

Handling Stress



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Managing stress: stress resilience

What is stress?

People experience stress as they adjust to a continually changing environment. Stress has physical and emotional effects, and pressure can create both positive and negative feelings. Positive pressure can energise you and help you reach your peak performance. Too much pressure can turn into stress. Prolonged exposure to stress can be harmful to your physical and mental wellbeing. One of the first steps to managing stress is to understand what the causes are.

Sources of Stress

There is a wide range of sources of stress. These include daily hassles, major life events, home and work factors. What are the things in your life that cause you stress?

Home

Stress factors can include

- ▶ relationships;
- ▶ money problems;
- ▶ children;
- ▶ sickness; and
- ▶ housework.

Work

Stress factors can include

- ▶ overload;
- ▶ relationships;
- ▶ pace of change;
- ▶ deadlines; and
- ▶ unrealistic workloads or demands.

Stress Signs

As a first step, it is helpful to know your stress signs and recognise the ways that you react to stress.

Which of the following do you experience?

- ▶ muscle tension;
- ▶ headaches;
- ▶ indigestion;
- ▶ dry mouth;
- ▶ diarrhoea or constipation;
- ▶ anxiety/excessive worry;
- ▶ difficulty concentrating;
- ▶ forgetfulness;
- ▶ irritability;
- ▶ tearfulness;
- ▶ depression;
- ▶ boredom;
- ▶ apathy;
- ▶ change in sleep patterns;
- ▶ withdrawal;
- ▶ accident proneness;
- ▶ reduced sex drive; and
- ▶ increase in use of drugs, smoking or alcohol.

Some of these signs may have causes other than stress. Check with your doctor if symptoms persist.

Building Stress Prevention

- ▶ Exercise three to four times a week to reduce muscle tension.
- ▶ Minimise intake of sugar, caffeine and other artificial stimulants.
- ▶ Get enough rest.
- ▶ Practise at least one relaxation exercise.
- ▶ Get up 15 minutes earlier in the morning (making morning mishaps less stressful).
- ▶ Listen to music.
- ▶ Make time for fun.
- ▶ Unplug your phone.

Stress Strategies

Step 1: Awareness

Ask yourself these questions:

- ▶ What are the sources of stress in my life?
- ▶ What are my emotional and physical reactions to them?
- ▶ What are my strengths in dealing with stress? (e.g. 'I delegate well'.)
- ▶ What are my limitations in dealing with stress? (e.g. 'I sometimes have difficulty saying no to work requests'.)

Step 2: Plan

Develop a plan of action by asking yourself these questions:

- ▶ What sources of stress can I eliminate or avoid?
- ▶ What sources of stress are changeable?
- ▶ What one change could I start with that would make the most difference in my life?
- ▶ Who can I enlist in helping or supporting me with this change?
- ▶ How can I include taking care of myself in my plan?

Step 3: Action

Choose one new strategy to add to or change about your current strategies for dealing with stress.

- ▶ Practise a relaxation technique (breathing is one of the most effective ways of reducing tension).
- ▶ Identify what you do well at in managing your stress (use your past experience as a resource) and do more of it.
- ▶ Deal with the sources of stress that you can change (create a plan to eliminate, reduce or avoid these sources).





Stress Tips

- ▶ Share your concerns – talk to someone.
- ▶ Do something you enjoy.
- ▶ Take a brisk walk.
- ▶ Exercise.
- ▶ Take a break.
- ▶ Get a change of scenery.
- ▶ Set aside time for yourself.

Relaxation Technique

- ▶ Find a comfortable place to sit, close your eyes and begin to pay attention to your breathing.
- ▶ Take a deep breath in and exhale slowly.
- ▶ Continue breathing deeply and imagine a relaxing holiday spot.
- ▶ As you continue to breathe slowly, look around at the sights, imagine the sounds, the smells and the like.
- ▶ See yourself relaxed in this place.
- ▶ As you bring your attention back to the room you are in, remember that you can visit this place again anytime.

Other Ideas

Additional ideas to reduce or combat stress include:

- ▶ counselling;
- ▶ yoga;
- ▶ meditation;
- ▶ hypnosis;
- ▶ biofeedback;
- ▶ relaxation tapes;
- ▶ massage; and
- ▶ complementary medicine

Action Planning

- ▶ Set short and long-term goals.
- ▶ Plan to make one change at a time.
- ▶ Check that your goal is specific and measurable.

