

How to
manage stress



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How to manage stress

This booklet is for anyone who wants to know how to deal with stress and how to learn to relax. It explains when and how stress can be bad for you, and provides helpful strategies for dealing with it and where to go for further help.

Contents

What is stress?	4
What causes stress?	4
Is stress harmful?	5
How can I tell if I'm under too much stress?	7
What's the best way to handle pressure?	8
How can I learn to relax?	9
What if relaxation doesn't work for me?	16
What else can I do to cope with stress?	16
Useful contacts	20

What is stress?

We all sometimes talk about stress, and feeling stressed, usually when we feel we have too much to do and too much on our minds, or other people are making unreasonable demands on us, or we are dealing with situations that we do not have control over.

Stress is not a medical diagnosis, but severe stress that continues for a long time may lead to a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, or more severe mental health problems.

You can reduce the effects of stress by being more conscious of the things that cause it, and learning to handle them better, using relaxation techniques as well as other life-style changes.

What causes stress?

Situations which are recognised to be very stressful are associated with change, and with lack of control over what is happening. Some of the causes of stress are happy events, but because they bring big changes or make unusual demands on you, they can still be stressful.

Some of the most stressful events are:

- moving house
- getting married
- having a baby
- bereavement
- serious illness in yourself or a friend or family member.

Stress is also caused by long-term difficult circumstances, such as:

- unemployment
- poverty
- relationship problems
- caring for a disabled family member or friend

- difficulties at work
- bad housing
- noisy neighbours.

Not having enough work, activities or change in your life can be just as stressful as have too much activity and change to deal with.

Is stress harmful?

Stress can have a positive side. A certain level of stress may be necessary and enjoyable in order to help you prepare for something or to actually do it – e.g. if you are taking part in a performance, taking an exam or you have to do an important piece of work for a deadline – it will be stressful even if you enjoy it, and the stress itself will keep you alert and focussed.

Our physical reactions to stress are determined by our biological history and the need to respond to sudden dangers that threatened us when we were still hunters and gatherers. In this situation, the response to danger was 'fight or flight'. Our bodies still respond in this way, releasing the hormones adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline

The release of adrenaline causes rapid changes to your blood flow and increases your breathing and heart rate, to get you ready to defend yourself (fight) or to run away (flight). You become pale, sweat more and your mouth becomes dry.

Your body responds in this way to all types of stress as if it were a physical threat. You may merely be having an argument with someone, but your body may react as though you were facing a wolf. If the threat is physical, you use the effects of the adrenaline appropriately – to fight or to run, and when the danger is passed your body recovers. But if the stress is emotional, the effects of adrenaline subside more slowly, and you may go on feeling agitated for a long time. If the causes of stress

How to manage stress

are long-term, you may always be tensed up to deal with them and never relaxed. This is very bad for both your physical and your mental health.

Cortisol

The other stress hormone, cortisol, is present in your body all the time, but levels increase in response to danger and stress. In the short-term, its effects are positive, to help you deal with an immediate crisis, but long-term stress means that cortisol builds up and creates a number of stress-related health problems.

Short-term positive effects:

- a quick burst of energy
- decreased sensitivity to pain
- increase in immunity
- heightened memory.

Long-term negative effects:

- imbalances of blood sugar
- increase in abdominal fat storage
- suppressed thyroid activity
- decreased bone density
- decreased muscle mass
- high blood pressure
- lowered immunity
- less able to think clearly.

People's tolerance of stress varies. A situation that is intolerable to one person may be stimulating to another. What you feel is determined not just by events and changes in the outside world, but how you perceive and respond to them.

The important point is that you can learn to recognise your own responses to stress and develop skills to deal with it well.

How can I tell if I'm under too much stress?

There are a number of symptoms that suggest you are under stress. The more of the following you experience, the more stressed you are.

How your body may react

- fast shallow breathing
- headaches
- constant tiredness
- restlessness
- sleeping problems
- tendency to sweat
- nervous twitches
- cramps or muscle spasms
- pins and needles
- high blood pressure
- feeling sick or dizzy
- constipation or diarrhoea
- craving for food
- indigestion or heart-burn
- lack of appetite
- sexual difficulties
- fainting
- chest pains
- grinding your teeth at night

How you may feel

- irritable
- aggressive
- depressed
- fearing failure
- dreading the future
- a loss of interest in others
- taking no interest in life
- neglected
- that there's no-one to confide in
- a loss of sense of humour
- bad or ugly
- fearful that you are seriously ill

How you may behave

- finding it difficult to make decisions
- finding it difficult to concentrate
- denying there's a problem
- avoiding difficult situations
- frequently crying
- biting your nails
- unable to show your true feelings
- being very snappy or aggressive
- finding it difficult to talk to others

If you tick off your own reactions, you can get an idea of your personal responses to stress. This can help you recognise signs of stress coming on, in the future.

