



STRESS



...AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT.

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STRESS – and how to deal with it

Stress is a factor in all our lives. It can help to motivate us and help us to be more decisive. But if there is too much stress in our lives it can cause us harm. This pack was designed to help you to understand more about stress, what causes it, what it can do to you, and how you can reduce the stress in your life.

What is Stress?

The Oxford Concise Dictionary describes stress as: “a state of mental, emotional or other strain.” Well, we’ve all heard people say: “S/he’s under a lot of pressure,” or “feeling tense”, and so on. In a way, that’s what stress is.



Another, slightly jokey, description might be: “The conflict created by the mind overcoming the body’s basic desire to choke the life out of someone.”

A clearer and more accurate description would be: “The mind’s and/or body’s reaction to a specific event, series of events, or situation.”

Is stress good for you?

Stress is a very personal thing. Often, what upsets one person, or adds to their stress, may have little or no effect on someone else. It’s a feeling that is hard to define – most people don’t realise that they are coping with it. So they ignore it. But stress can be harmful.



We need to know what stress is, and what it can do to us, so that we can deal with it properly.

Some stress in our lives may even be beneficial – a way to help motivate us. But, for the purposes of this pack, we will treat *all* stress as being *bad* for us. This is because, as a carer, there is almost always additional stress in your life that others do not have to cope with. We will look at this as you go through the pack.

Once there is too much stress in your life, it is *all* bad for your well-being, at least until you can get it under control.

This pack is designed to help you to start reducing the stress in your life.

What Causes Stress?

Believe it or not, stress is a reminder of prehistoric times!

As mankind lived in caves and primitive shelters, the danger of attack by wild animals was very real. The human body coped with this in a number of ways. When a person felt threatened in some way, the body prepared itself for battle or for running away. This is sometimes called the “Fight or Flight” response. That response still happens now, when stressful events occur.

What happens?

The body releases large quantities of adrenaline into the bloodstream. This:

- shuts down the digestive system, which would otherwise use a lot of energy,
- reduces blood flow to the outer body – the skin, fingers and toes, for example, to reduce the possibility of bleeding from minor wounds and
- increases the heart and breathing rate to make sure of good blood and oxygen flow to the muscles and brain.

This is all right for a short time. But over a sustained period it can make you feel ill. This will be covered later in the pack.

Things that can cause stress

Almost any event, good or bad, can cause stress. A few examples are:

Getting married	Moving house	Getting divorced
Falling ill	Caring for someone	Changing jobs

Being a carer adds to your potential for suffering from stress. Although there have been many studies into the causes of stress, none have so far covered the issues that carers have to deal with. For example:

- Trying to find information about help available
- Trying to get benefits you are entitled to
- Changing dressings
- Finding out about the health problems your loved one has
- Coping with the drastic life changes brought about by illness or disability
- Guilt feelings – “am I doing enough?”

Try making a list of some of the things that you feel may cause you to suffer from stress. Think of as many as you can. You may find the “stress log” below useful for this.

It's often the *combination* of events that has a serious effect on us. For carers, it is usually aspects of caring that are the most stressful and uncomfortable situations.

Think about your life as a carer. Can you add to your list?

Stress Log

To help you recognise stress in your life, try keeping a note of events or situations that cause you stress. Try doing this for a week.

What Happened

What I Thought/Felt

You'll be using this list later on when you are looking at planning how to reduce your stress. So be honest!

Here are some other examples of other things that can cause, or add to, stress:

Overload

- Trying to do more than you can cope with.
- Lack of relaxation – One person may find gardening relaxing, while another finds it stressful. Music can be restful, good to work to, or very annoying. Everyone relaxes in different ways. Not taking time to relax is a good way to become stressed.



Never letting your mind switch off

- Going to bed and lying awake worrying about jobs that must be done tomorrow.
- Waking up and immediately thinking about jobs will also add to stress levels. It is best to take your time to wake up and to set a routine that works for you.



Worrying about things you cannot change

For example, your teenager's bedroom may be a real mess for you – and just how s/he likes it! Arguing about it will increase stress for both of you, to no good effect. And no improvement to the bedroom, either!

“Catastrophising”

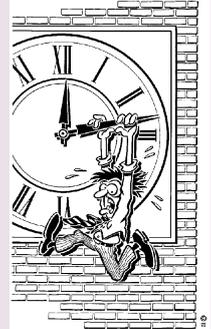
This is the tendency to exaggerate the negative aspects of present or anticipated events. “Oh, how terrible/awful/devastating...!”

Thinking badly of yourself

Always thinking badly about yourself is not good for you. It can also make other people think badly about you. Thinking you are no good at something all of the time can make you unhappy. This includes expecting more of yourself than you can possibly deliver.

Being disorganised

Are your finances in a mess? Is your workplace or rest place in a mess? Lack of organisation can cause you and/or someone else stress. If you cannot find what you are looking for it can be very stressful. If your boss or partner are upset this will add to your stresses.



Lack of support from people you can trust

Trying to deal with everything yourself without having someone to share concerns with is very wearing. It is even harder when the person you would normally confide in is unable to support you, especially if you are caring for them.

Lack of fun exercise

Lack of exercise can be harmful to both your mind and body. Exercise that you find a chore is stressful and you will soon stop.

Eating and drinking the wrong things

- Caffeine and alcohol can add to stress levels if taken in abundance. Avoid chocolate and cola – both have high levels of caffeine. Caffeine stimulates adrenaline production.
- Too much sweet food is bad for you.
- **BUT** it is okay to allow yourself an occasional treat of “bad” food or drink, as long as it isn’t a habit!



