

Stress

How to cope

If you are finding it challenging to cope with life pressures, you might be experiencing stress. This factsheet explains the common symptoms and causes of stress. It also looks at some of the ways you can try to reduce stress. This information is for adults affected by stress in England. It's also for their loved ones and carers and anyone interested in this subject.

Key Points.

- Most people feel stressed sometimes.
- There are many different causes of stress.
- Stress affects everyone differently, but there are common mental, physical and behavioural signs you can look out for.
- Stress is not an illness itself. But it can make you unwell if it is very bad or if it lasts for a long time.
- There are things you can do to help prevent stress
- If you can't avoid stress, there are things you can do to help manage it.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What is stress?](#)
2. [What are the signs of stress?](#)
3. [What causes stress?](#)
4. [Are stress and mental illness linked?](#)
5. [How can I help myself?](#)
6. [Can my doctor help?](#)

1. What is stress?

Stress is the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure. When you are stressed, your body releases stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.¹

Stress is your body's reaction to help you deal with pressure or threats.² This is sometimes called a 'fight or flight' response. Your stress hormone levels usually return to normal once the pressure or threat has passed.

A small amount of stress can be useful. It can motivate you to take action and get tasks completed. It can also make you feel alive and excited. But too much stress can cause negative effects such as a change in your mood, your body and relationship issues.³

2. What are the signs of stress?

Stress affects different people in different ways. Below is a list of some of the common signs.⁴ Some of these things will not apply to you. You may have other signs of stress that we have not listed.

Physical	Mental	Behaviour
Headaches	Worrying about the past or future	Crying
Sweating	Imagining the worst	Eating more or less
Stomach problems	Low self-esteem	Biting your nails
Muscle tension or pain	Concentration issues	Avoiding others
Feeling tired or dizzy	Feeling irritable	Sleep problems
Sexual problems	Struggling to make decisions	Rushing tasks
Fast heartbeat	Racing thoughts	Drinking or smoking more
Dry mouth	Feeling overwhelmed	Being irritable
Short of breath	Feeling low	Making mistakes

3. What causes stress?

Almost anything that affects your daily life, work or relationships can cause stress. Even seemingly small issues can cause stress if they go on for a long time.

Some people are more affected by stress than others. It can depend on factors such as your personality, upbringing, your work and home life.

People from minority communities, such as LGBTQIA+ or minority ethnic groups, are at higher risk of experiencing stress due to stigma and discrimination.⁵

Even situations or events that seem positive can cause stress, such as having a baby or getting married. If you feel stressed in these situations, you may struggle to understand why. You may not feel that you can talk to anyone about your feelings or struggle with guilt. But feeling stressed in these situations is very common.

Below are some examples of things that can cause stress.

Situation	Event
Not having a job	Getting married or divorced
Not sleeping well	Being diagnosed with an illness
Housing issues	Having a baby
Money worries	Moving house
Work problems	Having a job interview
Being bullied	Someone close to you passing away
Problems looking after children	Being evicted from your home
Health issues	Leaving hospital after a long stay
Family or relationship problems	Going to court
Not having a routine	Going to a benefits assessment

You can find more information about:

- LGBT+ mental health
- Black, Asian and Minority mental health

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet

4. Are stress and mental illness linked?

Can mental illness cause stress?

Having a mental illness could cause stress for many reasons such as:

- experiencing stigma and discrimination,
- having to give up work because you are unwell,
- spending too much money when you are unwell and getting into debt,
- having issues with welfare benefits,
- being discharged from mental health services but not feeling ready,
- not getting on well with your doctor, care coordinator, or anyone else involved in your care,
- being worried about how long it will take you to recover from your illness,
- not knowing how to manage your symptoms, or
- being worried about side effects of medication.

Can stress cause a mental illness?

