

**BHMA**®

British Holistic Medical Association

A woman with short, dark, curly hair and glasses is shown in profile, looking down with a stressed expression. She is resting her head on her right hand, which is holding her glasses. She is wearing a green V-neck top, a silver watch on her left wrist, and a ring on her right hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

# Tackling stress

# Stressed?

When you're stressed getting through the day may feel like an uphill struggle. With so much on your plate it's often hard to know where to start – the smallest of problems become a mountain. It's all too easy to get into the vicious circle of rushing from one stressful situation to the next. **But it doesn't have to be this way.**

Whether your stress is caused by problems in your personal life or at work – or a mixture of both, by learning some simple techniques to tackle stress then you can start to feel more in control.

This booklet offers quick fix solutions for coping with stress and advice on changes that you can make in the longer term to deal with and avoid stress.

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# What is stress?

For many people, a certain degree of pressure can have a positive effect, but if it builds up, and you don't get a chance to recover, it can lead to stress. This can have a negative effect, both physically and emotionally.

The body responds to stress by stimulating the fight or flight response – a physical reaction which helps you respond to emergency or tense situations.

Common reactions include:

- dry mouth
- racing heart
- quickened breathing
- tense muscles
- breaking out in a sweat.

Sometimes this response is useful. It can help you do well in an interview or even get through a real crisis. However, if lots of stressors are active at once or follow each other quickly, then the stress response, which should be short lived, lingers and keeps getting boosted. This means that the relaxation response (when your mind and body calm) can't kick in naturally, and help get you back on track. Some experts call this the 'stressed state' and it is what people generally mean when they talk about 'feeling stressed'.

# Stress signals

We all deal with some level of stress, however, there is only so much you can handle before it starts to take its toll.

## Common stress signals include:

- mood swings
- poor concentration
- feeling tense
- low self-esteem
- anxiety
- sleeping difficulties
- comfort eating
- poor memory or forgetfulness
- loss of appetite

Be aware of your own stress signals so you can act on them and feel more resilient and in control.

# Time out: stress and making time for yourself

It's hard to be rational when you're stressed so taking time out is important.

**Quick fix:** take time out from a stressful situation (even for just a few minutes) and give yourself head space to help you assess the problem rationally and then tackle it. Try the following **relaxation technique** that you can use just about anywhere.

- Sitting, raise your shoulders towards your ears and tense them up.
- Take a good breath in, and as you breathe out, lower your shoulders towards your hips, pushing them down.
- Take a breath in, and then, as you breathe out, let your shoulders totally relax.
- Make fists with your hands, tense them tighter – take a slow breath in and as you breathe out, let your hands go loose and heavy.
- Notice how your body feels on the chair that you're sitting on and notice the pressure on the seat of your chair.
- Tense your bottom – take a breath in, and as you breathe out, let that tightness go. Just press down on the floor with your feet and your toes and your heels so you're really aware of the pressure there. Take a breath in, and as you breathe out, let that pressure go.
- Notice your feet. You'll notice your bottom, your hands, your shoulders. Take a breath in, and as you breathe out, let go of all the tension.



**Long term:** try to take time out from your daily routine. Avoid working long hours, take breaks away from your work area each day and take proper holidays when you can. If you have young children try organising a relative, friend or neighbour to look after them for an evening or take it in turns with your partner to have time to yourselves.

## Chill out: stress and relaxation

Knowing how to trigger your relaxation response and getting good quality sleep can help you deal with stress.

**Quick fix:** learning simple relaxation techniques, like deep breathing, are an effective way of helping you deal with stress. Try the following **breathing exercise** that you can do anywhere if stress hits.

- Sit comfortably in an armchair and rest your arms on the arms of the chair. Spend a few seconds relaxing your body, noticing any tensions that are around and just letting them go.
- Now, gently press down on the arms of your chair with your elbows. This stops you using your neck and shoulder muscles while you are doing the breathing exercise.
- After a normal in-breath, purse your lips (like an exaggerated kiss) and breathe out through your mouth, counting at your own pace, until you sense a need to breathe in. Don't try too hard.
- Just repeat that a few times, breathing out through pursed lips, at your own pace.
- Now notice that if you can breathe easily through your nose, then on the out-breath you can close your lips, pause for a second or so, and then just let the air come back in, easily, without trying, through your nose while counting slowly.
- Notice that by exhaling fully and completely, your in-breath will be more full, without you even having to try. So just concentrate on easily letting all the air out, and you'll soon find that you can allow your out-breath to take slightly longer than your in-breath.
- Focus on breathing all the air out, letting the in-breath happen quite spontaneously. Allow that out-breath to be that bit slower and longer, than the in-breath.