Eleven tips for dealing with stress

1. Put your body in motion

Physical activity is one of the most effective ways of keeping stress away, by clearing your head and lifting your spirits. Physical activity also increases endorphin levels – the natural ‘feel-good’ chemicals in the body that leave you with a naturally happy feeling.

Whether you like full-fledged games of football, tennis or roller hockey, or you prefer walks with family and friends, it’s important to get up, get out and get moving!

2. Fuel up

If your body was a car, you wouldn’t go for a long drive without filling up on petrol first. Likewise, begin each day by eating breakfast to give you the energy you need to tackle the day. Eating regular meals (this means no skipping dinner) and taking time to enjoy them (eating in the car doesn’t count) will make you feel better too.

Make sure to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, proteins (peanut butter, a chicken sandwich or a tuna salad) and grains (wheat bread, pasta or some crackers) – these will give you the slow-release energy you need to make it through those hectic days.

Don’t be fooled by the jolt of energy you get from fizzy drinks and sugary snacks – this only lasts a short time, and once it wears off, you may feel sluggish and more tired than usual. For that extra boost grab a banana, some string cheese or a granola bar.

3. LOL (Laugh Out Loud)

Did you know that it takes 15 facial muscles to laugh? Lots of laughing can make you feel good – and that good feeling can stay with you even after the laughter stops. Head off stress with regular doses of laughter by watching a funny movie or cartoons, reading a joke book or even make up your own riddles – laughter can make you feel like a new person!

Everyone has those days when they do something really silly or stupid – instead of getting upset with yourself, laugh out loud! No one’s perfect!

4. Have fun with friends

Being with people you like is always a good way to ditch your stress. Get a group together to go to the cinema, do some exercise, listen to music or play a board game – or just hang out and talk.

5. Spill to someone you trust

Instead of keeping your feelings bottled up inside, talk to someone you trust or respect about what’s bothering you. It could be a friend, a parent, someone in your family, someone from your religious or spiritual community, or a supervisor or teacher. Talking about your problems and seeing them from a different view might help you figure out ways to deal with them. Just remember, you don’t have to go at it alone!

6. Take time to chill

Pick a comfy spot to sit and read, daydream or even take a snooze. Listen to your favourite music. Work on a relaxing project like putting together a puzzle or making jewellery.

Stress can sometimes make you feel like a tight rubber band – stretched to the limit. If this happens, take a few deep breaths to help yourself unwind. If you’re in the middle of an impossible problem, take a break! Finding time to relax after (and sometimes during) a hectic day or week can make all the difference.

7. Catch some ‘zzz’s

Fatigue is stress’s best friend. When you’re over-tired, a problem may seem much bigger than it actually is.

You may have a hard time doing a school or work assignment that usually seems easy, you may not do your best in sports or any physical activity, or you may have an argument with your friends or partner over something really stupid.

Sleep is a big deal!

8. Keep a journal

If you're having one of those crazy days when nothing goes right, it's a good idea to write things down in a journal to get it off your chest – how you feel, what's going on in your life and things you'd like to accomplish. You could even write down what you do when you're faced with a stressful situation, and then look back and think about how you handled it later. Find a quiet spot, grab a notebook and pen, and start writing!

9. Get it together

Do you have too much to do, but not enough time? Are you feeling overwhelmed or forgetful at work? Being unprepared for work, school, practice or other activities can make for a very stressful day.

Getting everything done can be a challenge, but being organised and planning in advance can help.

10. Lend a hand

Get involved in an activity that helps others. It's almost impossible to feel stressed out when you're helping someone else. It's also a great way to find out about yourself and the special talents you never knew you had. Signing up for a community-service project is a good idea, but helping others is as easy as saying hello, holding a door or volunteering to keep a neighbour's pet.

11. Learn ways to better deal with anger

It is totally normal to be angry sometimes – everyone gets mad at some point. The important thing is to deal with your anger in a healthy way. Cool down first and then focus on positive solutions to problems. This will help you to communicate better with the people in your life, and you can even earn more respect along the way. The next time something really has you stressed out, try these steps:

1. Try to calm yourself down before doing or saying anything (counting to 10 can help).
2. Tell the other person what the problem is and how it makes you feel.
3. Try to think of some solutions. What would the good and bad results of those solutions be?
4. Explain your solution to the person you are upset with and try to put it into action together.



Hints to avoid harmful stress

1. Work out priorities

Keep a list – make the tasks possible. Prioritise the tasks in order of importance and tick them off when done. Include the important people in your life as priorities and attend to these relationships first.

