



Mental Health
Ireland

Stress

*| The Pocket Guide on
How to Manage and
Reduce Stress*

Defining stress



Stress is a natural and healthy response to challenging situations or life events. Stress can sometimes be helpful in motivating us to complete a task. However, at times, stress can become overwhelming and affect our ability to cope.

At the most basic level, stress is our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event.

Some of the things that can make you feel stress include experiencing something new or unexpected, something that threatens your feeling of self, or feeling you have little control over a situation.

What is stress?

Stress affects us in a number of ways, both physically and emotionally, and with 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 issues 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: trouble getting to sleep, 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. The response can lead to raised blood pressure, increased heart rate and an increase in the rate at which you perspire, preparing your body to respond to a perceived threat.

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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 physical symptoms.



Behavioural and emotional symptoms

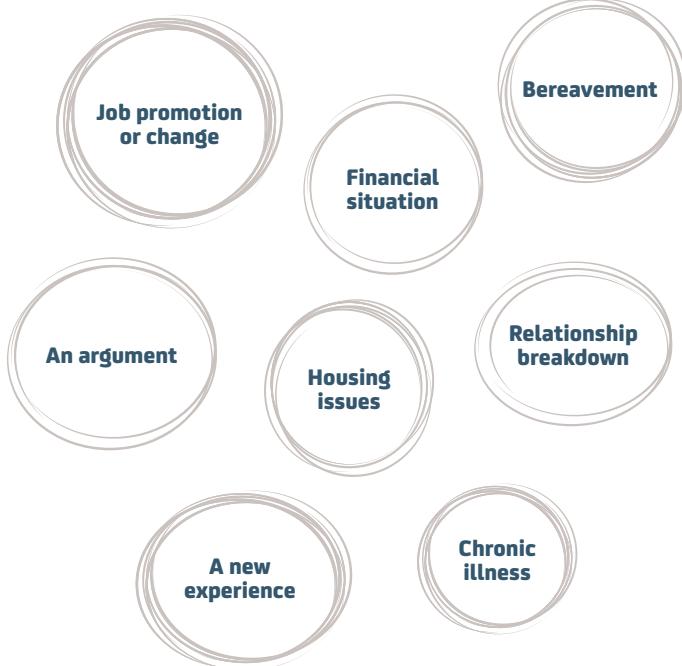
When you are stressed, you may experience many different feelings including anxiety, irritability or low self-esteem, which can lead you to become withdrawn, indecisive or tearful.

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. You may lose your 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 worse.

What causes stress?

Everyone has different stress triggers. The most common involve work, money matters, or relationships.

Some causes of stress include;



Work-life balance

Mental Health Ireland's 2018 Mental Health Insights Survey reported that work was the most commonly cited aspect impacting on mental health and wellbeing (Mental Health Ireland, 2018).

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 and, if not addressed, to more severe mental health issues.

The number of employees working 50 hours or more per week increased to almost 5% in 2016, the same level as in 2005 (OECD, 2017).

Work may increase your vulnerability to stress and, if not addressed, to more severe mental health issues.

There has been an increase in offerings of workplace health and wellbeing training/programmes for employees and managers. For more information about the training we offer go to; www.mentalhealthireland.ie/training

Money

Concerns about money and debt can cause stress. There is support available to help you gain control of your financial situation.

Citizen Information and the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) have information on ways to support people in debt. Please find more information at www.mabs.ie





Smoking, drinking and drug use

Some people smoke, drink alcohol and/or use recreational drugs in an attempt to reduce stress. However this can increase our stress levels.

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.

For support on quitting go to www.quit.ie

Similarly, people may use alcohol as a means to manage and cope with difficult feelings and to temporarily reduce feelings of stress. However, alcohol may make our existing mental health issues worse. It can make you feel more anxious and depressed in the long term. Drinking, hangovers and poor sleep can reduce your energy and productivity. Learn more about alcohol, the recommended limits and the effects of alcohol at the Ask About Alcohol Campaign.

For more information go to www.askaboutalcohol.ie

Prescription drugs such as tranquillisers and sleeping tablets can impact on our mental and physical health if the recommended dosage is exceeded. Street drugs, such as Cannabis or Ecstasy, can cause dependency as a person's body gets used to repeated use of the drug. This leads to the need for increased doses to maintain the same effect.

For more information go to www.drugs.ie

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:



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

Other signs of stress

- ✓ Feelings of constant worry or anxiety
- ✓ Feelings of being overwhelmed
- ✓ Difficulty in 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 or constipation
- ✓ Feelings of nausea or dizziness
- ✓ Loss of sex drive

Illustrations of a man holding a clipboard and a woman standing next to him are positioned at the bottom right of the clipboard frame.

Managing stress

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

We mentioned earlier that a moderate amount of stress can help us perform better in challenging situations, but too much or prolonged stress can impact on physical health. This can include lower immunity levels, digestive and intestinal difficulties such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or mental health issues 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.



Here are some steps you can take to manage your stress;

- **Realise when it is causing you a problem;**

It is helpful to be aware of times when stress is having an impact on your life. When we make the connection between feeling tired or ill and being stressed, it is important to respond in a positive way.

- **Identify the causes;**

Determine the possible reasons for your stress. It is important to remember some stressors can be changed while others are beyond your control. Sometimes it is helpful to take a look at your lifestyle choices. Are you taking on too much? Are there things you are doing which could be handed over to someone else? Can you schedule some time to relax?

- **A healthy diet;**

There is growing evidence that suggests what you eat positively affects our mood and mental wellbeing. A healthy balanced diet can also reduce the risk of heart-related diseases. Feelings of wellbeing can be protected by ensuring that your diet provides adequate amounts of nutrients, vitamins and minerals as well as water. For more information go to www.safefood.eu

- **Sleep;**

When you are stressed your sleeping patterns can be disturbed. Try to keep a good routine and reduce screen time in the evening.