Stress is not an illness itself, but it can lead to you becoming unwell. For example, if stress lasts for a long time it can lead to anxiety and depression.⁶ Experiencing a very stressful or traumatic event could cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)⁷ or cause you to dissociate.⁸

Stress can make an existing mental illness worse. Such as causing a psychotic relapse.⁹

You may use alcohol or drugs to deal with your stress. But if you do this on a regular basis you may need to seek support. Using alcohol or drugs in the short-term may help you to cope. But it may make your mental health worse in the long term.¹⁰

You can find more information about:

- Anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Psychosis
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Dissociation and dissociative disorders
- Drugs, alcohol and mental health

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

5. How can I help myself?

There are things that you can do to help reduce your symptoms of stress. This is also known as self-care. There isn't a set process for where you should start, or what you should do, everyone is different.

As a starting point you could try something that interests you the most, or feels more manageable. For example, if you don't like exercising, don't start with exercise.

You may need to try different things until you find what works for you.

Stress diary

If you don't know what is causing your stress, it might help to keep a 'stress diary' for a few weeks. It may help you to identify areas in your life that you may be able to change.

You could write down when you feel stressed. You should include what happens just before or after you feel stressed.

It could also help you to identify things which can make you unwell. These things are known as 'triggers.' Identifying your triggers can help you to have more control over your stress levels.

There is a template for a stress diary at the end of this factsheet for you to use.

Sara's story

Sara has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Recently she has started drinking more alcohol and has had difficulty sleeping. She is not sure why. Sara decides to keep a stress diary.

Keeping the diary has made Sara realise that she tends to be most stressed in the morning. She feels tired, irritable and is snappy with her children on most school days. Sara also struggles with guilt when she snaps at her children. She believes that she drinks alcohol to deal with these feelings.

Sara decides to make an appointment with her doctor to see if her medication is making mornings more difficult for her to cope with. She also talks to her doctor about her concerns with guilt and alcohol.

Her doctor reviews her medication. And makes a referral for her to have talking therapy. The doctor also gives Sara advice on how to get a better night's sleep.

Sara realises that she struggles less with symptoms when her partner is with her. She talks to her partner about getting more support from them before school. Her partner talks to their employer about changing their working hours. The partner is able to give Sara support before school for 3 days per week.

This support has made Sara less reliant on alcohol. And more able to cope.

Sara has decided to use the 'Staying well with bipolar' guide. She feels that this will help her to manage her mental wellbeing. This is a guide that is available to download on the Rethink Mental Illness website:

www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/treatment-and-support/staying-well-with-bipolar/

Get practical advice

You may be able to take steps to change the cause of your stress. There are lots of places you can get practical advice on different issues. An advice service may be a good place to start. They may be able to support you to solve an issue. For example, you may want advice on:

- housing,
- benefits,
- money, or
- employment.

You can find details of different organisations that give practical advice in the 'useful contacts' section at the end of this factsheet.

You can find out more about:

- Housing options – For adults who live with mental illness
- Work and mental illness – Getting a job
- Discrimination and mental illness – The Equality Act 2010

at www.rethink.org. Or you can call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Manage your money

Money can cause many different issues such as poverty, debt and relationship problems.

Making a budget sheet could help. This will help you work out what you can afford to pay.

If you are worried about your debts, there are places that you can get advice and support, such as StepChange, Citizens Advice and National

Debtline. Their contact details can be found in the 'useful contacts' at the end of this factsheet.

You can find information on the **Mental Health and Money Advice** website on:

- **What are my options for dealing with debt?**
www.mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org/en/managing-money/what-are-my-options-for-dealing-with-debt/?utm_source=rethink&utm_medium=landing_page&utm_campaign=mbmh

Plan your time

Planning your time can make you feel more in control. Here are some ideas that could help you do this:

- write lists of what you need to do,
- prioritise the most important tasks,
- share tasks with others if you can,
- don't put things off, and
- set yourself steps and goals for complicated tasks.

Remember to reward yourself for any achievements.