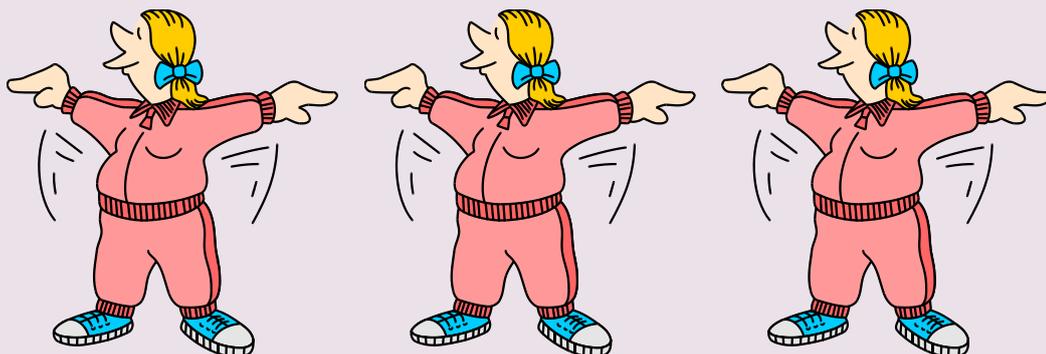
Health and Stress

Stress can be really bad for you! Here is a list of symptoms that stress can cause, or make worse. It is also related to a number of health conditions such as:

- High blood pressure
- Stroke
- Angina
- Asthma
- Eczema
- Psoriasis
- Migraine
- Headaches
- Dizzy spells
- Increased sweating
- Back pain
- Neck pain
- Shoulder pain
- Leg cramps
- Blurred vision

So, how do you feel?

And what are you going to do about it?



What Now?

This is about the kinds of choices you can make to cope with stress.

You can...

A Do something about the... SITUATION causing the problem

*B Do something about... YOU how you deal with the situation,
how you feel*

(You can do both, of course)

A. This means tackling “causes” – e.g. too much work; no time for yourself.

It could mean only doing what’s most important. It could mean making sure you don’t agree to do more than you really can. But some stress can be caused by a lack of training. Think about what you have to do and consider learning more about it. CLASP may be able to help.

B. Stress produces physical and emotional symptoms, which can be helped by taking care of yourself. Relaxation techniques, a better diet and regular exercise will all help. Some people find it helps to look at a situation in a different way – perhaps your problem is not as large or frightening as you first thought?

It is up to you how you approach the things that stress you. You can choose to work on **A** or **B** or both.

SOME TIPS TO OVERCOME STRESS

- Learn to say no.
- If you are unhappy and need someone to talk to, talk to someone you really trust or use a helpline such as The Samaritans, Alcoholics Anonymous, Parentline, Carers UK, etc.
- Try to accept what you cannot change – for example, other people, and the world as it is at the moment.
- Try to avoid “solutions” such as alcohol, nicotine, or drugs (legal or not!). They don’t solve the problem and can sometimes make things worse!
- Try to deal with one thing at a time. Taking on the whole world is too much for anyone.
- Try to plan your time as much as possible. Life is easier if you can find ways that work for you. But make sure your plan is realistic!
- Take time out for yourself. Do something you enjoy doing.
- A regular break can help to reduce problems.
- Find time to relax every day. It’s important to find a balance between work and rest.
- Spoil yourself from time to time – give yourself a treat – you are allowed!
- Try to get enough good quality sleep every night. If you cannot sleep, what can you do to help yourself? Some people try milky drinks, or breathing exercises, to help promote relaxation.
- Recognise when you are tired, and try to do something about it.
- Listen to music that relaxes you.
- If you are unwell, accept it. Don’t force yourself to behave as if you are fully fit. If you need to work see what you can do to make working easier, or keep the number tasks you perform down to the minimum.
- Don’t skip meals!
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Take regular exercise, preferably in the open air.
- **Remember you are not a magician.**
- Ask for help if you need it. Don’t “go it alone.” You will just feel worse.
- “Stress toys” can be useful in an emergency – something to squeeze or pull apart. A cheap but effective stress squeezer can be made by taking a balloon (not inflated) and filling it with cornflour. It’s quite a messy job (but fun, I’m told), and the squeezer is very effective!



Action Planning

Knowing what you can do and trying it out are two different things. The best way to manage stress is to *plan* what you are going to do about it!

Look at which area you want to work on first. Then decide what you want to achieve by next month. You can't do it all at once, so set yourself some small targets each week that will take you towards your monthly target. Do this at the beginning of every week. Take a look at the example plan I've prepared for you.

It's important to know exactly what you want to achieve. You must be realistic. Set a target you know you can reach.

Look at your small targets each week. See how well you have done, and try to keep it up for the whole month. Set a new target as well. You might like to use a diary for this.

Don't give up! Keep trying – practice makes perfect!

Why not give it a try?

Sample Action Plan

Problem Areas

Eating too many snacks
Drinking too much coffee
Not enough exercise

One Month Goals

Allow enough time for proper meals
Cut out caffeine
Go swimming once a week

One week Goals

Plan meals for the week ahead
Start drinking decaffeinated coffee
Go swimming this week

Daily Goals

Don't skip any meals today
Buy some decaffeinated coffee today
Fit in a walk or a swim at lunchtime

It's important not to set too many goals at once, or you will not succeed in reducing stress – in fact, you might even find life *more* stressful!

Once you have achieved these, you can start looking at the next month's targets and start to tackle some more stress areas.

Remember! New Year's resolutions are a pain. You have to want to do it to make it work. Even then, it can be hard work!

Problem Areas

One Month Goals

One week Goals

Daily Goals