



THE BUPA STRESS GUIDE

HOW TO IDENTIFY, UNDERSTAND AND MANAGE YOUR STRESS

bupa.co.uk/stress

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a fast-paced world that seems to be ever-changing, stress can feel like an unavoidable part of everyday life. If you often feel stressed, or live or work in a stressful environment you may be wondering what effects it can have on your health.

Stress in 21st century Britain is widespread. Research by Bupa reveals that 44% of adults currently feel stressed with over a third of these (36%) stating they've been stressed for more than six months, and over a quarter (28%) reporting that they've been stressed for more than a year.¹

There are times when stress can have some positive effects – such as when you're playing sport or working towards a deadline. However, being stressed over a long period of time can have a negative impact on how well you function mentally and physically.

It's important, therefore, for people to be informed about the possible signs and symptoms of longer term stress to help them to identify whether their stress levels are becoming a cause for concern. While there is no catch-all cure for stress there are number of things that people can do to help them understand their stress and what is causing it. There are also a number of positive steps people can take to help them to reduce their stress levels and to give them back a sense of control and wellbeing.

This guide has been created to provide more information about stress, its causes and effects and to offer people some practical advice about how to manage it.

We hope that you find it helpful.

Dr Sandra Delroy,
*Clinical Director, Mental Health,
Bupa Health Funding*

¹ YouGov Plc surveyed 10,241 adults between 16th–22nd October 2013. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).



Stress is a physical reaction to a perceived threat. Everyone reacts to stress differently depending on their personality and how they respond to pressure.

2. WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress can be defined as the way that we feel when the pressure we are under exceeds our ability to cope.

Everyone reacts to stress differently depending on their personality and how they respond to pressure. While one person may thrive in a high pressure environment, for example, this may be unbearable for another.

Stress is a physical reaction to a perceived threat. Like many of the body's control mechanisms, our response to stress happens without us having to think about it via an involuntary reaction known as the 'fight or flight' response.

When we sense danger or have a shock, the human body releases hormones (chemicals produced by your body), such as adrenalin, that contribute to the 'fight or flight' response. These hormones increase the heart rate and blood pressure so that more oxygen and glucose can get to the muscles.

The hormones also cause us to breathe faster and sweat more to cool these muscles down. All of these reactions prepare us to take action to deal quickly with a possible threat.

In the short term, stress 'revs up' the body and heightens our ability to carry out tasks and meet deadlines. Some stress is good for us and a certain level of pressure can help us to prepare for actions and challenges.

However, the heightened emergency state that stress creates is only meant to last for a short period of time. Modern day stresses such as money or work worries can mean we experience stress in a more sustained and relentless way, which - over time - can have a negative effect on how we cope with situations and can even be damaging to health.

3. CAUSES OF STRESS

Stress is an individual experience that can be caused by many different kinds of situations and events, including:

WORK

- increased demands
- changes in work patterns
- feeling unsettled or insecure at work

PERSONAL

- relationships with partners
- family relationships
- serious illness in yourself, your friends or family members
- caring for a family member or friend with a disability

