cheeks, your mouth and your jaw. Allow your teeth to part and feel that tension ease.
- Now take your attention to your neck and let the chair or floor take the weight of your head, feel your neck relax. Your head should now feel heavy. Now take your attention to your shoulders and gently drop them.
- Notice how your body feels as you start to relax.
- Take your awareness now to your arms and hands. Let them drop down into the chair, or let them sink into the floor. They are now feeling heavy.
- Focus on your back and let any tension go as you feel yourself sink deeper into your chair, or into the floor. Now take your attention to your hips, your legs and your feet and relax them, again letting them sink into the chair or the floor. Notice how your body feels as the relaxation is taking over.
- Notice your breathing, your abdomen rising and falling gently with each inhale and exhale of the breath. Allow your breath to be a little slower and deeper.
- You should now be feeling completely relaxed and heavy. Continue to lie still and focus on slow, deep breathing.
- When you are ready, count back from 5 to 1 and start to wiggle your toes and fingers. Breathe in deeply and stretch. Open your eyes and start to look around the room, noticing what you see, feel and hear. Gently rise.

You can access an audio version of this relaxation technique at: http://www.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/dont_panic/Pages/relaxation.aspx



Balancing tasks

It can often feel stressful having to balance tasks in our lives and determining priorities.

If you are struggling with balancing conflicting tasks you can:

- Manage your time more effectively
- Set limits on things you are prepared to do
- Learn to live with them

Think about one task placed on you that you would like to change.

What is the task?

.....

What do you want to change?

.....

What factors could make it more manageable?

.....

Who do you need to talk about this with?

.....

When will you negotiate this change?



Time management

Effective time management can be used as an opportunity to get more done, but also as a chance to allow yourself time to relax and do things that you enjoy. It can help us to have a clear idea of how long we have to spend on each task.

Tips:

- ✎ Making lists
- ✎ Prioritising
- ✎ Getting up early/ on time
- ✎ Set yourself achievable goals
- ✎ Breaking a job down into manageable chunks
- ✎ Build in breaks
- ✎ Keep a diary
- ✎ Don't be afraid to delegate
- ✎ Plan ahead (daily, weekly, monthly)
- ✎ Be organised



Use the table below to review how you use your time:

What you did	How long did it take?	Priority (low, medium, high)

Now go through your list and ask yourself if this was the best use of your time at that moment?

You could consider if you were able to delegate any of these or if they were a waste of your time?

High Priority: Were there lots of items that were made a high priority because you had avoided doing them until the last possible moment?

Items that were at crisis point:





Are you spending time doing more medium and low priority tasks and not finishing what is high priority?

How long would it have taken to finish high priority tasks:

.....

Jobs I could have postponed to finish high priority tasks:

.....
.....
.....
.....



What could you have delegated?

What stopped you from doing this?

e.g. worrying about asking people to do something for you?

Things I could have delegated	Reason not delegated

Were any of these tasks a waste of your time?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Use these lists to plan your time in daily or weekly timetables. Also try to consider when is the best time to do these things. When are you most likely to be productive? When are you likely to need a break and time to relax?

You will find a timetable on the next page that you can use to plan in your week.



Day of the week / date	6am—8am	8am—10am	10am—12pm	12pm—2pm	2pm—4pm	4pm—6pm	6pm—8pm	8pm—10pm	10pm—12am

Are you getting enough time for yourself?

Allocating more time to yourself can give you a better balance of your time. This is not selfish; if you are more relaxed you will be more efficient at the things you need to do.

Use the table below to notice what makes you feel good e.g. a cup of coffee with a friend

What makes me feel good:

Do you think that you could plan some time for more of the things that you enjoy doing?





Self-care (taking care of you)

We know that when we feel better about ourselves, the more we want to take care of our health. When we are healthy and fit this makes us feel good and we see ourselves in a more positive light, which in turn improves our self-image.

When we are able to handle stress in an effective way, this makes it easier for us to take care of our health, and equally when we take care of ourselves and our health we are in a better position to handle stress more effectively.

Tension over time can lead to stress related illness, including any 'props' we may use to help make it easier to cope with stress which can also impact negatively on our health such as; alcohol, caffeine and smoking.