When you've finished, relax your upper body, focus on the things around you and enjoy that feeling of relaxation.

**Long term:** plan time to relax and try to have a good night sleep. Lack of sleep or disturbed sleep is a common stress signal. Getting quality sleep is important as it helps your body and mind repair and recover. Adults usually need on average 7-8 hours sleep – but this can be difficult for some people, especially if you have children or work shifts. If this is the case aim to have at least 4 hours of sleep at the same time each day as this can help keep your sleep clock regular. If you are having problems sleeping try to:

- avoid caffeine (tea, coffee, cola etc) after 5pm
- cut out smoking before bed (or give it up altogether) - smoking is a stimulant and can keep you awake
- exercise - research shows that people who are regularly active fall asleep faster and sleep longer and more deeply than those who do less
- steer clear of big meals just before bed as your body will have problems trying to digest it
- avoid too much alcohol as it causes broken sleep and dehydration.

There are lots of excellent relaxation techniques and practices which use breathing, mental calming and the release of muscular tension to help relax your body and mind. They include **yoga, t'ai chi, massage, meditation and self-hypnosis** (see page 22 for more information on complementary therapies). Find out what's going on in your area through the local paper, library, gym, health centre, internet or local phone directory.

## Work out: stress and getting active

Keeping active improves your awareness and self-esteem as well as building up your stamina, strength and flexibility. All of these things will help to give you more energy, feel less stressed, more able to cope with life and generally make you feel good.

The exercise on the opposite page will boost your circulation and energy and gives your upper body a good stretch, it also loosens your upper back and tones up your waist. Remember doing even five minutes a day of this sort of easy office stretch should help you feel better, more energetic and less prone to work stress.

**Quick fix:** go for a brisk walk round the block – this can help clear your head and put problems in perspective. If you work, get some fresh air and get moving during breaks. You can also try this quick yoga based half moon stretch – great if you feel stuck in the office.

**Fact:** getting active improves your mood.

- Stand with your feet parallel and about shoulder width apart.
- Then bring your arms up over your head and interlace your fingers letting your chest open up – feel it relaxing, feel it opening up and sensing that your shoulders move back a little.
- Now breathe out stretching your hands to the left and take three easy slow breaths in that position.
- Then breathe in and stretch your arms up moving back to the middle; breathe out stretching your hands to the right, hold that stretch for three easy, slow breaths.
- Now breathe in as you move back to centre.
- Repeat this four times.
- On the final stretch feel the stretch letting your breath move down into your tummy – set your feet on the floor and be aware of your body.
- Feel the stretch down one side of your body, slowing and synchronising your breathing.
- When you're ready, just let your hands go and let your arms relax to your sides. Give them a good shake to stimulate the circulation.



**Long term:** aim to do at least 30 minutes of activity a day. This doesn't have to be done all at once and can be done in bouts of 10 minutes. Try building activity into your daily routine like:

- walking or cycling to the shops
- taking the stairs instead of lifts
- going for a walk with friends or family
- playing games with the children
- walking/cycling to work or meetings
- taking advantage of work-based exercise facilities or corporate deals at local gyms.

If you find it difficult to get started think about the long term benefits that exercise would bring to your life – like losing weight, having quality sleep and feeling more relaxed. Keep them written down as a reminder.

## Knock out: stress and the mind

Do you often find yourself having negative thoughts? Maybe you don't even realise you're doing it. Negative thoughts can really impact on how you feel and how you deal with things. When you're stressed, anxious or depressed you're more likely to have negative thoughts about life in general and other people – including yourself.

Knowing how to knock out negative thoughts and focus on the positive will help you cope better with stress. Thinking positively helps you handle stress better and feel happier and healthier.

**Quick fix:** when you're stressed try to stay positive. Tell yourself (out loud if it makes you feel better) "I can deal with this situation. I am calm. I can cope". This is known as an affirmation.

**Long term:** To shift your mindset in the longer term it can help to create positive affirmations that suit you and to really focus on them. Affirmations should be short and easy to remember. Try repeating them each day in a 10 minute session. You can also repeat them at any time when you're not needing to concentrate on anything else. Your affirmation needs to state clearly what you want, for example:

- **I'm healthy and I'm happy**
- **I have loads of energy**
- **I am calm and relaxed – whatever life throws at me**
- **I am going to succeed and be proud of myself.**

Your unconscious mind will soon start to absorb affirmations. This can bring about positive changes to your life and break that bad habit of being negative.