LIFE EVENTS

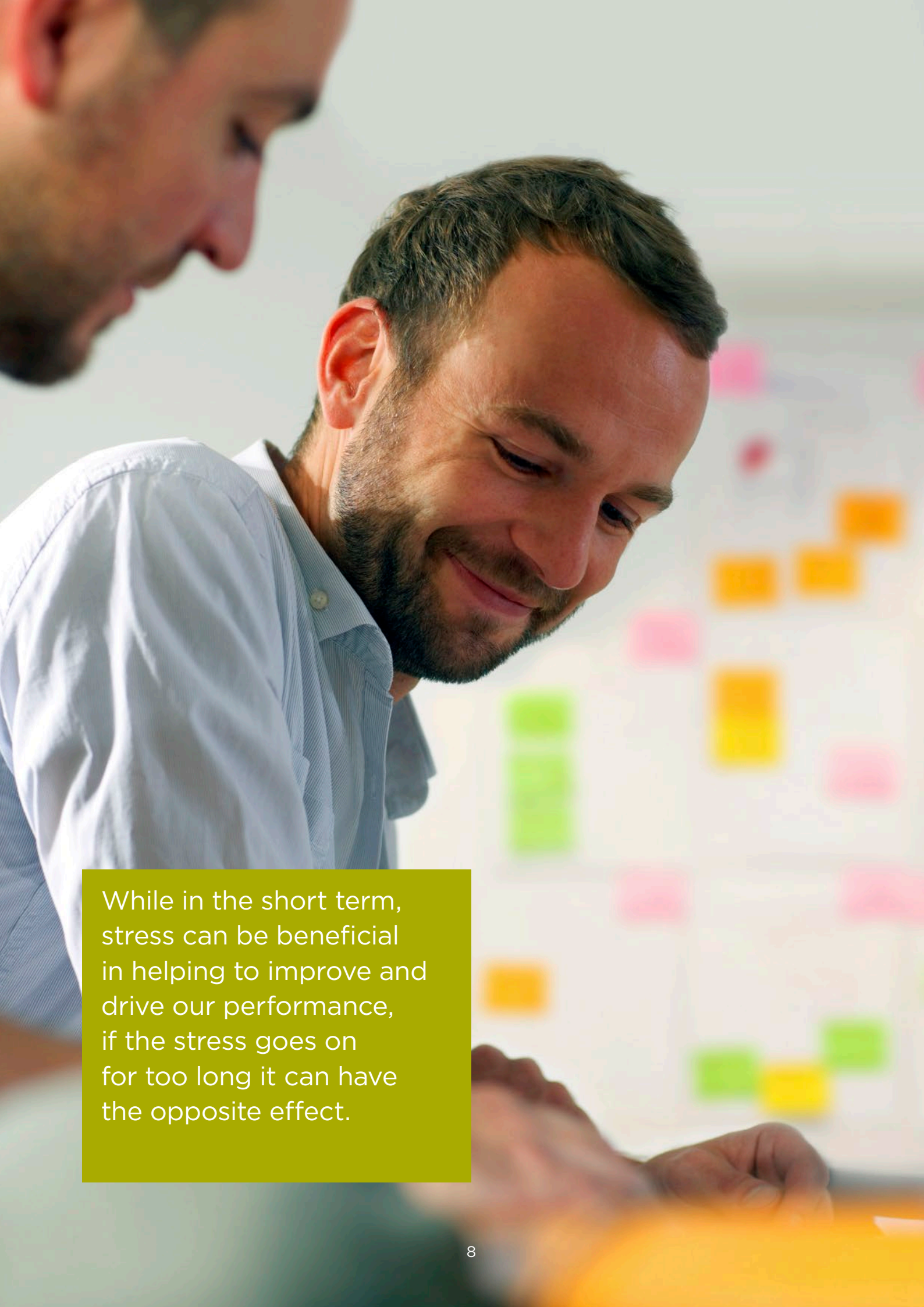
- moving house
- divorce
- unemployment
- bereavement

Stress can also be caused by a build-up of small things over time, for example, not feeling valued at work or finding it hard to deal with a child's behaviour. Sometimes there is no obvious cause for stress.

There is a difference between temporary stress, which usually goes away once a specific problem is resolved, and long-term, sustained stress that can be damaging to you, your health and those around you.



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4. THE PROBLEM WITH STRESS

While, in the short term, stress can be beneficial in helping to improve and drive our performance, if the stress goes on for too long, or causes too much anxiety, it can have the opposite effect, and decrease our ability to function effectively.

Severe and sustained stress can also trigger longer term mental and physical health problems, including;

- heart disease;
- anxiety and depression;
- diabetes;
- imbalances of blood sugar;
- increase in abdominal fat storage;
- suppressed thyroid activity;
- decreased bone density;
- decreased muscle mass;
- high blood pressure; and
- lowered immunity.

