

How to

manage

and reduce your
stress



Contents

How to manage and reduce stress	3
What is stress?	4
How stress affects your body	5
How stress affects your behaviour and emotions	7
Identifying the signs of stress	8
What causes stress?	9
Relationships	10
Work-life balance	11
Money	12
Smoking, drinking and drug use	13
How to manage your stress	14
Stress worksheet: what's causing you stress?	18
99 top tips from you	20
Seeking help	26
References	28



How to manage and reduce your stress



Everyone experiences stress – it's a normal feeling. In moderation, it can be a helpful indicator that you feel under threat or uncomfortable and a sign to take steps to reduce this.

A little stress can be a good thing, as it helps us to get things done or focus on something that needs our attention. However, if you feel stressed most of the time, or if stress is affecting how you live your life day-to-day, this becomes a problem.

The good news is that there are things you can do to help you manage stress. In this guide, we'll tell you the ins and outs of stress, so you know:

- 1 What stress is
- 2 How stress can affect you
- 3 The causes of stress
- 4 How to manage your stress

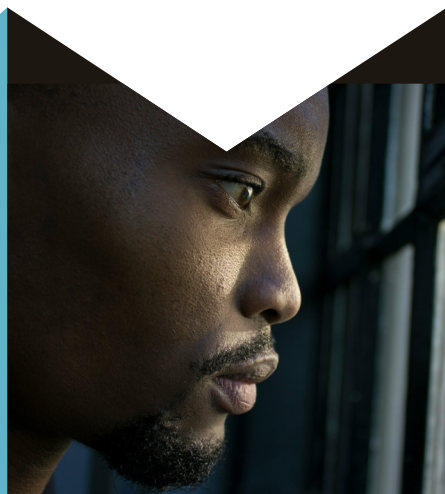
What is stress?

Stress is the feeling of pressure you could get when you have a heavy workload at work, or have just had an argument with a loved one. It could be the feeling that keeps you up at night when you're worried about money.

However, stress doesn't always come about because of negative events. It can also happen when something positive or exciting happens to you, like starting a new job, getting married, or going on holiday.

Stress affects us all and in many ways. We may feel stress physically or emotionally, and the strength of this may vary.

Research has shown that stress can sometimes be positive.¹ It makes us more alert and helps us perform better in certain situations. However, stress has only been found to be beneficial if it's short-lived.



Excessive or prolonged stress can increase the risk of illnesses such as heart disease and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.^{2,3}

During situations that make you feel threatened or upset, your body creates a stress response. This can cause a range of physical symptoms, change how you behave, and trigger intense feelings, such as anger or fear.

How stress affects your body

How we react to stress is unique. But there are some common symptoms that show up physically, mentally, and in our actions.⁴

Common physical symptoms:

- ✎ Headaches
- ✎ Muscle tension
- ✎ Stomach upset
- ✎ Racing heartbeat



Common mental symptoms:

- ✎ Difficulty concentrating
- ✎ Forgetfulness
- ✎ Feeling overwhelmed
- ✎ Constant worry

Common behavioural symptoms:

- ✎ Irritability
- ✎ Sleep changes
- ✎ Changes to eating habits
- ✎ Craving unhealthy habits (like smoking or drinking) more



These are just some of the common symptoms of stress – it's not an exhaustive list.

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 and increase your heart rate and the amount you sweat. This prepares your body for an emergency response. These hormones can also reduce blood flow to your skin and may cause digestive issues or stomach upset. Cortisol, another stress hormone, releases fat and sugar into your system to boost your energy levels.

As a result of these hormone surges, you may experience headaches, muscle tension, pain, nausea, indigestion and dizziness. You may also breathe more quickly, your heart rate might become more noticeable, or you may feel various aches and pains. Long-term high levels of stress (over days or weeks) can increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

We humans have inherited our stress system from our ancient ancestors, who needed to be able to either run away from danger or face it and fight.

Once the pressure or threat has passed, your stress hormone levels usually return to normal. However, if you always feel stressed, these hormones stay in your body, increasing the likelihood of symptoms relating to chronic stress.

For example, imagine you're on a delayed train. Time is ticking on, and you have somewhere else to be. You feel stress build up in your body, but there's no threat to run away from or fight. Your body doesn't need the chemicals it makes to protect you, so they sit in your body, unused. Over time, these chemicals build up so much that they start to damage your health.

