



STRESS

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 everyone differently – what one person might find stressful may not be stressful for another.

Some stress can be 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. 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.

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 on the next page.

Outside world – background stresses

For example:

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

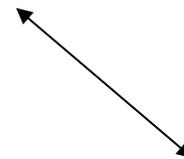
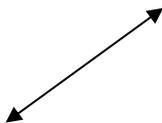


Negative thoughts

“Things are never going to get better.”

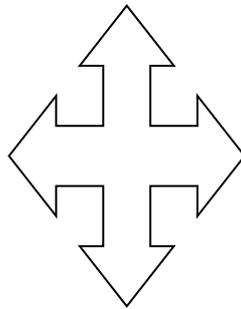
“I can’t cope with this.”

“I shouldn’t be feeling this way.”



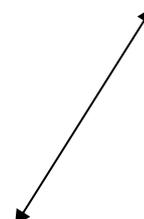
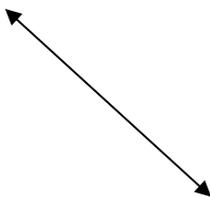
Behaviour

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

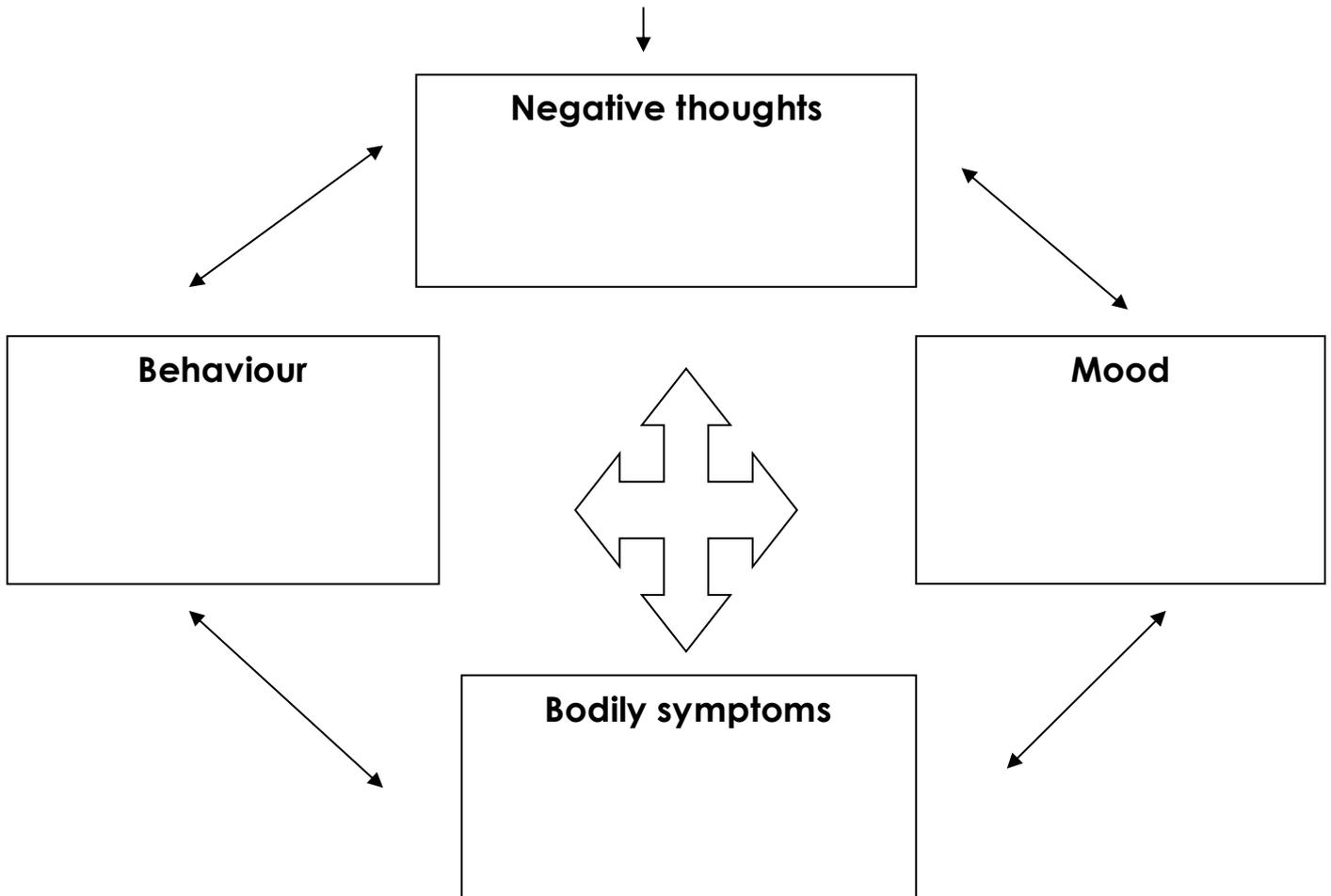
Try to draw out your own vicious cycle on the next page.

- What events or situations make you feel stressed? Put these under ‘background stresses’.
- What images or words go through your head? What sort of thoughts do you have about yourself, the situation or the future? Put these under ‘negative thoughts’.
- What things do you feel in your body? Put these under ‘bodily symptoms’.
- What is your mood like? This is usually just one word. Put these under ‘mood’.

The vicious cycle of stress

Outside world – background stresses

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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 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 very 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	• chest
• eyes	• lower back
• mouth and jaw	• stomach
• neck	• bottom
• shoulders	• thighs
• arms	• back of legs / front of legs
• hands	• 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.

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.