What's the best way to handle pressure?

If your stress is caused by the pressure of being too busy and trying to fit too much into the day, you will need to plan each day, with time for work and other tasks, and time for relaxation. Making time for leisure, exercise and holidays is just as essential as spending time on business or home worries.

Remember that a little stress is good for the body and alerts the mind. But it needs to be short-term and to be followed by a period of relaxation.

Manage your time

- **Identify your best time of day** (you may be a morning person or an evening person) and do the important tasks that need the most energy and concentration at that time.
- **Make a list of things you have to do.** Arrange them in order of importance, and try to do the most urgent ones first.
- **Try to vary your tasks in a day.** Vary dull jobs with interesting ones, tiring jobs with easier ones.
- **Try not to do too many things at once.** You could try to start something else if you have to wait for the next stage in a previous task, but if you have too many things going on at the same time, you will start to make mistakes.

Act positively

- Once you've finished a task, take a few moments to **pause and relax**. Maybe have a healthy snack, spend a few minutes looking at the sky, or try a relaxation exercise (See pp. 14-15).
- **Have a change of scene.** A short walk can make a big difference to how you feel, even if it's a simple walk round the block. Try to focus on what is happening around you, rather than thinking about your worries.
- At the end of each day, sit back and **reflect on what you've achieved**, rather than spending time worrying about what still needs to be done.
- **Try to get away every so often**, if you can, even if it's only for a day out.

- **Develop an absorbing hobby or interest** – an activity that uses your brain in a completely different way from your everyday work can be a great release. It can also be a great way to make new friends. This is sometimes easier when you are focussing on a shared activity with others, and not on yourself.
- **Make time for your friends.** Talking to them about your day and the things you find difficult can help you keep things in perspective – and you can do the same for them. Smiling and laughing with them will also produce hormones which help you to relax.
- **Practise being straightforward and assertive in communicating with others.** If other people are making unrealistic or unreasonable demands on you, be prepared to tell them how you feel and to say no. (See the Impact Factory website in 'Useful contacts' for tips on assertiveness.)
- **If you find yourself in conflict with another person, try to find solutions which are positive for them as well as for you.** Try to find the real cause of the problem and deal with it.

Try to accept things you can't change

It isn't always possible to change the things you don't like or find difficult, but you can try and change your own attitude to them so that you don't build up feelings of resentment or start taking your feelings out on others.

●● *I saw a big road junction in India with a red traffic light that said, 'Relax'. Maybe more road junctions should have these.* ●●

How can I learn to relax?

Relaxation is the natural answer to stress. Everyone should make time in the day to relax, whether we feel under stress, or not.

People often confuse relaxation with recreation. However, if hobbies or other activities – including exercise – become excessive, and make you feel even more driven or pressurised, they cease to be relaxing. If you are already exhausted in daily life, trying to relax by doing even more is not the answer.

The first thing is to become more relaxed in daily life and not to waste energy on things that don't require it; such as fidgeting impatiently while you wait for the kettle to boil, or getting impatient with the photocopier. Instead take the opportunity for a few moments of calm.

The second is to learn some breathing and relaxation techniques.

Breathing

Relaxation starts with breathing. Many people – especially those who are under stress – have a tendency to take shallow breaths, using only the top part of their chest to breathe, and not their stomach muscles. [Learning to breathe more deeply can make you feel a lot calmer and increase your sense of wellbeing.](#) Making your out-breath longer than your in-breath is especially calming.

To improve the way you breathe, try this simple exercise:

- Sit down, or lie down on your back. Make sure you are comfortable, and loosen any tight clothing.
- Notice how you are breathing, how fast, how deeply, and how regularly.
- Put one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach, just below your belly button.
- Slowly breathe out (count to 11)
- Gently breathe in (count to 7), so that you feel your stomach rise slowly under your hand.
- Breathe out again (count to 11), feeling your stomach fall.
- Pause for a few moments and then repeat the process again.

