

Stress

A self help guide

Shining a light on the future



What is stress?

Here are the thoughts of some people who are experiencing stress.

"I just don't get a task finished any more before I move on to the next thing. I keep forgetting where I'm up to, I have 20 things on the go at once and I'm not getting anywhere with any of them".

"I keep meaning to get a little time for myself but I never manage to. Someone always asks me to help out and I never have the heart to say no, but I end up feeling really tired and irritable".

"It just seems to be one crisis after the next in my life. I've got a constant headache and stomach problems, I keep expecting something else to go wrong, I'm at the end of my tether".

Stress is the word that many people use when they are describing how the demands of their life seem to be becoming too great for them to cope with. This ability to cope varies from person to person and what one person finds stressful may not be a problem for another. Whilst many of us suffer with stress at times in our day to day lives, long term stress is known to be bad for our health and many of us would like to find ways to gain some control over it.

How can this guide help me?

This guide will tell you more about stress, it will help you to see whether stress is a problem for you. It makes simple suggestions about how to overcome stress and what other help may be available.

What are the signs of stress?

The signs of stress vary from person to person but here are some of the most common ones. **Do you recognise any of them in yourself?**

Physical signs

- Headaches
- Muscle tension or pain
- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Feeling dizzy
- Bowel or bladder problems
- Breathlessness or palpitations
- Dry mouth
- Tingling in body
- Sexual problems
- Tired all the time

Emotions

- Feeling irritable
- Feeling anxious or tense
- Feeling low
- Feeling lack of interest
- Feeling bad about yourself

Effects on what you do

- Temper outbursts
- Drinking or smoking too much
- Changes in eating habits
- Withdrawing from usual activities
- Becoming unreasonable
- Being forgetful or clumsy

- Rushing around
- Not sleeping

If you have some of these signs it may be you are experiencing stress. These are some of the short term signs but long term health risks from stress can be serious. For example, heart disease, high blood pressure, severe depression, stroke, migraine, severe anxiety, asthma, low resistance to infection, bowel problems, stomach problems especially ulcers, fatigue and sleep problems.

Can life events cause stress?

Some things that happen in your life can be stressful, particularly life changes. If you have had one or more of the following life events occurring over the last year, you will probably be more likely to be stressed and should take care to avoid further stressors, and try to take extra care of yourself.

- Death of partner
- Divorce or relationship breakdown
- Jail term
- Death of close family member
- Getting married
- Loss of employment
- Health problems
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- New employment
- High financial commitments
- Serious debts
- Major changes at work
- Partner stops or begins work
- Death of close friend
- Change in living conditions
- Disagreement with friends
- Problems at work (e.g. lack of job security, several jobs, no satisfaction at work)
- Change in leisure activities
- Change in church or spiritual habits
- Minor legal problems
- Problems with neighbours or noise
- Family gatherings for holidays or Christmas

Is there a type of person who is more likely to experience stress?

Studies have shown that some people are more likely to experience stress than others. These people are known as type A personalities. They tend to be more competitive and impatient and have tight time schedules compared to type B personalities, who are more relaxed and laid back in their style. If you would like to know which type you are, the following questions may help you to decide:

Type A

- Must get things finished
- Never late for appointments
- Competitive
- Can't listen to conversations, interrupt, finish sentences for others
- Always in a hurry
- Don't like to wait
- Very busy, at full speed
- Trying to do more than one thing at a time

- Want everything perfect
- Do everything fast
- Hold feelings in
- Not satisfied with work or life
- Few social activities or interests
- If working will often take work home

Type B

- Don't mind leaving things unfinished for a while
- Calm and unhurried about appointments
- Not competitive
- Can listen and let the other person finish speaking
- Never in a hurry even when busy
- Can wait calmly
- Easy going
- Take one thing at a time
- Don't mind things not quite perfect
- Slow and deliberate speech
- Do things slowly
- Express feelings
- Quite satisfied with work and life
- Many social activities and interests
- If working, don't take work home.

If most of your answers are on the **A** side, then you will be more prone to stress, if your answers are a mixture of both **A** and **B** then you are a little prone to stress, if your answers are mainly **B** then you are less likely to suffer from stress. Those people who are more prone to stress may have to try harder to use some of the stress management approaches suggested here in order to tackle their natural tendency to a stressful lifestyle.