Stress may also contribute to unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, eating an unhealthy diet and excessive alcohol consumption. While it may feel like these behaviours help to tackle stress in the short term by helping people to relax, in the long term they can actually exacerbate stress and cause other health problems.



5. IDENTIFYING STRESS

Everyone reacts to stress in different ways, but when we feel stressed it can affect everything we do - from how we feel and think to how our bodies work.

Excessive stress can prevent us from functioning at our best, impacting our ability to think clearly, manage our emotions, respond physically to the everyday demands of life and to moderate our behaviour. This is why it's important for people to understand the effects of stress and to try to identify early whether their stress levels are becoming a longer term problem.



Stress is not a medical diagnosis and there is no specific test to diagnose it. There are however a number of common changes in our thinking, emotions, physical wellbeing and behaviours that can be caused by stress, and which can be used as a guide to identify stress:

**THE WAY YOU
THINK HAS
CHANGED**

“I don’t seem to be thinking right”

-
- constant worrying, anxious thoughts
 - inability to concentrate
 - memory problems
 - poor judgment
 - seeing only the negative
 - increasingly critical of self and others

**THE WAY YOU
FEEL ABOUT
THINGS HAS
CHANGED**

“I don’t usually feel this bad”

-
- changes in your mood
 - irritability or having a short fuse, getting bad-tempered
 - an inability to relax - ‘edginess’
 - feeling overwhelmed
 - a sense of loneliness
 - depression
 - feeling afraid

THE WAY YOU FEEL PHYSICALLY HAS CHANGED

“If I’m just run down, how long is it going to take to be well again?”

- aches and pains
- diarrhoea and constipation
- nausea or dizziness
- loss of balance
- chest pains
- loss of sex drive
- frequent colds

YOUR HABITS AND BEHAVIOURS IN DAILY ROUTINE HAVE CHANGED, BUT NOT BY CHOICE

- eating more or less
- sleeping too much or too little
- isolating yourself from others
- neglecting or putting off responsibilities
- increasing intake of alcohol, or illegal drugs, and maybe smoking more
- nervous habits, for example, nail biting or not being able to sit still
- loss of control

The more of these changes that people experience, and the longer that they have been going on for, the more important it is for people to seek medical advice.

6. MANAGING STRESS

We all feel stressed at some point throughout our lives. And, because everyone reacts to stress differently, it's impossible to find a definitive way to prevent being affected by stress. However, there are things you can do to help you cope with stress and lower your risk of developing longer term health problems.

The first stage in helping to tackle stress is recognition – understanding that you are under unusual pressure.

The next stage is to assess whether the stress you are under is within, or partly within, your control, and if so if there are certain self-help techniques that will help you.

However, if self-help isn't having an effect, or if you're concerned about your stress levels or feel very anxious, you should always talk to your GP. They will usually be able to recognise the symptoms of stress and give you advice about how to deal with it or refer you to a counsellor or psychotherapist if you need one.

If you have health insurance or support from an Employee Assistance Programme available to you, this could also provide direct access to a counsellor or psychotherapist if appropriate.

Find a solution that fits you, your lifestyle and your personality. There is no right or wrong approach as everyone reacts to stress in different ways, so different approaches will work for different people.



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TOP 10 TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

1

Understand the problem - if you understand a bit about what is causing your stress, you'll be better able to deal with it.

- Help yourself - find out what is causing you to feel stressed and consider how you're going to tackle it.
- Take action - if you can affect what's causing you stress, take steps to reduce the pressure you are under e.g by asking a colleague for help with a project.
- Talk things over with a friend or a family member. They will be able to offer a different perspective and the simple step of sharing your feelings can have a beneficial impact in itself.

2

Take back control - feeling out of control can increase your feelings of stress.