Talk to someone

Telling someone how you are feeling may help with stress. It can help to 'offload' your worries. You may feel comfortable talking to someone you know. Or you might prefer to talk to someone who doesn't know you.

You could call an emotional support line or talk to a counsellor. We have added some emotional support lines at the end of this factsheet.

You can find more information about how to access a counsellor here. 'Talking therapies' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Make lifestyle changes

Limit your caffeine intake

Coffee, tea, energy drinks and chocolate contain caffeine. Reducing your caffeine intake could help you sleep better. Especially if you reduce it in the evening.¹¹ You could have herbal tea, a warm milky drink or warm cordial instead.

Exercise

Exercise can relieve stress. It can also help you to stay healthy. There are lots of ways to exercise, and people enjoy different things. You could try

cycling, walking, running, team activities or going to the gym. Doing housework or gardening is also a way to exercise.

For more information you can look at our webpage on '**Physical activity and mental health**': www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/physical-activity-and-mental-health

Get enough sleep

If you're dealing with stress you may struggle to sleep well. If you don't get enough sleep this can cause problems such as poor concentration and low mood. Long term sleep issues can lead to mental health problems such as depression.¹²

If you struggle with sleep, you can try to:

- talk to your doctor,
- refer yourself for talking therapy, or
- practice sleep hygiene.

Sleep hygiene means things like:

- having a regular bedtime routine,
- only using your bed for sleep,
- exercising regularly but avoiding lots of exercise too close to bedtime,
- cutting down on caffeine, especially in the evening,
- making sure the place you sleep is a comfortable temperature,
- making sure the place you sleep is dark,
- not using your phone or computer immediately before bedtime, and
- making sure that the place you sleep is tidy.

For more information you can look at our webpage on '**How can I improve my sleep?**': www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/how-can-i-improve-my-sleep

Eat a balanced diet

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is good for your mental and physical health.

You can get more information on exercising, sleeping and eating a balanced diet from the NHS. You can find this by following this link: www.nhs.uk/live-well/

Do something nice for yourself every day

It is important to do some things because you want to, not because you have to. This could include reading a book, watching a film, doing something creative, or eating something you enjoy.

Practice positive thinking¹³

Learning to think in a more positive and productive way could help you cope more easily with the stresses of everyday life.

Common negative thinking includes:

- Focussing on bad points and dismissing good ones.
- Expecting the worst without the facts.
- Trying to live up to very high standards.
- Seeing the world as good or bad without a middle ground.

To practice positive thinking check in with your thoughts throughout the day. When a negative thought appears in your mind, try to put a positive spin on it. This is also known as re-framing your thoughts. What can you do to make the thought, more balanced, manageable and optimistic?

These could include:

- Seeing a problem as an opportunity to learn something new.
- Seeing something not as a failure but a temporary setback.
- Reminding yourself of what you are thankful for.
- Reminding yourself of things you like about yourself.
- Looking for the humour in the situation
- Being kind and less critical of yourself. If you wouldn't say it to someone else, why do you think it's ok to say it to yourself?

It can take time to learn how to think more positively. The more you practice, the easier you will find it, just like any new habit.

See the below link for NHS support on how you can reframe negative thoughts:

www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/self-help-cbt-techniques/thought-record/

Practise mindfulness¹⁴

Mindfulness can help you become more aware of your thoughts, feelings, and the world around you.

The basic principle is to be present in the moment by paying attention to what is going on both inside and outside of your body.

If you find that your mind wanders to thoughts of past or future, gently bring it back to now.

Practicing mindfulness can help to deal with symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety. It can help you to enjoy and appreciate life more.

Mindfulness and meditation may be difficult if you are having very distressing thoughts. Or you find it difficult to focus on your body.¹⁵ If they are causing you difficulty speak to your doctor for different options to help you manage.

Everyday Mindfulness

You don't need to set aside time to practice everyday mindfulness. You can practice mindfulness as part of everyday life.

Everyday mindfulness can help you feel grounded and calm. Even if you practice for only a moment or 2 at a time.