How can I help myself to cope with stress?

Studies have shown that the first step in tackling stress is to become aware that it is a problem for you. The next stage is to make a plan to take control of the causes and effects of stress. Here are some practical ways to take control of stress.

Holiday – try to plan at least one each year with a change in activities and surrounding.

Open up – if your relationship is part of the problem. Communication is very important.

Work – is that the problem? What are your options? Could you retrain? What aspects are stressful? Could you delegate? Could you get more support?

Try to concentrate on the present. Don't dwell on the past or future worries.

Own up to yourself that you are feeling stressed – half the battle is admitting it!

Be realistic about what you can achieve. Don't take too much on.

Eat a balanced diet. Eat slowly and sit down, allowing at least half an hour for each meal.

Action plans – try to write down the problems in your life that may be causing stress, and as many possible solutions as you can. Make a plan to deal with each problem.

Time management – plan your time, doing one thing at a time and building in breaks. Don't make too many changes at once in your life.

Set priorities – if you could only do one thing, what would it be?

Talk things over with a friend or family member or someone else you can trust and share your feelings with.

Relaxation or leisure time each day is important. Try new ways to relax such as aromatherapy, reflexology or yoga. Relaxation exercises are described more fully later in this guide.

Exercise regularly – at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on five or more occasions per week is excellent for stress control. Walking is good – appreciate the countryside.

Say no and don't feel guilty.

Seek professional help if you have tried these things and still your stress is a problem.

Can I learn to be more relaxed?

Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension.

Deep muscle relaxation

It is helpful to read the instructions first and eventually to learn them by heart. Start by selecting a quiet, warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. To begin with, choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed, then lie down and get comfortable. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly – in two three and out two three. Say the word calm or relax to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax.

Start with your hands. Clench one fist tightly, and think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop.

Do the same with the other hand.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they are relaxed. Don't try to relax but just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they are relaxed and when they are tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

It is useful to stick to the same order, as you work through the muscle groups:

Hands – clench fists, then relax.

Arms – bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.

Neck – press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.

Face – there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.

Shoulders – shrug your shoulders up – then relax them.

Chest – take a deep breath, hold it in for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.

Stomach – tense your stomach muscles as tightly as you can and relax.

Buttocks – squeeze your buttocks together and relax.

Legs – straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face then relax.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practice daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense your muscles first.
- Use parts of relaxation to help in difficult situations, e.g. breathing slowly.
- Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.

- Practice in public situations (on bus, in queue etc).
- Relaxation see dees are available at most bookshops and libraries.

What further help is available?

Sometimes a good source of help is to talk to family or close friends, but there are also other ways you may get help.

Your family doctor is probably the best person to discuss your difficulties with in the first instance. This is particularly important if your problem is not going away or is getting worse. You could also talk to your Health Visitor or Practice Nurse if you are in touch with either.

You may be offered counselling or if your problem seems to become more severe you may be referred to a mental health worker.

The following organisations and help lines may also be useful:

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**
Telephone 0 1 4 5 5 8 8 3 3 1 6
www dot b a c p dot co dot uk
Address B A C P House, 15 Saint John's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire, L E 1 7 4 H B
Offers an information service providing contacts for counselling in England and Wales.
- **First Steps to Freedom**
Helpline 0 8 4 5 1 2 0 2 9 1 6
Telephone 0 8 4 5 8 4 1 0 6 1 9
www dot first hyphen steps dot org
Address P O Box 4 7 6 Newquay, T R 7 1 W Q
Provides helpline and resources for those suffering from anxiety.
- **International Stress Management Association (I S M A)**
Telephone 0 1 1 7 9 6 9 7 2 8 4
www dot i s m a dot org dot uk
Address P O Box 4 9 1, Bradley, Stoke, Bristol, B S 3 4 9 A H
Provides information about recognising and reducing stress.
- **Mental Health Matters**
Telephone 0 1 9 1 5 1 6 3 5 0 0
www dot mental health matters dot com
Address Avalon House, Saint Catherines Court, Sunderland Enterprise Park, Sunderland, S R 5 3 X J
A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.
- **Mind Infoline**
Telephone 0 8 4 5 7 6 6 0 1 6 3
www dot mind dot org dot uk
Address 15 to 19 Broadway, Stratford, London, E 1 5 4 B Q
Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.
Helpline available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- **National Debt Line**
Telephone 0 8 0 8 8 0 8 4 0 0 0
www dot national debt line dot co dot uk
Address Tricorn House, 51 to 53 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B 1 6 8 T P
Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.
- **N H S Choices – Your health, your choices**
www dot n h s dot uk
Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.