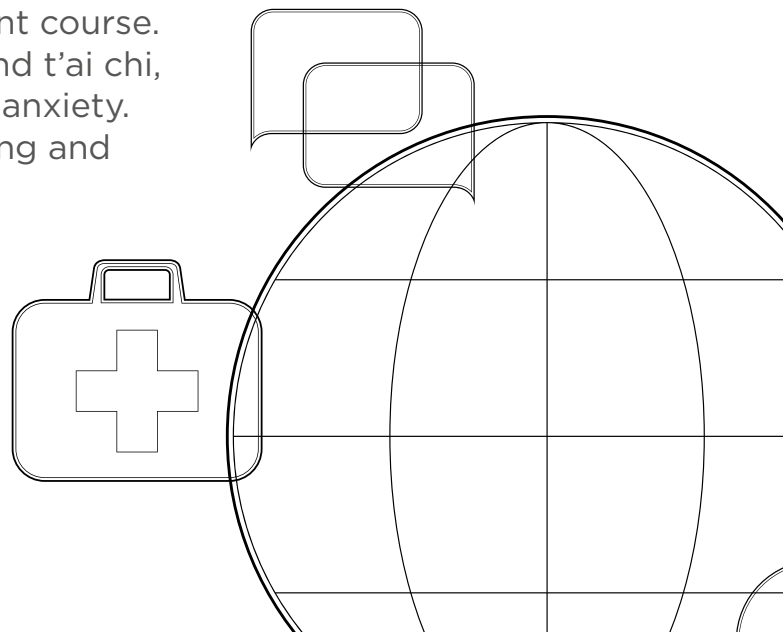
- Plan more effectively and prioritise the more important jobs first.
- Know your limitations - don't take on too much.
- Concentrate on the things you have control over - consider your options and see what steps you can take to address what is concerning you.
- Hold on to your self-esteem - focus on what is going well and remember your strengths.

3 Take breaks - taking a break can help you to see things more clearly.

- Have a breather or take a brief break regularly. Make yourself a cup of tea or go for a short stroll outside.
- Change your environment, work from home for a day a week, or even just in a different room. Changing location can help to change your perspective.

4 Learn to relax - relaxing will help you to reduce your stress levels. Take some deep breaths - stress is a physical reaction and deep breathing helps to counteract its effects.

- Make time to practice some simple relaxation techniques that will help to relax your muscles and slow your breathing.
- Try different techniques to manage your stress - this may include self-help books and audio tapes, or attending a stress management course. Meditative approaches, such as yoga and t'ai chi, can be effective at reducing stress and anxiety. Yoga can help you control your breathing and relax your mind.





5

Exercise – is good for your wellbeing.

It can improve your mood, help you sleep, give you a sense of achievement and helps you release daily stress.

- Improve your mood – when you exercise, chemicals called endorphins are released. Endorphins make you feel relaxed and happy.
- Manage your weight – changes in your weight can affect how you feel – there is a strong link between depression and obesity, for example. Exercise can help you to maintain a healthy weight.
- Incorporate exercise into your daily routine – a brisk walk to the shops, cycling to work or gardening can all help.
- Set yourself a target – the recommended healthy level of physical activity is 150 minutes (two and a half hours) of moderate exercise a week. Moderate exercise means your breathing is faster, your heart rate is increased and you feel warmer – this should be done in bouts of 10 minutes or more. One way to achieve this is by carrying out 30 minutes of exercise on at least five days each week.

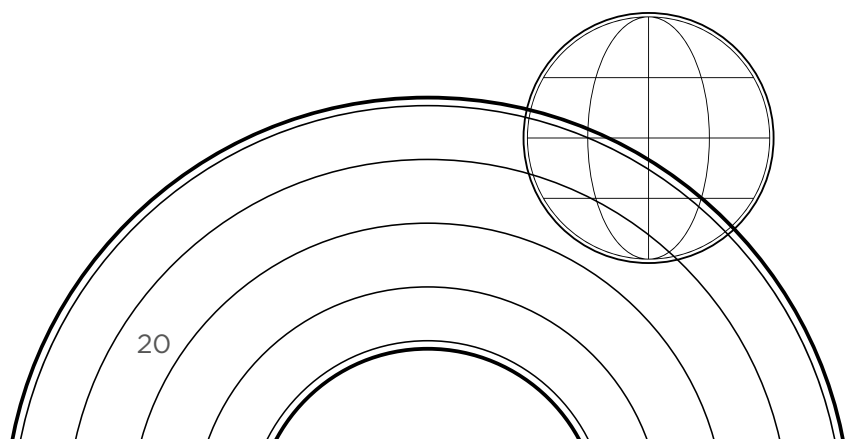
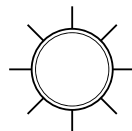
6 **Get enough sleep** – Feeling stressed or anxious is a key reason for insomnia