How stress affects your behaviour and emotions

When you're stressed, you may have lots of different feelings. You might notice yourself feeling more anxious or irritable, or you may think and feel bad about yourself. As a result, perhaps you withdraw from others, struggle to make decisions or feel tearful.

You may have periods of constant worry, racing thoughts, or repeatedly go over fears in your head. Perhaps your behaviour changes, too. You may lose your temper more easily, yell at your loved ones and become physically or verbally aggressive.

These feelings can feed off each other and produce physical symptoms, which can make you feel even worse. For example, you may be worried that something's wrong with your heart if it continually feels like it's beating out of your chest.



Identifying the signs of stress

We all feel stress at times. However, if stress creeps into all aspects of your life, health and wellbeing, it's important to tackle it as soon as possible. While stress affects everyone differently, there are common signs and symptoms to look out for:

- ✧ Constant worry or anxiety
- ✧ Feeling overwhelmed
- ✧ Difficulty concentrating
- ✧ Mood swings or changes in temperament
- ✧ A short temper or irritability
- ✧ Difficulty relaxing
- ✧ Frequently feeling down or depressed
- ✧ Low self-esteem
- ✧ Eating more or less than usual
- ✧ Changes in sleep habits
- ✧ Using alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs to cope
- ✧ Aches and pains, particularly muscle tension
- ✧ Diarrhoea and constipation
- ✧ Nausea or dizziness
- ✧ Loss of sex drive

If you experience these symptoms often, or for long periods of time, and feel they are affecting your everyday life or making you feel unwell, speak to your GP. Ask them for information about the support services and treatments available to you.



What causes stress?

Many different situations can cause stress. The most common involve work, money, and our relationships. Our health and the health of our loved ones also affect our stress levels.⁵

Major changes and life events, such as divorce, unemployment, or the death of a loved one can cause stress. A series of minor irritations, such as feeling undervalued at work or arguing with a family member, can also do the trick.

Stress can affect us at any stage of our life. For children and young people stress could come from exams, bullying or difficult family situations. As we go through life, significant events like becoming a parent, illness, or managing a long-term health condition can all be causes of stress.

It's important to say that these are not the only causes of stress, they are only some of them. If you or a loved one is struggling with stress, one of these factors may be linked, or it may be something else entirely.





Relationships



Relationships can be a great support in times of stress. 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 difficulties, such as an affair, illness or bereavement are likely to affect the way you think, feel and behave. Circumstances like these can have a knock-on effect on your stress levels.

Find out more about building healthy relationships at:
mentalhealth.org.uk/healthy-relationships

Work-life balance

The pressure of continually working harder and for longer hours in the UK is one of our biggest causes of stress.⁶ Not having control over your job, not receiving rewards for hard work and worrying about losing your job, can also increase the risk of work-related stress.^{7,8}

Unfortunately, work-related stress doesn't tend to go away on its own. We need to take steps to manage this stress, or it can quickly get on top of us, putting us at risk of burnout or more severe mental health problems like anxiety or depression.

Mental ill-health, if it becomes severe, can mean taking time away from work – mental illness was the fifth most common reason for sickness absence in the UK in 2022.⁹

And while it's important to take sick days when you're not feeling physically or emotionally able to work, these figures show us just how important it is to take care of our mental health.

Find out more about supporting your mental health at work, visit mentalhealth.org.uk/mental-health-at-work



Money

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

The cost of living in the UK has been causing financial stress for many of us. Energy and food prices, rent costs, and mortgage rates are high, leaving many people struggling to keep their heads above water when paying their bills.¹⁰

Unfortunately, 50% of people living with some form of debt also struggle with their mental health.¹¹ Having money troubles can also increase the risk of having thoughts of suicide and acting on these thoughts.

So, if you're worried about your finances and debts, or you noticed a dip in your mental health due to money worries, it's important that you don't deal with this alone.



There's a lot of help and support available to you through organisations such as [StepChange.org](https://stepchange.org) and citizensadvice.org.uk.

You could also talk to your GP or a mental health professional you trust for advice if money worries are affecting your mental and physical health.

Smoking, drinking and drug use



When we're feeling stressed, we may smoke, drink alcohol, or try recreational drugs as forms of self-medication to help us cope.¹² However, despite the common belief that smoking relieves stress, nicotine is an addictive substance. So, smoking triggers withdrawal symptoms and cravings that actually increase the risk of stress, anxiety and depression.^{13,14}

Similarly, we may have a glass of wine after a hard day, or to cope with difficult feelings. This can potentially worsen our mental health long term. For example, by increasing anxiety and depression.¹⁵ For this reason, it's best to know the recommended limits and stay within these.