Examples of everyday mindfulness include taking some time to:

- Pay attention to everything you see, hear, and sense around you, no matter where you are. Such as focussing on the detail of a house in the street, the smells in the air, the texture of a leaf.
- Keep your awareness on what you are doing during a routine task. Such as washing up. Instead of letting your mind wander, focus on the warmth of the water, the smell of the soap, the way the water moves.
- Stop to gently notice how your body feels throughout the day.

Mindfulness meditation and breathing exercises

You can set aside time to practice a more formal mindfulness meditation.

This involves sitting quietly and paying attention to your breathing, to sensations in your body, and bringing your attention back to the present whenever your mind starts to wander.

You may be able to find guided online mindfulness courses through YouTube, podcasts, or apps.

Below are some breathing exercises you can try.

Slow breathing

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Keep your back straight and your shoulders back.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing.
- Think about how your breathing feels in your body.

- Can you feel it coming in through your nostrils?
- Can you feel it going down your throat, into your lungs?
- Slow down your breathing as much as you can.
- You may find it useful to count as you inhale and exhale.
- See if you can expand your exhale, to make it longer than your inhale. Can you feel your chest expanding? What about your belly?
- If you start to have upsetting thoughts, try bringing your focus back to your breathing.

Box breathing

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Focus on your breathing.
- Take one deep breath in and out.
- Breathe in for 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 4 seconds.
- Breathe out for 6 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 2 seconds.
- Repeat this cycle for 5-10 minutes.

4-5-8 method

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Focus on your breathing.
- Slowly breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds. If you can't breathe in through your nose, use your mouth.
- Hold your breath for 5 seconds.
- Breathe out slowly for 8 seconds.
- Repeat this cycle 10 times, or as many times as you want. While you do it try to concentrate on your breathing. You can alter the number of seconds to suit you.

Practice relaxation techniques¹⁶

Relaxation can help you to deal with stress.

There are lots of different relaxation techniques you can try. If one doesn't work for you, you can try another one. For example:

- Gentle physical movement such as yoga or tai-chi.
- A calming treatment such as a massage or aromatherapy.
- Mindfulness and meditation.

The more you practise relaxation, the more you will notice when your body is showing signs of tension or stress.

You can find out more about:

- Complementary and alternative treatments for mental health
- Recovery and mental illness

at www.rethink.org. Or you can call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Use online resources

There are websites which give information about how to manage your mental health. Such as support try using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques or exercise to improve your mood.

- **NHS:** www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/
- **Live Life to the Full:** www.lltf.com/index.php?section=page&page_seq=8&;
- **Psychology Tools:** www.psychologytools.com
- **Mental Health UK:** mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/stress/

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6. Can my doctor help?

You can speak to your GP if you are struggling to cope with stress.

Signs you are struggling may include the following.

- You are finding it difficult to do everyday things.
- You have stopped looking after yourself.
- You are taking more time off work.
- You have thought that life is not worth living.
- You are using drugs or alcohol to cope with how you feel.
- You have felt very low or hopeless for 2 weeks or more.
- You no longer enjoy anything.
- You are having panic attacks.

It may help you to write down a list of the main points and questions that you want to discuss with your GP. This can be helpful if you are feeling anxious or worried about your appointment.

If you have kept a stress diary you could take this with you. See [section 5](#) of this factsheet for more information about a 'stress diary.'

Your GP could offer:

- self-help advice,
- support through an NHS recovery college,

- talking therapy,
- exercise on prescription,
- medication,
- support groups in your area, or
- an appointment with a social prescriber.

You can find more information about:

- GPs and your mental health
- Talking therapies

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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Further Reading

Books

You can find books about how to manage stress from your local library. Or you can buy books or audio books from online websites such as eBay or Amazon.

If you are not sure what books to try you could read customer reviews. This may help you to decide where to start.

Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) Plus. Formerly living without Depression and Manic Depression - Mary Ellen Copeland, PhD.