If you find that only the hand on your stomach moves, then you are breathing correctly. There should be little or no movement in your upper chest; your hand should stay still. Once you have learned to breathe this way, you may find you get into the habit of it all the time, and not just at chosen relaxation times.

Relaxation techniques

There are three important parts to relaxation techniques:

- **Preparation** – this means making time for relaxation, choosing a suitable position (see pp. 12-13 for some examples) and making sure you are comfortable.
- **Method** – this should follow a logical sequence, and it will be more effective if you stick to the suggested order.
- **Recovery** – this should be part of any exercise you do (see p.15). Make sure you include time for this part in your plans.

Preparation

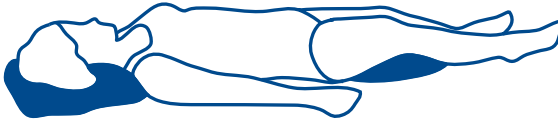
With regular practice and repetition, relaxation will become second nature.

- If possible, plan to set aside a specific time each day
- If you can, choose a quiet place. It's easier to learn if you are not interrupted.
- If you have young children, see if they will join in doing the exercises and then snuggle up to enjoy the peace and stillness.
- It's impossible to relax if you are cold, so make sure you are comfortably warm.
- Avoid practising relaxation when you are hungry or just after eating a meal.
- If you use a CD or MP3 player have it close by so that you can operate it without difficulty.

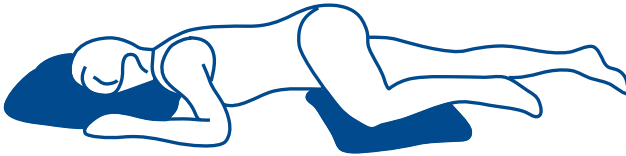
Don't worry about whether you're doing everything correctly; just do what you can, and enjoy the feeling.

Whichever relaxation technique you use (see pp. 14-15), how you position your body is crucial to it working effectively.

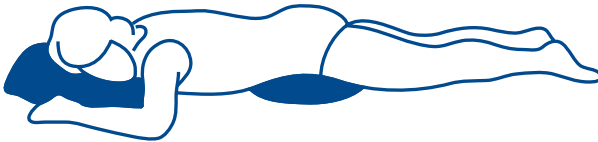
Effective positions for relaxation



- Support your head, neck and knees
- Head should be level, not tilted back or pushed forward

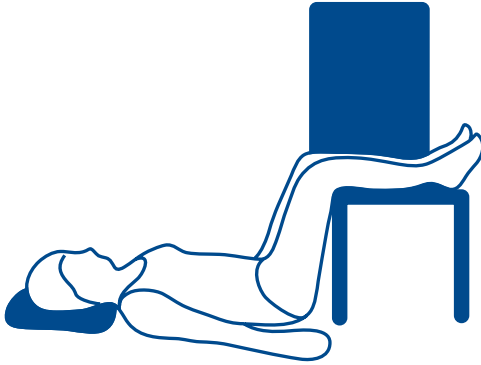


- 'Old' recovery position
- Support under head and knees
- Good if pregnant



- Support under pelvis
- Good if overweight or with large/heavy bust

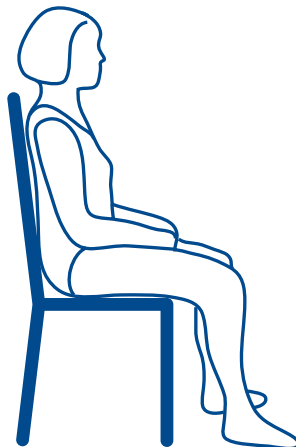
Based on drawings by Michael Atherton, previously used in the now discontinued *The Mind guide to relaxation*



- Knees high enough to reduce tension in stomach muscles
- Legs on chair sideways
- Support right up to behind knees
- Good for relieving lower backache



- Ensure table is close and arms are not stretched out
- Alternatively, kneel beside a bed



- Back fully supported by chair
- Chin and thighs parallel to the floor
- Feet and hands resting easily

Method

A simple relaxation exercise

Try this every now and again, especially when you feel under pressure. It should take you no more than five to ten minutes.

- Have a stretch. Then let your shoulders and arms relax into a comfortable position.
- Notice any tension in your feet, ankles, calves, knees, thighs, chest, arms, shoulders and neck.
- If you are sitting in a chair, or on the floor, allow yourself to feel as if the chair or the floor is supporting your whole weight.
- Try to be peaceful; loosen your jaw and face.
- Follow the breathing technique described on p. 10.
- Close your eyes and imagine a peaceful scene, then imagine that you are really there.