Prescription drugs, such as sedatives 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.

Illegal drugs, such as cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin, are taken for many different reasons. You may start out trying these out of curiosity, because your friends are doing it, or to help you manage stress or the symptoms of a mental health condition.

Drugs might seem like a quick fix when you're having a hard time. However, even in the short term low mood, or anxious feelings as the drug starts to wear off can make you feel worse. In the long term, this can add up to make your stress levels and mental health worse as well. As your mental health worsens, you may use drugs more often, or in bigger amounts, to help you cope.¹⁶ But this increases the risk of becoming dependent, which can make you more susceptible to severe mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia and psychosis.¹⁷

How to manage your stress

Stress is a natural reaction to worrying, as well as difficult, or new or even exciting life events. But if you feel stressed most of the time, or your stress is affecting your life or health, it's worth taking steps to reduce this.

Let's explore some options for managing your stress:

Understand when stress is causing you a problem

Try to connect your feelings or physical signs with the pressures you're facing in your life.

Remember to look out for the physical warnings, such as tense muscles, over-tiredness, headaches or migraines, as well as emotional signs like irritability and forgetfulness.



Identify the causes of your stress

Stress can be caused by one big issue or a build-up of many small ones. However, not understanding the causes of your stress can make it harder for you to manage as you could feel overwhelmed.

To stop you from feeling overwhelmed, once you notice feelings of stress in your body or mind, pause for a moment. What happened right before you noticed these feelings?

Tracking your physical and mental sensations of stress over a couple of days or weeks can help you pinpoint where they're coming from and where in your life you could make changes.

Focus on what you can change

You may not be able to change the cost-of-living crisis or the political environment, but there will be stresses in your life that you can manage. Take a couple of moments to list everything you can think about which is causing you to worry. Which of the items on your list are not in your control?

Once you have identified these, it's good to practise reminding yourself that you're wasting important energy on things that will probably resolve themselves over time.

Have a go doing this with our worksheet on page 18–19.

Start small

Using the items that you **can** control from your list, number them in order of most manageable to least. Then focus on tackling the most manageable tasks first. For example, your least stressful task might be to complete a household chore, and your most stressful one may involve a work project.

Once you begin ticking off the more achievable tasks, you'll likely start to feel an increase in confidence and motivation and a reduction in stress levels. As a result, the bigger stressors may not feel as daunting and worrisome.



Consider your lifestyle habits

With the stressors that you can and can't control in your mind, are there any lifestyle changes you can make that could reduce the effect of the factors you can't control? Yes, making major life changes can be an additional source of stress in the short term, but they could improve your health and wellbeing in the long run. For example, if your job is a big source of stress and there's no sign of it improving on the horizon, you could consider looking for a new role.

Aside from removing stressors you can't control from your life where possible, you could also try to reduce daily pressures by passing over tasks to someone else when necessary or prioritising important tasks instead of trying to take on everything at once.

Get restful sleep

Sleeping problems are common when you're struggling with stress. Try to make sure you get enough rest.

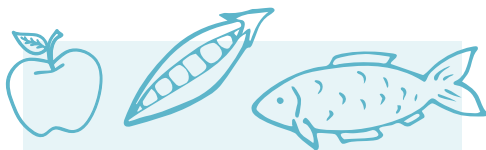
For more tips on getting a good night's sleep, check out our guide at: mentalhealth.org.uk/how-to-sleep

Move your body regularly

Physical activity can be very effective in relieving stress and improving your overall wellbeing.

It can also give you a natural energy boost and improve your focus and motivation. Even going out for a 10-minute brisk walk or a bike ride can help.

Check out our helpful resource on how to find moments for movement every day here: mentalhealth.org.uk/movement



Keep a healthy diet

Certain foods can improve mood, balance hormones, and boost energy levels, so eating healthily can protect you from the physical and emotional demands of stress.

Aim to drink plenty of water and eat a mineral and vitamin-rich diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, complex carbohydrates, lean proteins, and omega-3 fatty acids to help support your body during times of stress.

Maintain a routine

When elements of our lives seem unmanageable, routines can give us a sense of control. Sticking to a daily pattern of sleeping, eating, and exercising within reason can help you fight the effects of stress.

Also, exercise can boost your mood and good sleep practices can help you to feel 'restored,' so factoring these steps into your routine is a great way to protect yourself from the effects of stress.