Self-care (taking care of you)

1. Identify what activities help you feel your best – seeing friends or family/time alone/ physical activity/cuddles/ meditation etc



2. Schedule it in your calendar. Make time for self-care and stick to it. Plan ahead – book trips, tickets, events. If you are short on time, plan brief slots to begin with and try to increase these over time

3. Practice self-care where you can – take a few minutes of deep breathing, stretch your body, mindful walking, listen to a song, walk outside for a few minutes

4. Take care of the basics – food, exercise, sleep

5. Know when to say no – put your well-being and health first

6. Check in with yourself, listen to your needs

7. Consider your work/life balance



Self-care activities

- ✍ Meditation
- ✍ Listen to music
- ✍ Dance
- ✍ Keeping a journal
- ✍ Have a massage
- ✍ Reading for pleasure
- ✍ Swim
- ✍ Learning something new



Helping yourself—work/life balance

- ✍ Take proper breaks at work, making sure you take at least half an hour lunch and getting away from your desk or out of the workplace if you can.
- ✍ Recognise the importance of leaning on your supports such as through exercise, friendships, leisure activities. Try to spend time on these, and ensure that these are not sacrificed to working longer hours.
- ✍ Aim to 'work smart, not long'. This involves time management and prioritisation. Allow yourself a set time per task, try not to get caught up with less productive activities.
- ✍ Take responsibility for your work-life balance. Speak up when demands and expectations are too much. It is important that employers are aware of the pressures for them to address them.
- ✍ Ensure you draw a line between work and leisure. If work does need to be brought home, only work in a certain area of your home, that way you can close the door on it to keep it separate.





Being Assertive

Setting clear boundaries with other people makes it less likely that unreasonable demands will be asked of you.

This means:

-  Being open and concerned with the rights of others
-  At the same time establishing your own rights
-  Standing up for your own rights
-  Expressing your own needs, wants, feelings and opinions

Being assertive can help build a clear understanding of what you can expect from a person which can help us to avoid stressful situations.

How to be assertive:

1. Decide what you want
2. Say what you want clearly and specifically
3. Support what you say by the way you say it
4. Don't be manipulated or side-tracked
5. Listen to the other person
6. Aim for a 'win-win' compromise.



Being Assertive

Think of the last time you wanted somebody to do something for you but were unsure/ unable to ask them:

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Now decide on a clear statement/ question that you could have used in that situation:

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Social support

Self-esteem and stress

Self-esteem is your sense of self-worth or what you think and feel about yourself. It is sometimes referred to as having a good self-image.



When we have good self-esteem we tend to like ourselves and other people, and we expect others to like us too. This can make maintaining friendships easier, and friends can help protect us against the negative effects of stress.

In contrast, if we have poor self-esteem we tend not to think much of ourselves and our self-image is poor. If we don't think highly of ourselves or believe that others could care about us, this makes it difficult to form close friendships. We tend to assume that something must be wrong with us and can't imagine anyone liking someone like us.

It can be difficult to build confidence and self-esteem with few friends to give us support and feedback, however self-esteem is something that is learned and can be changed.



Social support networks

We need friends the most when we are going through times of stress or change, such as moving house, starting a new job, having a baby, breaking up from a relationship.



Improving your social network

- It can be hard to find time for friends when we are busy, but one way to tackle this is to arrange to meet and do something else at the same time such as; exercise or go to a class together, share a lift, form an interest group.
- Aim to have regular contact by arranging meetings such as a weekly exercise class or lunch monthly.
- Aim to talk to a new person, don't always wait for others to introduce themselves first. Mingle at events, have a few things prepared that you could talk about.
- Ask the other person questions, often people who do this are felt to be the best conversationalists.





Managing unhelpful thoughts

When we experience stress, anxiety or low mood, we tend to experience negative unhelpful thoughts.

Negative thinking is often: **Unbalanced** and **Unrealistic**

It is important to remember that events do not cause feelings or actions – we feel or act according to how we interpret events.

These are sometimes hard to recognise. They are:

- Negative** → they make you feel worse about yourself, other people, and life in general
- Automatic** → they pop into your mind automatically
- Believable** → they feel like facts
- Biased** → they are unfairly biased in the direction of your negative/unhelpful beliefs



Managing unhelpful thoughts

It can be helpful to take a step back and assess how accurate and helpful our thoughts are. The following questions can be useful.

Am I making things worse than they really are?

What would someone else say about the situation (someone who cares about me)?

What's the worst thing that could happen?

Will this matter in 5 years time?

Does it matter if things don't turn out exactly right?

Is my reaction in proportion to the actual event?

Is this really as important as it seems?

Am I showing compassion and kindness to myself?

Am I setting impossible standards?

What are the chances of this actually happening?



Problem solving

When we feel stressed we can sometimes feel like everything is too much, that we are being overwhelmed. When this happens it can be helpful to break problems down into manageable chunks. We can do this by using problem solving skills broken down into the following steps:

What is the problem to be worked on?:



What are our options? Lets weigh them up—use another sheet of paper if needed

What are the possible solutions? - It doesn't matter how unusual the options might be, don't rule anything out.	Positives of option	Negatives of option
Solution 1:		
Solution 2:		
Solution 3:		
Solution 4:		

Lets make a plan and....