- **N H S Direct**
Telephone 0 8 4 5 4 6 4 7
www dot n h s direct dot n h s dot uk
Health information and advice.
- **No Panic**
Freephone 0 8 0 8 8 0 8 0 5 4 5
www dot no panic dot org dot uk
Address 93 Brands Farm Way, Telford, Shropshire, T F 3 2 J Q
Support for sufferers of panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, general anxiety disorder and tranquilliser withdrawal.
- **PALS – Patient Advice and Liaison Service**
www dot pals dot n h s dot uk
Provides information and advice about local N H S services and support organisations and helps sort out problems with N H S services.
- **Relate**
Telephone 0 3 0 0 1 0 0 1 2 3 4
www dot relate dot org dot uk
Address Premier House, Carolina Court, Lakeside, Doncaster, D N 4 5 R A
Help with marital or relationship problems.
- **Rethink**
Helpline 0 8 4 5 4 5 6 0 4 5 5
www dot rethink dot org
Address 89 Albert Embankment, London, S E 1 7 T P
Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.
- **Samaritans**
Telephone 0 8 4 5 7 9 0 9 0 9 0
www dot Samaritans dot org
Address P O Box 9 0 9 0, Stirling, F K 8 2 S A
Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

Some useful books to buy or borrow from your local library:

- **Feeling good: the new mood therapy**
David Burns
HarperCollins 2000
A drug free guide to curing anxiety, guilt, pessimism, procrastination, low self esteem, and other depressive disorders using scientifically tested methods to improve mood and stave off the blues.
- **Stress management: a comprehensive guide to your well being**
E. Charlesworth
Souvenir 1997
This guide helps you identify the specific areas of stress in your life - familial, work-related, social, emotional - and offers proven techniques for dealing with every one of them.
- **Mind over mood**
Christine Padesky and Dennis Greenberger
Guilford 1995
Draws on the authors' extensive experience as clinicians and teachers of cognitive therapy to help clients successfully understand and improve their moods and alter their behaviour.
- **Self help for your nerves**
Clare Weekes
HarperCollins 2000
Guide for everything you need to know to keep relaxed through every day life. Offers comprehensive insight and advice into coping with nervous stress.
- **Anxiety and depression: a practical guide to recovery**
Robert Priest
Ebury Press 1996
Robert Priest has written this book especially to provide help for those feeling anxious and depressed. In particular, he covers the practical self help methods to reduce stress and offers an explanation of the causes and effects of anxiety and depression.

Mental Health Self Help Guides [www dot n t w dot n h s uk / p l c](http://www.nthshs.uk/plc)

- **Anxiety**
- **Bereavement**
- **Controlling Anger**
- **Depression**
- **Depression and Low Mood**
- **Eating Disorders**
- **Domestic Violence**
- **Food for Thought**
- **Health Anxiety**
- **Hearing Voices**
- **Obsessions and Compulsions**
- **Panic**
- **Postnatal Depression**

- Post Traumatic Stress
- Self Harm
- Shyness and Social Anxiety
- Sleep Problems
- Stress
- **Plus** 3 guides for prisoners

Shining a light on the future



Written by Doctor Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron, Consultant Clinical Psychologists, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear N H S Foundation Trust, with contributions from healthcare staff and service users in Northumberland.

This information can be made available in a range of formats on request (e.g. Braille, audio, large print, B S L, easy read or other languages). Please contact the Patient Information Centre Telephone 0 1 9 1 2 2 3 2 5 4 5

Published by the Patient Information Centre

2010 Copyright, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear N H S Foundation Trust

Reference, P I C / 1 0 3 / 0 6 1 0 June 2010

[www dot n t w dot n h s dot uk / p i c](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic) Telephone 0 1 9 1 2 2 3 2 5 4 5

Review date 2012