Situation	Thought
<p>E.g. Where were you? Who were you with? What was happening?</p> <p><i>I am sitting at work and my boss gives me another piece of work to do for the end of the week and I already have a pile of work on my desk.</i></p> <p><i>I come home and find an expensive bill and I don't have the money for it.</i></p> <p><i>I am on the phone and I have an argument with my brother.</i></p>	<p>What words or images were going through your head?</p> <p><i>“I can't cope with all of this, I am losing control.”</i></p> <p><i>“Things are just getting worse and worse, they will never get better.”</i></p> <p><i>“Everything just keeps going wrong, I don't know what to do.”</i></p>

Situation	Thought

Try asking yourself the questions below to help you to challenge your thoughts.

- Is there any evidence that does not support this thought?
- What would you say to a friend who was in a similar situation?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?
- How will you feel about this situation in 6 months or a year's time?
- What is another way of looking at this situation?

Acting differently - getting the balance right

When we are stressed, we often stop doing things that give us pleasure or a sense of closeness to others. Try to make sure that there is a balance of activities in your life. Ideally, there should be an equal balance of activities that give you a sense of *achievement*, *enjoyment* and *closeness to others* as these things can all help to improve mood. Here are some examples:

Achievement	Pleasure	Closeness to others
Doing some ironing Getting a report completed for work Dealing with bills and letters you have been putting off	Having a nice hot bath Watching a favourite film Having a bar of chocolate	Calling a friend for a chat Visiting relatives Going to a social group or club

Now, try to write your own below:

Achievement	Pleasure	Closeness to others

Acting differently - overcoming avoidance

When something makes us feel stressed, sometimes the most tempting thing to do is to avoid it. However, when we avoid things, we don't give ourselves the opportunity to test out our predictions about what might have happened. We might miss out on things that we would enjoy or that might be important to us.

To overcome avoidance, try breaking down the task into manageable steps.

- Try making a list of tasks or activities that you have been avoiding, for instance:
 1. complete the housework
 2. start a new exercise class
 3. telephone the bank
 4. prepare for a work meeting
- To make these tasks less overwhelming and more manageable, try selecting the easiest or most important task to focus on.
- Break this task down into manageable steps. For instance, if the task is to complete the housework, you might break this down into:
 1. wash and dry the dishes
 2. Hoover the lounge
 3. dust the surfaces
 4. put a load of washing on
- Then reward yourself, for example, with a cup of tea and a chocolate biscuit!

Try to do this yourself now below.

- Write a list of the tasks you have been avoiding here:

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....

- What one is the most important or the easiest that you would like to start first?

- 1.....

- What are the steps you need to carry out?

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

- Work your way through the steps, if one is too hard; try going back one step or breaking the step down. If you have a set-back, don't be put off. Try again soon or make the step a bit easier. Congratulate and reward yourself when you have done well!

- What will you do to reward yourself?

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Acting differently - managing your time

Managing your time effectively can be a very effective way to gain control of your stress levels, at home or at work. Here are some tips to help you do this:

- Set yourself **SMART** goals:
Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Realistic
Time-limited
- Rank priorities - identify what tasks are most important
- Plan your work. This may take up time but in the long-term it can keep you focussed on what you need to do
- Spend time organising your environment
- Don't procrastinate - putting off tasks just gives you more to do the next day
- Identify when you are most productive and try to complete the most demanding tasks then
- Keep a balance - make sure you have a balance of activities that are enjoyable and relaxing

Acting Differently - Lifestyle

Diet

A healthy diet helps us to cope better with stress. When we are stressed, we often rush about to try and get things done and this sometimes means we skip meals or eat convenience foods. It is important to set some time aside to sit down and enjoy our food. Eating should be pleasurable and relaxing. When we are stressed, we often eat foods high in sugar and fat as they give us a short-term surge of energy. However, these types of foods can result in irritability and mood swings. Try to cut down on foods high in sugar and fat. Instead, try to eat a balanced diet that includes plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Alcohol

We often assume that alcohol will make us feel better after a stressful day, but alcohol can actually act as a depressant, lowering mood and can increase anxiety and stress levels if consumed in excess. Alcohol can also affect sleep as it is stressful for our body to process alcohol. You might find that you have a disturbed sleep if you consume alcohol before bed. Try not to consume alcohol 2 hours before going to bed.

Try to stick to the recommended guidelines for alcohol intake.

Caffeine

Caffeine can be a helpful way to give us a boost when we are feeling tired. But we respond to caffeine in a similar way as we do to stress. This means that caffeine can sometimes lead to higher levels of anxiety, agitation and headaches. The effects of caffeine can last for six hours so try to not consume caffeine in the late afternoon and evening. Caffeine is found in energy drinks, coffee, tea, some painkillers, chocolate, hot chocolate and some soft drinks. You can get decaffeinated versions of many of these items.

Physical Exercise

There are a lot of benefits of regular physical exercise. Stress produces adrenaline and regular exercise can help to use up these adrenaline resources. Exercise produces natural anti-depressants and can improve mood. There are also lots of health benefits of regular exercise, including reduced muscle tension.

The ideal amount of exercise is 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. It is a good idea to start slowly and build up the intensity. Try to think of ways to exercise by doing something that you enjoy, like taking up a sport you used to play or going for a walk with a friend.

Acting differently – asking for help

When we are stressed, we can feel alone like we are the only person that feels like this. We also often feel like we “*should*” be able to sort these things on our own. Sometimes we don’t want to tell other people how we are feeling because we don’t want to be a burden to them. It is important to share how you are feeling with someone that you trust. Having support from others is a helpful way of coping better. It means that you can get some ideas of advice and ways to cope with your difficulties. You may prefer to express your feelings in writing, or with the use of images. It can also make you feel better to share how you are feeling, and you might find that other people feel in a similar way or have had similar experiences in the past.

Further Information

www.nhsinform.scot

www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing

[What to do if you are struggling with stress | NHS inform](#)