Seeking help

The first step is to visit your GP who will be able to guide you on a range of helpful options available. It may be difficult, but asking for help is a sign of strength and can make a real difference. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Mindfulness based approaches are known to help reduce stress. There are also a number of voluntary organisations that can help you to tackle the causes of stress and advise on how best to manage stress.

Samaritans Ireland

The Samaritans telephone service is available 24 hours a day. For confidential, non-judgmental support:

Freephone **116 123**

Text **087 2 60 90 90**

- standard message rates apply

Email jo@samaritans.ie

Visit www.samaritans.ie for details of the nearest branch.

Yourmentalhealth.ie

For advice, information and support about services for mental health and wellbeing go to:

www.yourmentalhealth.ie

Specialist mental health services

There are a number of specialist services that provide various treatments, including counselling, and other programmes. Often these different services are coordinated by a Community Mental Health Team (CMHT), which is usually based at a hospital or a local community HSE centre. You can contact your local CMHT through your local HSE office.

HSE Live - Guidance and support for navigating the Irish public health system. **1850 24 1850** | 8am - 8pm Monday to Friday and 10am - 5pm on Saturdays. | hselive@hse.ie

For a list of registered counsellors and psychotherapists contact:

Irish Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy www.iACP.ie

Irish Council for Psychotherapy www.psychotherapycouncil.ie



Tips to help reduce your stress levels

Everybody is different and what works for one person might not work for another person. Here is a list of ideas on how you can manage or reduce your stress.

- ✓ Meet up with a friend
- ✓ Set aside 10 minutes a day to relax and collect your thoughts
- ✓ Listen to relaxing music
- ✓ Watch a funny film
- ✓ Take a walk in the countryside
- ✓ Go to the gym
- ✓ Soak in the bath with lavender oil
- ✓ Meditate
- ✓ Walk the dog
- ✓ Try to get more sleep
- ✓ Read a book
- ✓ Do something kind for someone else
- ✓ Paint or draw
- ✓ Take a moment to sit still in nature
- ✓ Write a list of things to do and cross them off as you do them
- ✓ Turn off your phone and get some time to yourself
- ✓ Plan something you enjoy with family or friends
- ✓ Have a change of scenery
- ✓ Spend time with positive people around you
- ✓ Keep a gratitude journal
- ✓ Eat a healthy meal
- ✓ Get closer to nature
- ✓ Watch your favourite TV programme

- ✓ Give yourself just a few minutes of 'me time'
- ✓ Think of the work you HAVE achieved in a day, rather than what you haven't done
- ✓ Cheer up someone who is feeling down
- ✓ Play with your pet
- ✓ Be gentle with yourself
- ✓ Laugh!
- ✓ Go window shopping
- ✓ Write a short story or poem
- ✓ Phone a loved one
- ✓ Take a nap
- ✓ Take a break, even a short one can make a difference
- ✓ Going for a walk at lunchtime
- ✓ Bake a cake
- ✓ Make yourself a cup of tea
- ✓ Go for a relaxing swim
- ✓ Sit on a park bench and watch the world go by
- ✓ Breathe deeply for two minutes, and focus on your breaths
- ✓ Take a minute to stretch your body
- ✓ Go to the cinema
- ✓ Go for a bike ride
- ✓ Listen to the birds singing
- ✓ Play a board game
- ✓ Sing
- ✓ Write a letter to a loved one
- ✓ Go for a run in the park
- ✓ Volunteer in your local community
- ✓ Play Sudoku or crosswords
- ✓ Get or give a cuddle
- ✓ Find a quiet place and try to visualise something that makes you happy
- ✓ Play a musical instrument



Take some time to learn about the Five Ways to Wellbeing

The Five Ways to Wellbeing

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are simple, evidence based actions, you can do everyday to feel good and function well (NEF, 2008).

CONNECT

BE ACTIVE

TAKE NOTICE

KEEP LEARNING

GIVE

Connect with people around you, friends, relatives or co-workers you haven't spoken to in a while. Try to make new connections where possible.

Be Active Do what you can to stay active. Try a new class in the gym, walk instead of getting the bus, try gardening, dancing, or cycling. Choose something you enjoy, that suits your mobility and fitness.

Take Notice
Take time to look around you; notice changes in the world, the passing of seasons. Be aware of your feelings and reflect on your experiences. Be present in the here and now.

Keep Learning

Try something new; a new recipe, hobby, or language course. Take on a different responsibility in work. Set yourself a challenge you will enjoy achieving.

Give Do one good deed every day. Smile at a passer-by. Make someone a cup of tea. Join a community group. Doing good for someone else can be beneficial for your mental health.



Mental Health Ireland is a national voluntary organisation whose aim is to promote positive mental health and wellbeing to all individuals and communities in Ireland.

OUR VISION

Mental Health Ireland's vision is for an Ireland where mental health is valued as being an essential part of personal wellbeing and the health of the nation. Mental Health Ireland will lead the way in informing Irish society's understanding of mental health and fostering a culture where people with mental health difficulties are respected and supported.

TEXT TO DONATE

Text MHI to 50300 to donate €4 to Mental Health Ireland.

100% of your donations goes to Mental Health Ireland across most network operators. Some operators apply VAT which means that a minimum of €3.25 will go to Mental Health Ireland.

Service provider: LikeCharity's helpline is **076 680 5278**.
Charity Number CHY 5594

facebook.com/Mental.Health.Ireland

instagram.com/mentalhealthireland/

twitter.com/MentalHealthIrl

Information provided by the Mental Health Foundation.



**Mental Health
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MENTAL HEALTH IRELAND
Promoting Positive Mental Health
and Wellbeing

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