Practise regular self-care

Striking a balance between responsibilities to others and to yourself is a key step in managing stress levels. This is where self-care plays an important role in protecting against stress. Meaningful self-care has many mental, physical, and emotional benefits that can help people manage stress.

Self-care can mean something different to everyone, so try to choose activities that are most meaningful to you. For instance, taking time just to relax, seeing friends, going for a walk or a bike ride, or watching your favourite TV series again – as long as it makes you feel good, that's all that matters.

Be aware of your smoking and drinking

Although alcohol and nicotine may reduce tension in the short term, alcohol is a depressant and nicotine creates cravings, both of which can increase the risk of more stress in the long term.

Be kind to yourself

When you're struggling with stress, it's easy to get into a negative headspace, thinking hurtful things about yourself. In these moments, try to remind yourself that you're not at fault. Stress has an intense effect on all of us, and it's okay to be kind to yourself.

Be mindful

Mindfulness meditation is a simple tool that can be practised anywhere, at any time, to reduce stress.

Research has suggested that mindfulness can also reduce the effects of stress-related problems such as anxiety, insomnia, poor concentration and low moods.

Our guide on mindfulness and how to practice it is a good starting point:

mentalhealth.org.uk/mindfulness



Check-in: What's causing you stress?

What is causing you stress?



Number them in size from 1 to 10. 1 should be something relatively small like a household chore, while 10 could be a project at work. Circle the stressors that you **can change** or act on.



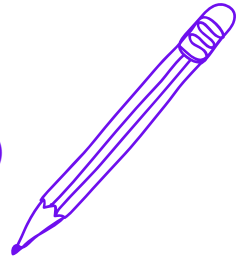
How do you feel?

Notice how the stressors are affecting you.
Write down what **symptoms** of stress you're feeling.

What help might you be able to find to manage these symptoms?



Check out our resources for support on page 26 of this guide. If your stress symptoms are making it hard for you to go about your daily life, you might want to reach out for support. Consider contacting your GP, or have a look at Every Mind Matters.



Re-write your stressors (the ones you circled) in order. Start with the easiest / smallest.

- 
- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |



Break down a task

Choose one task to split up into manageable chunks.

Task name: _____

Step 1: _____

Step 2: _____

Step 3: _____

99 top tips from you

We ran a survey asking people to share their best tips for managing stress. We're excited to share the 99 top tips to handle your stress!

Please remember that everyone is different.
What works for one person might not work for another.





1. Meet a friend.



2. Set aside 10 minutes a day to relax and collect your thoughts.



3. Walk the dog.



4. Watch funny movies.



5. Take a walk in the countryside.



6. Go to the gym.



7. Soak in the bath with lavender oil.



8. Meditate.



9. Talk to someone just to vent a little.



10. Listen to relaxing music.



11. Go to a salsa class.



12. Read a book to distract yourself from stressful thoughts.



13. Write a letter to someone to get your feelings across and vent, but don't actually send it.



14. Go out and meet new people.



15. Do something good for someone else.



16. Pray.



17. Paint or draw.



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 to get more sleep.





21. Have a change of scenery.



22. Dance around in your room to your favourite music.



23. Go to your friend's house with another friend and put the world to rights.



24. Do something you like with family or friends like going to a show.



25. Switch off the phone and get some time to yourself.



26. Go to a yoga class.



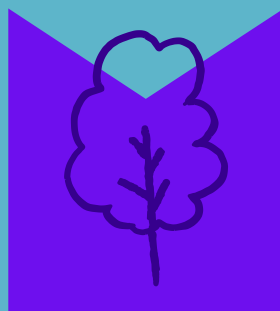
27. Express your feelings and emotions.