2. Identify your stress situations

Make a list of events that leave you emotionally drained, with one or two ways to reduce the stress for each. When they occur, use them as an opportunity to practise your stress-reduction techniques and keep notes on what works for next time.

3. Don't react to imagined insults

It is a waste of time and energy to be oversensitive to imagined insults, innuendo or sarcasm. Give people the benefit of the doubt; talk over the situation with someone you trust. They may have another spin on what was said.

4. Think before you commit

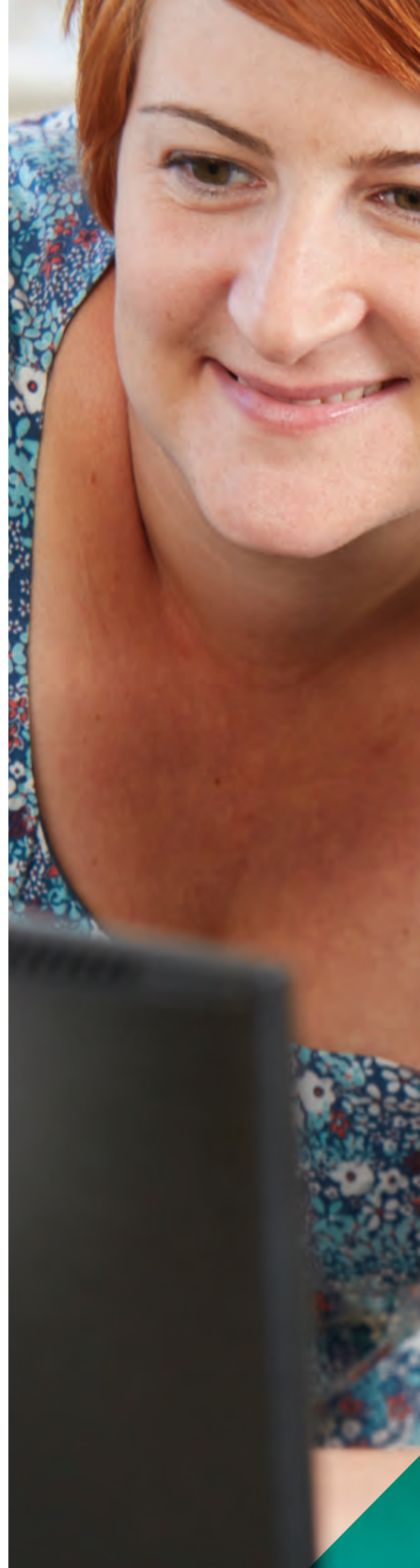
People can often perform tasks merely to feel accepted or liked by other people. Practice saying no to requests that are unreasonable or more than you can handle at the time, rather than suffer subsequent regrets and stress.

5. Move on: Don't dwell on past mistakes

Feelings of guilt, remorse and regret cannot change the past, and they make the present difficult by sapping your energy. Make a conscious effort to do something to change the mood (e.g. employ mindfulness techniques or do something active that you enjoy) when you feel yourself drifting into regrets about past actions. Learn from it and have strategies in place for next time. Learn to forgive yourself for past mistakes.

6. Don't bottle up anger & frustrations

Express and discuss your feelings to the person responsible for your agitation. If it is impossible to talk it out, plan for some physical activity at the end of the working day to relieve tensions. Let go of grudges – they effect you and your state of mind more than the other person.





7. Set aside time each day for recreation and exercise

Gentle repetitive exercise, such as walking, swimming or cycling, are good to relieve stress. Meditation, yoga, pilates and dance are also excellent. The trick is to find what suits you best. Hobbies that focus attention are also good stress relievers. Take up a new activity unrelated to your current occupation; one that gives you a sense of achievement and satisfaction. Establish new friends in your newly found interest.

8. Take your time

Frenzied activities lead to errors, regrets and stress. Request time to orient yourself to the situation. At work, if rushed, ask people to wait until you have finished working or thinking something out. Plan ahead to arrive at appointments early, composed and having made allowances for unexpected hold-ups. Practice approaching situations 'mindfully'.

9. Don't be an aggressive on the road

Develop an 'I will not be ruffled' attitude. Drive defensively and give way to bullies. Near misses cause stress and strain, so does the fear of being caught for speeding. If possible, avoid peak hour traffic. If caught in it, relax by concentrating on deep (stomach) breathing or 'mindful driving'. Advanced driving lessons can also be useful.

