

## What is stress?

Stress can be defined as “the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them”. Stress occurs when the demands in our life affect our ability to cope. Stress affects each individual differently – what one person might find stressful may not be stressful for another.

Some stress is actually good for you because it can prompt you into action. For example, stress can be helpful if it leads you to study for an exam or prepare for a job interview. However, stress is unhelpful when it leads you to feel overwhelmed, burned out and unable to cope.

Here are some examples of people’s experiences of stress:

*“I just feel like I can never get on top of everything I need to do. Whenever I think I am about to find my feet, something else comes up. I just jump about from task to task but never seem to finish anything.”*

*“I am so stressed all the time - I just feel so overwhelmed. I have butterflies in my stomach, feel sick and can’t seem to concentrate on anything. I don’t think I can ask for help, I don’t want people to think I can’t cope and can’t do my job properly.”*

*“Everyone seems to rely on me - I don’t want to let anyone down but I never get a moment to myself to relax. I feel like I am going to go crazy! ”*

## Why do we get stressed?

Stress is very common and anyone can get stressed. Some people may be more likely to get stressed than others because of their genes. However, these people can still take positive action to reduce their stress levels.

Difficult life events can cause people to become stressed. Some examples of these are:

- relationship problems or divorce
- financial concerns
- redundancy/unemployment
- difficulties at work
- role changes – e.g. becoming a parent, retiring
- poor health
- pregnancy
- difficulties with parenting
- death of a loved one
- being treated unfairly/abuse
- legal problems

These are just examples of events that can lead to stress; there are lots of reasons why someone may experience stress. For many people, there is often a combination of reasons. Everyone experiences stress differently and what is stressful for one individual may not be stressful for another.

Try to identify what factors are causing you stress at the moment. If you are not sure what is causing your stress, try to keep a diary of when you are feeling stressed for a few weeks. Try recording:

- the date, time and place where you felt stressed
- what you are doing and who you were with
- what was going through your mind
- how stressed you felt from 1 – 10
- what you did as a result

Keeping this record can help you to identify what triggers your stress and what effect this has on you.

## What are the symptoms of stress?

Below are the physical symptoms, feelings, thoughts and behaviours you might experience when you are feeling stressed. See if you can identify with any of them.

### Physical Symptoms

- tension in muscles
- upset stomach
- butterflies in stomach
- headaches
- feeling hot and sweaty
- poor concentration
- rapid change in weight
- skin complaints
- feeling very tired all of the time
- breathlessness

### Behaviour

- consume more caffeine
- consume more alcohol
- smoke more
- exercise less
- snap at people
- bottle up how you feel
- eat more junk food
- skip meals
- stop doing things that you enjoy
- rush around trying to get everything done

### Thoughts

- "I can't cope with this"
- "I am losing control"
- "I am not good enough"
- "if I ask for help, people will think I can't cope"
- "I shouldn't be feeling this way"
- "things are never going to get better"

### Feelings

- low
- anxious
- guilty
- helpless
- overwhelmed
- burnt out
- irritable

The symptoms listed above are the short-term symptoms of stress. There are also long-term health risks associated with stress. These include sleep problems, frequent colds and coughs, headaches, bowel problems, stomach problems, low energy levels and high blood pressure.

The good news is that there are lots of helpful steps you can take to help you cope with stress.

## The vicious cycle of stress

Our thoughts, our behaviour, our mood and our physical symptoms all affect one another. This can sometimes become an unhelpful, vicious cycle, like the example below.

### Outside world – background stresses

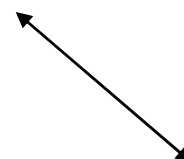
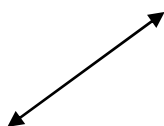
For example:

- financial difficulties
- change in circumstances
- relationship problems
- unemployment/problems at work



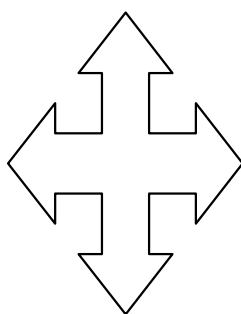
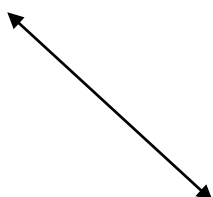
### Negative thoughts

"Things are never going to get better."  
"I can't cope with this."  
"I shouldn't be feeling this way."