Like many other things, relaxation takes practice, but it is possible to learn how to relax, even for short periods during your working day.

Simple muscle relaxation exercise

- Once in a comfortable relaxation position, close your eyes and listen to your breathing.
- Try to slow down your breathing and make it deeper, following the suggestions on p. 10.
- With each out-breath, relax each part of your body, in turn, from your feet to the top of your head.
- As you focus on each part of your body, think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
- When you have reached your head, just listen to your breathing and enjoy being still and comfortable.
- After 20 minutes, take some deep breaths and stretch your body.

Other relaxation exercises may involve actively tensing your muscles in turn and then relaxing them, starting from your feet and working up to your head.

You may relax so completely that you fall asleep. This is fine, so long as you don't sleep for too long and cause yourself problems. If there is a risk of this happening, you might want to consider setting an alarm, though you want it to be a gentle one and not a startling noise.

Deep relaxation

Deep relaxation is best learned from an experienced relaxation teacher (See 'Useful contacts' for organisations listing practitioners) or a good relaxation CD.

Imagery

Imagery is about imagining. This could be in the form of taking yourself in your mind to a place where you feel relaxed. This can be anywhere you like: a warm beach, a green meadow, a building or room you like and feel comfortable in. The more immersed you become in this place in your mind, the more relaxed you will feel.

Imagery can also take the form of imagining your worries being locked up in a box and put away somewhere, or imagining that the tension is flowing out of your body.

Recovery

After a relaxation or breathing exercise, all your body rhythms will have slowed down, so avoid jumping up quickly as you may become dizzy. Always stretch, yawn, wriggle and have a lazy look around you. Say to yourself, 'I will keep this feeling of calm for as long as I can'. Then move, speak and breathe a little more gently than usual.

Relaxation leaves muscles softened, and it's important to be gentle when bringing them back into action. Remove any cushions that are giving you support. If lying down, don't pull yourself up using your stomach muscles, but roll on to your side and push yourself into a sitting position, using your arms. Then stand up slowly.

What if relaxation doesn't work for me?

If you have tried relaxation and find it isn't helping, it may be because:

- You are trying too hard, and in pressurising yourself you are losing the opportunity to relax.
- You haven't found the right relaxation method for you.
- You are so tense or in crisis, that letting go, even for a little bit, is impossible for you at the moment.
- You haven't been through the three stages – preparation, relaxation and recovery – in full.
- You are taking up a poor physical position for relaxation.
- You are uncomfortable; for example, feeling hungry.
- You can't concentrate during practice: just listening to a teacher or CD will have no benefit, if your mind is elsewhere.

If you start any relaxation technique and feel uncomfortable or disturbed, do not continue.

What else can I do to cope with stress?

Acknowledging your problems

Sometimes, people let their lives slip into chaos to mask underlying problems they are not facing or dealing with. The only person who can decide if this is happening is you and, if it is, **it may be a good idea to consider talking things through with a professional.** (See 'Useful contacts', and Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments*.) Once you've begun to tackle your problems, you will then be more able to relax.

Sleep

Sleep is very important to health, and sleep problems, such as insomnia, are a common sign of stress. Lying awake worrying about things can make everything seem a lot worse – and the small hours of the morning are the worst time to be thinking about them. *If you find you can't stop worrying it may help to write a list of the things that are bothering you, or write yourself a letter about them. Once they are recorded, you may be able to switch off and relax more easily.* Some people find it very helpful to keep a diary.

🗨️ *I find writing a diary an extremely helpful stress management tool. My problems become 'contained' in the diary and I make sure I do not write in it immediately before going to bed so I can switch off from the problems in it.* 🗨️

For more information about sleep, see Mind's booklet *How to cope with sleep problems*.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an approach to wellbeing that involves accepting life and living 'in the moment'. This includes paying attention to the present moment and taking time to see what is happening around you in a non-judgmental way, rather than focussing on what you are trying to get done and going over your problems again and again. It involves being aware of each thought, feeling or sensation that comes to you and accepting it.