10. Help children & young people to cope with stress

Children need the experience of being confronted with problems to try out, and improve their ability to cope. By being overprotective or by intervening too soon, parents and teachers may prevent young people from developing valuable tolerance levels for problems, or from acquiring problem-solving skills.

11. Think positively

Smile whenever possible – it's an inexpensive and effective way of improving how you feel. Try and find something positive to say about a situation, particularly if you are going to find fault. You can visualise situations you have handled well, and hold those memories in your mind when going into stressful situations.

12. Cut down on drinking, smoking, sedatives & stimulants

These vices only offer temporary relief and don't solve the wider problem. Indeed, they can create more problems in terms of physical and mental health. They can create more problems in terms of physical and mental health. Consider the effects you are looking for (sedation or stimulation) and how else you can achieve them.

Stress Management: challenges in the workplace

Pressure is inevitable. In the workplace, it can be a source of positive motivation to succeed or it can be an overwhelming dark cloud that hinders morale, relationships and performance. This article contains information for managers about stress and tips to reduce stress in the workplace.

Different Levels of Stress

Stress

Stress is a normal, physiological adaptation to change. Healthy stress serves as a motivational drive to survive and succeed. When people are stressed, say by hunger, they act to relieve the stress by finding food and eating. When people are stressed by feelings of financial insecurity, they work hard to make sure they can provide for themselves and their families.

Distress

Distress is a destructive form of stress. Distress can manifest itself as high blood pressure, insomnia, irritability and poor job performance. During periods of distress, people often overreact and engage in self-defeating behaviours – like the man who goes to happy hour to calm his nerves after a stressful day at the office. He drinks too much, sleeps in and comes to work late with a hangover causing more stress in his life, not less. Take the distressed working mother who drives like a maniac to make it to her son's football game after work. She gets a ticket for speeding or, worse, has an accident.

Overload

Overload, often called burnout, results from long-term exposure to distress. Overload causes exhaustion and fatigue, depression, accidents and poor job performance. Working long hours for an extended time or for many months without days off to recuperate are common causes.

Productivity versus Overload

Stress brings both positive and negative aspects to the workplace. Providing for families, getting a promotion and making more money are all normal stresses that can motivate employees and increase productivity. Conversely, when stress becomes severe or overwhelming, worker morale and productivity declines. Through effective training

and communication, good managers can learn to recognise the sources and signs of stress and can create a balance of healthy stress, opportunity and encouragement.

Sources of Stress

Keep in mind that what motivates one worker may overwhelm another. Be aware of what happens outside the workplace. Stresses from home and other outside sources can dramatically affect productivity and morale. The causes of stress generally come from three sources:

1. An uncontrollable or unpredictable event. This might include a serious accident, the loss of a loved one or a sudden job change.
2. Being overwhelmed. Too many things can be on someone's plate at once, or things come at one too fast.
3. People working beyond their capabilities, skill level or coping resources. Common examples are taking on a new job without proper training, parenting stepchildren or caring for an elderly parent.

Signs and Symptoms of Workplace Stress

Signs an employee may be stressed include:

- ▶ withdrawal from others; increased accidents, incidents and errors;
- ▶ increased absenteeism or lateness;
- ▶ more frequent illness and visits to the doctor;
- ▶ emotional outbursts;
- ▶ easily upset or angered; and
- ▶ increased use of alcohol or other drugs.

Lighten the load

In today's fast-paced economy, the pressure to overwork and produce beyond prior limitations is constant.

Understanding that humans need time to recuperate and recharge their batteries is central to reducing stress in the workplace. Companies that fail to recognise the need for recuperation spend valuable time and capital addressing the symptoms (listed above) of overload, which, in the long run, is counterproductive.





Tips for managers to help reduce workplace stress

- ▶ Recognise the signs.
- ▶ Encourage employees to periodically 'unplug' from workplace stress by taking time off and curtailing too many long days on the job.
- ▶ Consider establishing the Education Support Partnership's employee assistance programme at school to support staff with stress-related or personal problems.
- ▶ Encourage skill development towards new challenges.
- ▶ Plan monthly 'stress busters', such as
 - ▶ employee birthday parties or length-of-service parties;
 - ▶ stress-reduction workshops; or
 - ▶ motivational speakers.
- ▶ Invite top management to talk with your employees about the company's goals, successes and challenges.
- ▶ Be quick to praise right thinking and initiative.
- ▶ When confrontation is necessary, do it in private, stick to performance and never admonish the person.

Managing when the stress doesn't go away

Traumatic events can overwhelm you with their suddenness. People are shocked and shaken by the enormity of the event and its unexpected nature.