- Establish a sleep routine – our bodies get used to a routine so try to go to bed and get up at the same times each day – even at the weekend. And don't nap during the day.
- Wind down before bed – take some time out to relax and wind down before going to bed by having a warm bath, having a hot drink or reading in a quiet, calm place without distractions.
- Practice relaxation techniques – listening to self-hypnosis CDs or meditating before going to bed can distract you from your day and make you feel calm before rest.
- Write down your thoughts before going to sleep – it can help if you're stressed or worried about something. If this doesn't work, get up and do something relaxing for 20 minutes, such as reading a book, before trying again to get to sleep.

- Take regular physical exercise – this should help you to sleep better, giving you more energy the next day. If you haven't exercised for a while, start slowly and build up. Once you get into a routine, you will feel fitter and less tired.

7 **Make time for the activities you enjoy** – you're more likely to neglect this area of your life if you're stressed.

- Make time for the activities you enjoy. While you may not feel you have any time to spare, it is important to try to find the time to do things for you, and to do things you like doing. It will help you to relax and ensure that you take the breaks that will benefit you.
- Socialise with friends – have fun and try to laugh! It will distract you from what is causing your concern.
- Spend time with nature – take a trip to the countryside, or take a dog for a walk.







8

Eat a healthy diet – diet can affect your emotional and mental health.

- **Eat regular meals** – your brain needs a consistent flow of nutrients to work properly.
- **Limit your intake of high-fat foods** such as crisps, cakes, chocolates, pastries and puddings. If you're suffering from symptoms of depression, or a low mood, you may comfort eat.
- **Eat a balanced diet:**
 - **Carbohydrates** are a really important part of your diet as they are your body's main source of energy. They should make up a quarter to a third of your plate for each of your meals. Try to go for wholegrain carbohydrates as they are rich in vitamins and minerals.
 - **Proteins** are needed by your body for growth and repair. They are also a good source of energy and help to prevent spikes in your blood sugar levels, which affect your mood. Proteins are made up of amino acids, sometimes referred to as building blocks. Tryptophan is an amino acid that your body needs to produce serotonin. This is a chemical which regulates your mood, sleep and appetite. Good sources of tryptophan include: lean meat, fish, eggs and beans.
 - **Some fats** are healthy, such as omega-3, which is commonly known as an essential fatty acid. It plays an important role in the structure and function of your brain, helping it to communicate smoothly and it needs to be obtained via your diet. The best sources of omega-3 are oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and sardines. Aim to eat two to four portions of this type of fish every week (only two portions if you are breastfeeding or pregnant)
 - **Vitamins and minerals:** Include folic acid and vitamin B in your diet as they can lower the levels of homocysteine in your blood, a toxic amino acid which can cause depression. Foods such as wholegrain cereals, fruits and vegetables are rich in vitamins and minerals, including vitamin B and folic acid. Also ensure that you get enough vitamin D, as a deficiency in this vitamin is connected to depression and seasonal affective disorder.
 - **Drink enough liquids** – water makes up over half of your body. Dehydration can affect how your mind and body feels so it's vital that you drink enough throughout the day to stay hydrated. Most people need about 1.5 to 2 litres of fluid a day. Water is the best drink to have, but if you feel like a change try low-calorie squash or a small pure fruit juice.