28. Spend time with positive people around you.



29. Eat a healthy meal and avoid caffeine.



30. Have a hot cup of something wonderful and sit with a journal and a pen.



31. Get closer to nature e.g., have a walk on the beach, or observe the sunset.



32. Watch your favourite programme on TV.



33. Get a cuddle.



34. Ask yourself, *What would other people do?*



35. Go to bed with a great book.



36. Relax with reflexology.



37. Read gossip magazines.



38. Go to uplifting plays, operas and concerts that make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.





39. Host a dinner party.



40. Think of the work you **HAVE** achieved in a day, rather than what you haven't.



41. Close your eyes and spend a couple of minutes listening to all the sounds you can hear.



42. Cheer up someone who is feeling down.



43. Play a musical instrument.



44. Write down your thoughts.



45. Play games on the computer.



46. Laugh!



47. Do something creative like knitting.



48. Play with your pet.



49. Find a quiet place and try to visualise a happy memory.



50. Spend some time doing something you enjoy, like gardening.



51. Get some fresh air.



52. Be gentle to yourself.



53. Write a to-do list with small, manageable tasks.



54. Go window shopping.



55. Write short stories.



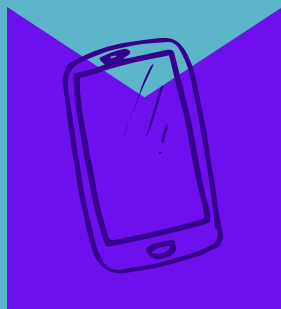
56. Call a loved one.



57. Talk to a stranger.



58. Read movie or TV trivia online.





59. Practice CBT (Cognitive behavioural therapy).



60. Video call a friend.



61. Take a nap.



62. Take a break, even a short one can make a difference.



63. Eat or drink something you enjoy.



64. Write poetry.



65. Go for a walk at lunchtime.



66. Pet a cat, or even just watch cat videos online!



67. Go out to a Karaoke night.



68. Sit in a café with a cup of tea and a magazine.



69. Bake a cake.



70. Challenge a friend to a game of Scrabble.



71. Sit on a park bench and watch the world go by.



72. Tidy a room or cupboard (if you find this relaxing!).



73. Go for a relaxing swim.



74. Breathe deeply for two minutes, and focus on your breaths.



75. Cuddle a baby (ideally one you know – cuddles with my niece or nephew are amazing).



76. Keep a gratitude journal.



77. Take a minute to stretch your body.



78. Give yourself 'me time' – just a few minutes to think about pleasant things.





79. Practice Tai Chi.



80. Use a relaxing room fragrance or scented candle to create a sense of sanctuary.



81. Look at photos of happy memories.



82. Have a cup of tea.



83. Think of something you're looking forward to or something that was fun.



84. Create something – knit a scarf, build an Airfix model.



85. Try Aquafit classes at lunchtime.



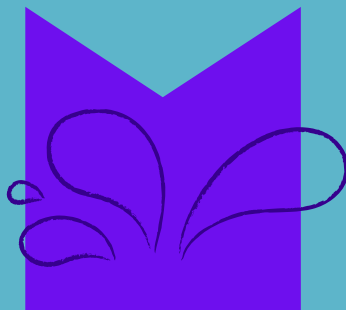
86. Go for a bike ride.



87. Listen to the birds singing.



88. Go to the cinema.



89. Play your favourite song and sing it out loud.



90. Volunteer for a cause you feel close to.



91. Practice calligraphy.



92. Move furniture around the house.



93. Write a letter to a loved one.



94. Clean!



95. Play board games with your family.



96. Go out for a run in the park.



97. Play with your children.



98. Play Sudoku or crosswords.



99. Watch some programs on TV.



Seeking help

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

Often, the first step to getting support is speaking to your GP. They should be able to give you advice about treatment and may refer you to another local professional. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based approaches are known to help reduce stress. There are also voluntary organisations which can help you tackle the causes of stress and advise you about ways to get better.

Every Mind Matters

The Mental Health Foundation supported the development of the Every Mind Matters stress resource, which offers advice on how to cope with stress.

Visit nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/stress

The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

You can talk to CALM about whatever you're going through. Call the CALM helpline on 0800 58 58 58 or use their webchat. Both are open 5pm to midnight every day

Visit thecalmzone.net/get-support

Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice provides free, independent and confidential advice for a range of problems, as well as information on your rights and responsibilities.

Visit 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 at stepchange.org.

Samaritans

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 variety of specialist services that provide a range of treatments, including counselling and other talking therapies. These different services are often 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.



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Useful contacts and notes

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Together, we can help you cope with stress in healthy ways and improve your overall wellbeing.

Everyone gets stressed at times, but no one should have to manage this alone. We should all have access to strategies to help us cope with stress. At the Mental Health Foundation, we believe everyone deserves to know how to manage their mental health.

Mental Health Foundation is the only UK charity solely focused on preventing poor mental health and building and protecting good mental health. We research, develop and campaign for new and more effective ways to support and protect people's good mental health.

We hope you found this booklet informative and useful.



We rely on public donations and grant funding to continue our vital work. Please consider making a donation mentalhealth.org.uk/donate



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