🗨️ *It is not about achieving a particular state or outcome but more about learning the skills to meet your life the way it is.* 🗨️
– www.bemindful.co.uk

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a technique you can learn by following a programme with a therapist or with a computer programme. It is based on meditation techniques, and 'moment-to-moment' awareness – being conscious of what is happening and how you

How to manage stress

are feeling right now. It is not specific to any particular condition, but can be helpful in coping with many situations.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is something you may be able to get a referral for from your GP. This uses similar techniques to MBSR, but also includes things such as identifying negative thoughts which contribute to conditions like depression, and consciously challenging them. It is recommended by NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) for recurrent depression, and has also been found to be effective for anxiety and insomnia.

Physical activity

Physical activity – as long as it is not done to excess – is important for reducing stress levels and preventing some of its damaging effects on the body. Exercise helps to use up the hormones that the body produces under stress (see pp. 5-6), and relaxes the muscles. It will also help to strengthen the heart and improve blood circulation. Physical activity also stimulates the body to release endorphins – natural brain chemicals that give you a sense of wellbeing – and can also help to raise self-esteem and reduce anxiety and depression.

Exercise does not need to be sporty or competitive; you can benefit simply by becoming more active, as part of your daily routine. Walking or cycling rather than taking the car or bus, or climbing the stairs rather than using the lift, can help a lot.

Healthy eating

When things get too hectic or difficult, and you feel under stress, it's often easy to forget about eating well. But **what you eat, and when you eat, can make a big difference to how you feel and how well you cope.** It's important to make time for regular food or snacks and not to miss out on meals, such as breakfast. Try not to rush; take time to enjoy what you're eating.

The key to a healthy diet is variety of different types of food, with a balance of protein, carbohydrate, oily fat and fibre, including plenty of fruit and vegetables.

When you are tired and stressed you may feel like a quick sugar rush, but this will leave you feeling tired again later. It's important to keep a steady blood sugar level. Usually we are only aware of this if it has dropped and we suddenly feel weak and hungry; but it may also affect your mood, making you depressed or bad-tempered. If you can, try to eat things that are digested more slowly and give you a steady supply of energy.

It's also important to drink plenty of fluids; however, many sweet fizzy drinks and caffeinated drinks can make you feel quite jittery – especially if you are already stressed. (See the 'Food and mood' pages on Mind's website for more information.)

Alternative therapies

Many practitioners of alternative and complementary medicine take a holistic approach, which emphasises the need to look at the whole person and not just their symptoms. [Meditation, different types of massage, aromatherapy, and autogenics \(a specialised relaxation technique\)](#) are just a few examples of therapies which some people have found helpful in relieving stress disorders and promoting relaxation. For more information see 'Useful contacts' on p. 20.

Having fun

[Making time for regular leisure activities can help you release tension, and to take your mind off the worries of the day.](#) Whether you unwind by soaking in a hot bath, browsing through your favourite books, listening to music, gardening or photography, the important point is to enjoy the activity, purely for itself, and take your mind off work or whatever is causing you stress.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 01455 883 300
web: bacp.co.uk

Contact for details of local practitioners.

British Autogenic Society (BAS)

tel. 07534 539425
web: autogenic-therapy.org.uk
For simple exercises in body awareness and relaxation and details of practitioners.

The British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA)

tel. 0845 345 5977
web: bcma.co.uk

The British Holistic Medical Association

web: bhma.org
Information about holistic approaches to health.

The British Wheel of Yoga

tel. 01529 306 851
web: bwy.org.uk

For information about yoga and teachers in your area.

First Steps to Freedom – the Anxiety Actionline

helpline: 0845 120 2916
Offers advice and information to help with anxiety.

Impact Factory

web: assertiveness.org.uk
Website with tips on assertiveness.

**The Institute for Complementary
and Natural Medicine (ICNM)**

tel. 020 7922 7980

web: icnm.org.uk

For details of complementary
practitioners.

**United Kingdom Council for
Psychotherapy (UKCP)**

tel. 020 7014 9955,

web: psychotherapy.org.uk

A body of around 80 organisations
offering psychotherapy.

**International Stress Management
Association (ISMA)**

tel. 0845 680 7083

web: isma.org.uk

A registered charity for the
prevention and reduction of stress.
Lists stress practitioners.

Mental Health Foundation

web: mentalhealth.org.uk

Information includes the
mindfulness website
bemindful.org.uk

No Panic

helpline: 0800 138 8889

web: nopanic.org.uk

Help and local self groups for people
experiencing anxiety.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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web: mind.org.uk

Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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