Which option are we going to try first? - Which one seems the most appropriate / most likely to work?	What do we need to put this plan in action? Do we need to get help from anyone? Do we need to do or have anything first?

Do it!

How did it go? – What went well? What could have been done differently? Do we need to change the plan slightly and try again or do we need to try a different solution?

If you need to use another solution, you already have a few worked out



Getting a good night's sleep

We can all go through times when we struggle with our sleep. We may struggle to get to sleep, wake up during the night, wake up too early or struggle to wake up in the morning. A lot of things can impact our sleep; physical difficulties like arthritis or injury, illness or psychological distress.

The amount of sleep we need can depend on our age and our level of activity. As we get older we tend to need less sleep and if we are not expending as much energy through the day. We may also need more if we are doing sports or have a physically demanding job.

There are plenty of things we can do to help us get a good night's sleep:

1

Our environment: Is our room too hot, cold, light or dark, noisy or quiet, is our mattress uncomfortable?
 - Think Goldilocks, are the conditions **just right** for you?



2

Our actions: Are we drinking too much caffeine, exercising before bed, smoking or playing with electronic devices prior to trying to sleep.
 - Try a warm milky drink half an hour before bed.
 - Exercise helps us sleep but if we do it just before bed it can wake our bodies up.

3

Are we associating night with struggling to sleep: Are we lying in bed focusing on not being able to sleep; can we get up and try to do something boring and come back to bed when we feel tired? Then we can only associate bed with being tired and drifting to sleep.....



What changes could I make to help my sleep?

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Treatment Options—Medication

At IAPT we do not prescribe medication and we do not insist that you take or stop medication. Instead we will provide you with information to help you make an informed choice.

What medications are prescribed?

Antidepressants are prescribed by GPs to many people with depression. The most widely used antidepressants are called Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI) and Selective Noradrenalin Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRI). Although they were prescribed more in the past, earlier antidepressants such as Tricyclics are still prescribed where clinically indicated.



What might put people off taking medication?

People may stop taking antidepressants completely or take less than prescribed for a number of reasons. Some possibilities may be due to beliefs that antidepressants are; ineffective, not helpful, side effects, concerns about addiction, concerns about safety, family oppose it or because they forgot to renew prescription. Like with all medications, some types may suit one person more than another. It may take a few tries to get the type and medication right. Please talk to your GP if you have any concerns.

How should I take my medication?

Usually with antidepressants it takes a few weeks before it can build enough in the system. This means it can sometimes take time to feel the full benefit. Unpleasant side effects can appear before these beneficial effects, which can cause many people to stop or reconsider taking their antidepressants. Some people may continue to take their antidepressants, but do so sporadically when they feel particularly low, believing that they will have an immediate effect. For best results take them daily at around the same time and in the dosage prescribed.

How long will I have to take them for?

After we start to feel better it can be tempting to stop taking them. It is suggested to keep taking them for six months following feeling better. Stopping sooner can increase the chances of relapse.

If you are interested to read further information on medication, there are many information materials available. Organisations such as MIND, Rethink and the Mental Health Foundation provide clear leaflets and booklets. Also we would recommend that you speak to your GP for any further advice around medication.

How to get help

Sometimes when we are feeling distressed we might get thoughts of not wanting to be here, or being better off dead. Thoughts are very different from actions but if you are worried:

What do I do if I think I might act upon these thoughts?

It is very important that you keep yourself safe and get some help:

- Contact your GP Practice to make an urgent appointment
- **If your GP surgery is closed...**
- Call your local GP out of hours service
- Go to your nearest A&E department or dial 999

Helplines:

- If you live in Coventry & Warwickshire you can call Mental Health Matters on 0800 616171 or 0300 330 5487 who can put you in touch with crisis support
- If you live in Solihull you can contact the Samaritans on 116 123.

Contacting a Helpline can give you a feeling of relief, wellbeing and peace of mind. You won't be judged and the service is confidential unless they consider that there is a risk to yourself or others.



REMEMBER:

CBT involves working collaboratively with your practitioner to identify the right intervention for you to allow you to become your own therapist and manage your stress

How do I access CBT?

If you feel that stress is a problem for you and you are aged 16 or over, registered with a Coventry or Warwickshire GP and are ready to make changes in your life, IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) might be able to help you.

The IAPT service helps people with anxiety, depression, low mood, panic attacks, phobias and stress to build on their strengths and to learn new coping skills by using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy techniques.

If you would like to refer yourself to the IAPT service, please phone **024 7667 1090** (open **Monday to Friday 9am to 4.30pm**, excluding bank holidays). We will take your details and book you in for an assessment with one of our therapists to agree the best way forward to get the help you need.