The Wellness Recovery Action Plan® or WRAP® is a self-designed wellness process. You can use a WRAP to get well, stay well and make your life your own. It was developed in 1997 by a group of people who were searching for ways to overcome their own mental health issues and move on to fulfilling their life dreams and goals.

Website: www.wellnessrecoveryactionplan.com

Mental Health UK

They provide information on managing work-related stress. You can find this by following the link:

www.mentalhealth-uk.org/best-working-life/

Practical Support

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)

Provides free and impartial information and advice to employers and employees about workplace relations and employment law, including the Equality Act 2010.

Telephone: 0300 123 1100

Website: www.acas.org.uk

Citizens Advice

Offers free, confidential, impartial and independent advice. They advise on benefits, housing, debt and other issues face-to-face or over the phone or webchat. Most areas of the country have a local Citizens Advice service. Search on their website for your local service.

Telephone England: 0800 144 8848

Telephone Wales: 0800 702 2020

Website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

National Debtline

Provides free, independent and confidential advice about debt. You can contact them over the telephone, by e-mail or letter.

Telephone: 0808 808 4000.

Address: Tricorn House, 51-53 Hagley Rd, Birmingham B16 8TP

Webchat: through the website

Website: www.nationaldebtline.org

Shelter

A housing and homelessness charity offering specialist advice on a range of housing issues.

Telephone: 0808 800 4444.

Website: <https://england.shelter.org.uk>

StepChange

Provides free, confidential advice and support to anyone worried about debt. You can contact them over the telephone or online.

Telephone: 0800 138 1111.

Address: 123 Albion Street, Leeds, LS2 8ER.

Webchat: through the website.

Email: [through the website](#)

Website: www.stepchange.org

Emotional Support**Samaritans**

Available 24 hours a day. They provide confidential support for people in emotional distress. They offer a non-judgemental service and can be contacted by telephone, letter and e-mail. There's also a face-to-face service available at their local branches.

Telephone: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org/

Sane

UK mental health charity aiming to improve the quality of life of anyone affected by mental illness. Including family, friends and carers.

Telephone: 0300 304 7000.

Email: info@sane.org.uk

Textcare: [through the website](#)

Website: www.sane.org.uk

Support Line

Offers help to people on any issue. They provide non-judgemental, confidential support and advice to help you to find ways of coping with a particular problem. They can also be contacted by post and email.

Helpline opening hours vary.

Telephone: 01708 765200

Email: info@supportline.org.uk

Website: www.supportline.org.uk

Relate

They are a charity who provide relationship counselling. They can provide counselling over the phone, live chat, webcam or face to face. You have to pay a fee to use Relate. If you want to contact them with a general enquiry or book an appointment, you will have to find your nearest Relate and give them a call through their website.

Website: www.relate.org.uk

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¹³ Mayo Clinic. *Positive thinking: Stop negative self-talk to reduce stress*. www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/positive-thinking/art-20043950#:~:text=It%27s%20unclear%20why%20people%20who%20engage%20in%20positive,harmful%20health%20effects%20of%20stress%20on%20your%20body. (accessed 06 June 2023).

¹⁴ NHS. *Mindfulness*. <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>. (accessed 23 June 2023).

¹⁵ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. *Depression in adults: treatment and management*. London: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence; 2022. Para 1.5

¹⁶ Mayo Clinic. *Relaxation techniques: Try these steps to reduce stress*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045368>. (accessed 23 June 2023).

Stress Diary

Date and Time	What happened to make you feel stressed?	Level of stress. Give it a number of 1-5 1 = low stress 5=high stress	How did you react?	How did you cope with your feelings?

This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525
Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this Information helped you

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:
RAIS

PO Box 18252

Solihull

B91 9BA

or call us on 0808 801 0525

We're open 9:30am to 4pm

Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org



rethink.org



Patient Information Forum

Need more help?

Go to rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on: 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

Can you help us to keep going?

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