Sometimes, though, long-term stress can assume traumatic proportions.

Disasters are not the only source of long-term stress that employees may face. Threats of violence, whether from individuals outside the organisation or from fellow employees, can lead to severe stress situations which go on for weeks and affect many people. Harassment campaigns directed against employees can be nerve wracking, even when there is no apparent physical danger. The prospect of losing a group member to a slowly debilitating illness can produce a long period of stress for everyone involved. Organisational change can produce severe stress if employees feel uncertain and worried for long periods.

Getting the job done and taking care of employees under conditions of severe, long-lasting stress can be one of the most difficult challenges a manager may face. It's not easy to take charge, develop innovative approaches and be sensitive to the needs of others when you're at least as uncomfortable as your subordinates. There are, however, some management approaches that have proved helpful in these situations:

- ▶ Take concrete steps to see that everything possible is being done to lessen the sources of stress. If danger is a problem, call the right law-enforcement function immediately, and get all the advice and concrete support you can for them. If employees are overwhelmed by competing demands in the aftermath of a large-scale emergency, set clear priorities and make sure they are consistently followed. You probably can't 'fix' the entire situation, but you can improve it. Your employees will feel better if they know you are working on their behalf.
- ▶ Keep open lines of communication with your employees. This is always important, but even more so when everyone is under long-term stress. In most stressful situations, one source of anxiety is a sense of being out of control. Your employees will feel better if they have up-to-date information and permission to approach you with their questions. Depending on circumstances, you may want to adopt new communications strategies, such as having frequent meetings, publishing an informal newsletter and keeping an updated notice board in a central place. As you consider your communication strategy, don't forget your employee unions.

Like you, union leaders are concerned with getting information to employees, and this may be an excellent opportunity for labour-management cooperation.

Consider the following:

- ▶ Employees will have a greater sense of control if you are careful to listen to them with an open mind before making decisions that affect them. Even if your decision turns out not to be the one they would have wished for, they will feel less powerless if they believe that their ideas and preferences were given serious consideration.
- ▶ Communicating with employees may be difficult for you if your own tendency, when under stress, is to withdraw from other people, or to become less flexible than you normally are. Both are common stress reactions, and can interfere with your leadership if you don't monitor yourself.
- ▶ Encourage teamwork and cooperation. Under long-term stress, there is no substitute for a supportive, caring work group. Employees will find the situation, whatever it is, less painful if they are surrounded by colleagues who care about them, and will listen if they need to talk, or lend a hand if they need help. A group accustomed to teamwork rather than internal competition will usually be able to cover for members who are temporarily unable to function at 100 per cent effectiveness.
- ▶ Ideally, your group has always been strong and cohesive. If not, do what you can to help it pull together under stress. Encourage and validate teamwork and cooperation. Avoid any appearance of favouritism, and make it clear that there is opportunity for everyone to achieve and receive recognition.
- ▶ Set clear work standards. Doing good work is always essential, but even more so in times of high stress, since success can bolster self-esteem and group morale. Keep your standards high, but allow as much flexibility as possible in how the work gets done. If you set clear standards, but give employees some freedom in working out ways to meet them, they will probably be able to develop approaches that fit the contingencies of the stress situation. Check on how much flexibility you have with regard to such conditions as work hours, administrative leave, alternate work sites and so forth. It's natural to assume that the way you have always done things is the only way, but you and your employees may have options that you haven't considered.



- ▶ Make it clear that this is a difficult period, and it's OK to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue or frustration.
- ▶ If you set the example by letting people know you can do a good job even though you are not feeling your best, you can set a positive example. Define the situation in a way that emphasises the strength of the group while acknowledging the challenges it faces. The tone should not be 'poor us', but rather 'this is hard, but we're going to hang together and get through it'.
- ▶ Acknowledge the value of professional counselling, and encourage your employees to get whatever help they need. Long-term stress can wear down the coping resources of the strongest person, and it makes sense to get extra support in order to preserve mental and physical health. One strategy is to bring in an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) counsellor to talk to the group about stress management. Besides learning from the presentation, your employees will develop a personal contact which can make it easier to turn to the EAP if they need it.
- ▶ Don't underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual. Attend to your own stress-management programme, and use your resources for professional consultation and counselling. You will find it easier to take care of your work group if you also take care of yourself.

Get Support

08000 562 561

support@edsupport.org.uk

Education Support Partnership
40A Drayton Park
London N5 1EW

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