## Cut out: stress and what you eat

When you're stressed it's easy to seek refuge in junk food or a few too many glasses of wine! It may seem like a quick fix at the time but it won't help your stress levels in the long run. If you are very stressed it can affect what your body does with the food you eat. Prolonged stress can play havoc with your appetite, the way you digest food and the amount of nourishment you get from it.

Ongoing stress can also affect your body's production of insulin making your blood sugar levels less stable. This can lead to mood swings, tiredness and cravings for sugary, fatty or salty foods. So even if your diet is normally healthy in times of stress cravings for unhealthy 'comfort foods' can easily take over.

**Having a healthy balanced diet increases your body's resistance to stress.**

**Quick fix:** always eat breakfast. It's easily skipped when you're trying to rush out the house or you've lost your appetite. But taking just five minutes to eat a nourishing breakfast (like whole grain cereal) will boost your energy levels and prevent cravings for unhealthy foods when you're stressed.

**Long term:** improving your diet in general and drinking plenty of water will increase your body's resistance to stress.

**Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables to help boost your immune system** - aim to eat five portions a day. Make small changes like:

- chopping a banana on to your cereal or toast
- having a glass of fresh fruit juice with your lunch
- adding more veggies to home made recipes like grated carrots, peppers or courgettes to bolognaise sauce
- taking fruit to work to snack on.

**Have regular meals.** Avoid skipping them. Set aside time to relax and enjoy at least one meal a day, this will allow your body and brain to wind down as well as ensuring that you're eating the right things. **Plan meals** so eating more healthily doesn't have to be an effort.

**If you're stressed try to avoid:**

- caffeinated and sugary drinks – too many of these can make your heart race which can make you feel even more anxious
- alcohol - drinking in moderation is fine but if you overdo it and you're stressed you're placing even more strain on your system
- comfort eating – too much of the wrong stuff can lead to weight gain and other health problems like high blood pressure.

# Stress and workload

Do you ever feel so snowed under that you don't know where to start? Or that it's all work and no play?

Research shows that work is good for us. It benefits both your physical and mental health and can really boost your confidence and self-esteem. People who return to work after a period of unemployment or illness often show a marked improvement in their wellbeing.

## So what's the stress?

Lack of a sense of control over your work can make you feel negative and cause stress. Pressure to reach targets and hit deadlines can sometimes feel overwhelming. Once you're in the stress zone it can become a vicious circle. A problem becomes a crisis, you can't see a clear way forward, you become anxious, maybe even irrational – and so it goes on.

A good way to tackle this is to look at your approach to work. Building on your time management skills and learning how to deal with the demands more efficiently are key. But this is easier said than done if stress is taking its toll.

**Quick fix:** the first thing you need to do is regain control so you feel able to respond positively under pressure. You can only do this if you are feeling calm and relaxed. Try the following four-step approach to managing stress – it only takes 2-3 minutes.

## **Stop. Breathe. Reflect. Choose**

**Step 1. Stop.** Say 'Stop'. Just for a few moments, stop what you're doing and be aware of your negative thoughts.

**Step 2. Breathe.** Take an easy breath in, feel your tummy rise and fall. Notice that if it's your chest doing the work, you can slow that down and get the diaphragm to work. Remember to release any tension in your body as you breathe out. Breathe easy.

**Step 3. Reflect.** Consider what is really going on. Is this situation a crisis? If it's a crisis, will your worry and tension help you find a solution? Will this predicament still be important to you in two weeks time? Two months?

**Ask yourself logical questions now and listen to your logical answers.**

**Step 4. Choose.** Make a choice. You can choose how you're going to react positively. A choice that is best for you in the longer view. Make it. This choice will depend on the situation of course, but by entering into the SBRC process, you begin to understand that you have the power to choose your best actions – even when you're under stress. That you don't always have to become tense, angry or upset. You'll also notice that holding onto negative feelings and thoughts not only tends to make situations worse but it harms you.

**Try to do this until you can feel in more control of your reactions.**

Devised by researchers at the Harvard Medical School.

**Long term:** to manage your time more effectively prioritise your goals and leave enough time for the most urgent and important ones.

- Try writing a list of the things you want to accomplish.
- Next, decide which ones are the most important and which ones are most urgent.
- If you have deadlines look at these as a target to aim for; if you don't then you might find it helpful to set yourself 'to-do-by' dates.
- Allow enough time to do the things on your list so that you don't feel constantly under pressure. Once the urgent stuff is out of the way, you will find time to tackle important non-urgent tasks.
- Block out time to make a start on important longer term tasks.
- Plan ahead and include the amount of time you think it will take you to do each task – most importantly be realistic!
- Decide how many of the tasks you are likely to achieve in the next day and the next week and month.
- Keep track by looking at your list and updating it when new tasks arise or if you under or overestimate the time needed.