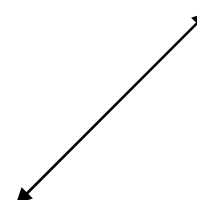
### Behaviour

Avoid people  
Stop doing things you enjoy  
Rush about to try to get everything done  
Work longer hours  
Shout or snap at people  
Drink more alcohol, eat unhealthily



### Mood

Sad, upset  
Guilty  
Irritable  
Overwhelmed



### Bodily symptoms

Restlessness/agitated  
Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep  
Tension  
Heart racing, blushing, feeling flushed  
Feeling sick, butterflies in the stomach

To break the vicious cycle, we can try to *think differently* and *act differently*. The next section will give you some tips on how you can do this.

## Physical Symptoms

The reason that we notice some of these physical symptoms is due to the “**fight or flight response**”.

Our body reacts in a certain way to stress, fear and anxiety. When we are presented with a “threat”, **adrenaline** gets released into our body. Adrenaline is a chemical messenger sent from our brain to make our body get ready to run away, fight or freeze. Some of the things that happen to the body include:

- our heart beats faster to pump blood around the body
- we produce more sweat to cool ourselves down
- our muscles become tense to prepare us for action
- our breathing becomes deeper and faster to supply more oxygen to our muscles

Adrenaline is released in dangerous situations (e.g. nearly being knocked over). This can be helpful because it prepares our body to take appropriate reaction (e.g. jumping out of the way). However, anxiety can also be released in everyday situations (e.g. going to the shops, speaking in front of large groups). When we start to experience these bodily sensations in these situations, this can actually make us feel more anxious because we start to become self-conscious or we worry about what these sensations mean.

The important thing to remember is that these bodily sensations are **normal**, **natural** and **not dangerous**. These reactions are designed to protect us and can be helpful. Practicing relaxation techniques or carrying out relaxing activities can help to reduce the physical symptoms of stress.

## Relaxation

Relaxation is a really good way to reduce symptoms of stress, reduce tension and to unwind. You can use relaxing activities or specific relaxation exercises. Try to plan a relaxing activity each day. Some examples of relaxing activities include:

- exercise - e.g. going for a walk or a swim
- reading a book
- watching a favourite TV show
- going to the cinema
- doing something creative - drawing, painting, writing poetry
- playing a game or doing a puzzle
- listening to music
- calling or visiting family or friends

You can also use specific relaxation techniques to help manage the symptoms of stress.

## Controlled breathing

Controlled breathing is a simple technique that is really helpful for when you notice yourself becoming stressed or anxious and no-one will notice that you are doing it.

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Step 1: | Breathe out.  |
| Step 2: | Breathe in slowly to the count of four, "one elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4 elephant." |
| Step 3: | Hold your breath for the count of four.   |
| Step 4: | Breathe out slowly while counting elephants.  |

Repeat the above steps until you start to feel calm. Take a few ordinary breaths in between the deep ones. Don't take too many deep breaths in a row or breathe too quickly, or you will become dizzy.

## **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

When we feel stressed, we often experience tension in our muscles. This can sometimes result in feelings of pain. Progressive muscular relaxation is an exercise that can help reduce the feelings of tension. It involves tensing up muscles and then relaxing them. The purpose of this exercise is to help you notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Try to tense each muscle group for five seconds, don't tense the muscles too tightly and stop if you feel any pain.

Here are the muscle groups to try:

- forehead
- eyes
- mouth and jaw
- neck
- shoulders
- arms
- hands
- chest
- lower back
- stomach
- bottom
- thighs
- back of legs / front of legs
- feet

You can work through the muscle groups that you would like. Some people experience tension in particular areas so you might find it helpful to focus on those areas in particular. There is also a "Relaxation" Wellbeing booklet with a relaxation CD included.

## Identify negative thinking

The first step to thinking differently is to identify negative thoughts you have. When we are stressed, we often have negative thoughts about ourselves and the situation, e.g.

*“Things are so awful right now.”*

*“I can’t cope with this.”*

*“I shouldn’t be feeling this way, I must be a weak person.”*

We also often make negative predictions about the future, e.g.

*“I will never manage that.”*

*“If I go to that event, I will have a terrible time.”*

*“Things are never going to get better.”*

Sometimes the way we think about a situation can make us feel worse and adds to the pressure we are under. The more negatively we think about a situation, the worse we feel. The worse we feel, the more negatively we think, and so on.

The important thing to remember is that our thoughts are *opinions* and not *facts*. This means that, particularly when we are stressed, our thoughts may not be totally accurate. They can also be unhelpful and can make us feel worse.

- Try to identify your negative thoughts and the situations that cause you to have these thoughts.