9

Unhealthy behaviours – cut

down on excessive alcohol and caffeine consumption – try to stop smoking. In the long term these things will only make you feel worse.

- Don't drink too much alcohol – drinking within safe limits is unlikely to do you any harm but if you regularly drink too much alcohol, not only do you risk your health, but depending on how much and how often you drink, your work and relationships may also be affected. The Department of Health guidelines recommend not regularly drinking more than:
 - three or four units a day for men
 - two or three units a day for women
- Cut down on caffeine – try not to have too many drinks that contain caffeine, such as coffee, tea, cola or energy drinks. These types of drinks can give you headaches and put you in a bad mood when the caffeine wears off.
- Stop smoking – this will benefit your health and give you more energy. To stop smoking, get support and treatment from your GP or local NHS Stop Smoking Service. Make a plan of action for stopping smoking, and stick to it. Tell your friends and family that you're trying to stop smoking, and get their help and support. Stay positive and remind yourself of what you have already achieved when the going gets tough.

10

Visit your GP – or healthcare professional

- Seek help from healthcare professionals to get the support you need if the above methods to reduce the effects of stress don't work. To help you to better cope with stress, your GP may recommend options such as talking therapies or medicines.

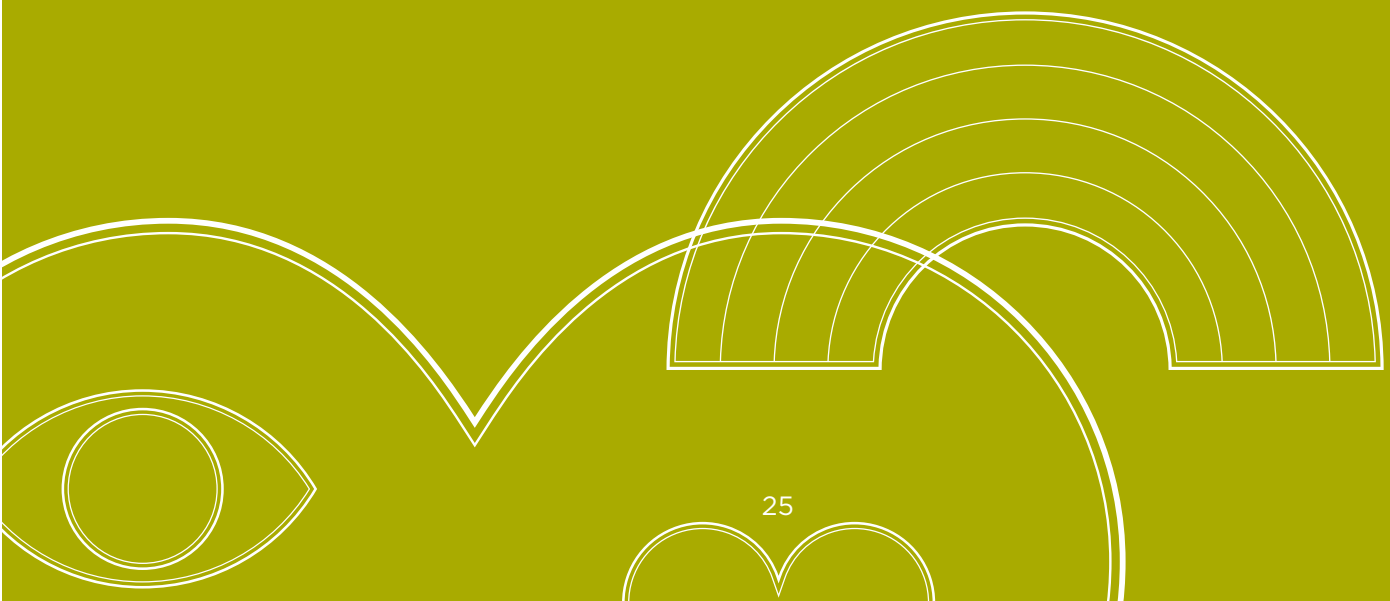
7. PROFESSIONAL HELP

The following may be suggested by your GP or healthcare professional if you seek help for stress:

Talking therapies

The aim of therapy is to help people to make changes, which lead to an increased sense of fulfilment, self-esteem and mental wellbeing. There are a number of different kinds of therapy. The three main approaches are humanistic, behavioural and psychodynamic, all of which help people look at how they relate to things and have the potential to improve individuals' responses to stressful events.