# Talk about stress

Talking about stress may help you see things in a different light and help you find a way forward in tackling practical problems that may be causing you stress.

## Talk with your boss

If you can't find a solution highlight the problem with your boss – remember, employers are keen to support you in finding positive ways to reduce work related stress. **If your stress is because of non-work worries your boss may be able to do something to relieve the pressure whilst you are at work.**

Don't let the thought of broaching the subject with your boss give you extra stress! If you find it difficult consider the following tips.

- **Book a time** with your boss to meet.
- **Prepare** – think about what is causing you stress and any potential solutions you may have. Make a note of these to discuss.
- **Think** about positive changes that you would like to make to help you work more effectively.
- **Make a list** of points and questions that you want to cover – especially if you're feeling under pressure as it's easy to forget things.
- **Help** your boss to help you by giving them the information they need.
- **Find out** if there are any training courses that may help you cope better – like time management or problem solving. If you need training for an area of work that is causing you stress your boss may be able to organise this for you.
- **Follow up** – arrange a meeting to make sure that you and your boss are happy with how things are progressing and that your stress levels have gone down!

If you don't want to speak directly to your boss you could raise the issue with a staff or trade union representative who can speak to your employer on your behalf.

### **Talk with your occupational health representative**

If your company has a counselling or occupational health service then use it. They are there to help you and the service is confidential. Research shows that people who experience work-based stress benefit from these services.

### **Talk with colleagues**

Good working relationships are important in dealing with stress. Getting advice on improving your work environment or prioritising tasks can help. Identifying colleagues who have knowledge of particular areas or who can simply offer a friendly ear can really help to relieve pressure.

### **Talk with friends or family**

Try not to go it alone. A good support network, even if it's just one other person, can help you deal with stress. Talk with family or friends about how you are feeling – they may be able to offer their support. Don't be afraid to ask for their help, even if it's just to lend an ear.

There are also voluntary organisations who can offer advice (see page 22).

### **Talk with a health professional**

Feeling run down, headaches, indigestion and sleeping problems can often be stress related and your pharmacist can give advice and over-the-counter treatment that may help, without the need for a prescription. They may also give you information and offer lifestyle advice on diet and getting active to help manage your stress levels in the long run. You can speak to your GP or practice nurse for advice and support, or contact NHS Direct (see page 23).

**Feel depressed or anxious?** Sometimes stress can feel overwhelming. This may trigger you to feel anxious or depressed. You can get help and support to deal with this. Speak to a GP, practice nurse or pharmacist. They can give you advice on how to cope and discuss treatments like exercise referral, other therapies or medication which may help.

## More information and advice

For more information on **complementary therapies** like massage and **hypnotherapy** for treating stress and details on how to find a well qualified practitioner visit **The Complementary Medical Association** website [www.the-cma.org.uk](http://www.the-cma.org.uk)

**Mind** is the leading mental health charity in England and Wales, and works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress. Contact MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163, [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk) or write to Mind, PO Box 277, Manchester, M60 3XN [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

If money or legal problems are causing you stress contact the **Citizens Advice Bureau** for free and confidential advice. Visit [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk) or look in your phone directory to find your local office.

The **Health and Safety Executive** produce information and advice on work related stress. Call 0845 34 500 55 or go to [www.hse.gov.uk/stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress)

**Samaritans** is available 24 hours a day to provide confidential emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair. Call on 08457 90 90 90, email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) or go to [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**NHS Direct** provides confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day through:

- NHS Direct Online at **[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)**;
- NHS Direct Interactive on digital satellite TV – simply press the ‘Interactive’ button on your remote control;
- the NHS Direct telephone service. Call 0845 4647\* (England and Wales only, people in Scotland can call NHS 24 on 08454 242424).

\*Calls are charged at BT local rates. Calls from mobiles or other networks may vary. A confidential interpretation service is available in many languages. For patients’ safety all calls are recorded.

[www.bhma.org](http://www.bhma.org)

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This booklet contains general information produced on behalf of the British Holistic Medical Association which can be used as the first step to help you decide the best course of action to take when you or your family are not well. In the absence of any examination it is not possible to reliably diagnose and treat a medical condition. Diagnosis can only be carried out by a suitably qualified health professional consultation.

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