- **Humanistic therapies** focus on the emotional and personal development aspect of people's lives. They aim to help people 'to move towards becoming the person they are' and to reach their potential. When people are feeling flooded with external stress, getting back in touch with who they truly are can ward off some of those stresses and serve to provide more balance in their lives. The balance may be between external factors over which they have less control, and self-development which may be more within their control.





- **Behaviour therapy** is based on dealing with people's stresses on a practical level and includes techniques such as relaxation, hypnotherapy, problem-solving and assertiveness training. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) focuses on the way people think about situations. The rationale is that if people can change the way they think about situations, that can in turn alter the way they feel, which can consequently modify their responses. CBT has been effective in treating depression, where people become stuck in the depressive cycle of negative thoughts about themselves, their future and the world in which they live. By learning to challenge their thoughts some people can break out of this negative chain of thinking.
- **The psychodynamic approach** focuses on the conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious workings of the mind in order to better understand more about our reactions to the various stressors that affect our lives. This approach allows people to learn more about themselves and how they are in relationships with other people. It can help us understand more about the way we defend ourselves against anxiety and the extent to which those defence mechanisms are adaptive (helpful) or maladaptive (unhelpful). By understanding more about our patterns of responding to stressful situations, we can learn to respond differently to try to create different outcomes.

Complementary therapies

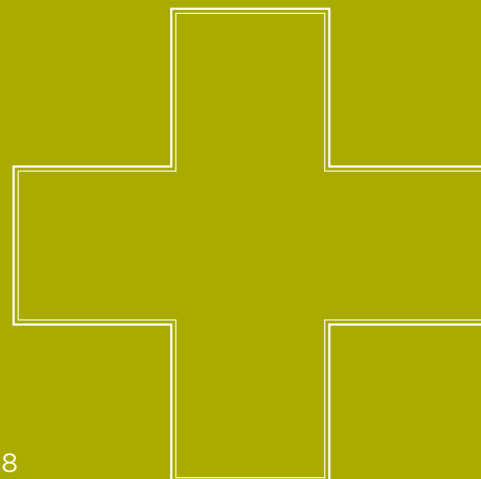
Massage and aromatherapy can promote a sense of wellbeing and provide a relaxing environment that helps you unwind. There is little scientific evidence to show whether or not aromatherapy is an effective treatment for stress, although there is anecdotal evidence to support its use. Aromatherapy may not be suitable for everyone.

Some people find that other complementary therapies offer some benefit, including acupuncture, visualisation, reflexology and herbal remedies. However, there isn't enough evidence to say if they are effective or not. Speak with your GP before you start any complementary therapy.

You may find herbal remedies helpful, but it's important to remember that natural doesn't mean harmless. Herbal remedies contain active ingredients and may interact with other medicines or cause side-effects. Don't start taking any herbal remedies without speaking to your GP or pharmacist first.

Medicines

Sometimes, depending on how severe your stress is, your GP may prescribe you antidepressants. Although antidepressants are primarily used to treat depression, many can be prescribed for other conditions, such as different forms of anxiety.





FURTHER INFORMATION

The following organisations will be able to provide further information about stress and the effects of stress.

- **Bupa**

For more information about stress visit www.bupa.co.uk/stress

For more information about Bupa health insurance visit www.bupa.co.uk

Telephone: 0800 077 8961

- **Mind**

Telephone: 0300 123 3393
www.mind.org.uk

- **Mental Health Foundation**
www.mhf.org.uk

- **Samaritans**

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90
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