

# Stress

## How to cope

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If you feel that you cannot cope with the pressures you are under, you might be stressed. This factsheet explains the common symptoms and causes of stress. It also looks at some of the ways you can try to reduce stress.



- Most people feel stressed from time to time. You might feel stressed if you have too much to do, are worried about the future or because upsetting things have happened.
- Stress affects everybody differently, but there are common symptoms you can look out for. You might feel worried, irritable or low. You may also have headaches and tense muscles.
- There are many different causes of stress. What is stressful for some people may not be stressful for you. It is important to find out what is causing your stress.
- Although stress is not an illness itself, it can make you ill if it is severe or if it lasts a long time.
- You might not be able to avoid every stressful situation, but there are things you can do to manage your stress.

### This factsheet covers -

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

## 1. What are the signs of stress?

Stress affects different people in different ways. We have listed some of the common signs below. Some of these things will not apply to you, and you may have other signs of stress that we have not listed.

### Physical signs

- Headaches,
- Muscle tension and pain,
- Stomach problems,
- 'Butterflies' in the stomach,
- Sweating,
- Feeling tired,
- Feeling dizzy,
- Bowel and bladder problems,
- Finding it difficult to breathe,
- Dry mouth,
- Sexual problems.

### Mental signs

- Racing thoughts,
- Worrying and feeling anxious about the future,
- Imagining the worst,
- Being forgetful,
- Going over things again and again in your mind,
- Feeling irritable,
- Feeling low.

### Behaviour

- Having a short temper,
- Drinking or smoking more,
- Crying,
- Eating more or less,
- Rushing around,
- Biting nails,
- Not wanting to see other people,
- Making mistakes,
- Struggling to concentrate,
- Problems with sleep.

## 2. What causes stress?

Many different things can cause stress. If you can work out what makes you stressed, it may be easier to find ways of making this better.

Sometimes a particularly difficult situation or event will cause stress. For example:

- Divorce or marriage,
- Getting diagnosed with an illness,
- Leaving hospital after a long stay,
- Moving home,
- Being evicted from your home,
- An upcoming job interview, court hearing, benefits assessment or other meetings,
- The death of someone you care about.

You might also feel stressed because of an ongoing problem such as:

- Having too many things to do,
- Having a bad routine,
- Sleep problems,
- Unemployment,
- Health problems,
- Money worries,
- Family problems,
- Problems with looking after children.

Problems at work can also cause stress. This can include:

- Having too much or too little to do,
- Feeling under-valued,
- Long working hours,
- Bullying,
- Poor management,
- Poor work environment.<sup>1</sup>

If you are having trouble working out what is making you stressed, it might help to keep a 'stress diary' for a few weeks. You could use this to write down when you feel stressed, what happens just before or after and what you were thinking about at the time. This could help you to find out what is making you stressed.

### **Sara's story**

Sara has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Recently she has started drinking more alcohol and has had difficulty sleeping. A friend suggests that she keeps a stress diary. Sara realises that she feels stressed because she is not working and is worried that she will not be able to find a job. Sara has two children and one of them is unwell at the moment. On top of this, Sara has an interview coming up about her benefits entitlement. Sara feels that these things are becoming too much for her to deal with and she feels stressed. She gets advice about her benefits, makes an appointment with an employment agency and asks her mother for help looking after her children. Now she feels more on top of things.

### **The effect of thoughts on stress**

Stress affects different people in different ways depending on their personality, circumstances, upbringing and many other factors. Some people might be particularly affected by stress. For example, you might feel that you put a lot of pressure on yourself by having unrealistic expectations about what you will be able to do in a short period of time.

Excessive worrying is a large cause of stress for many people. Worrying about a problem can sometimes be helpful. It might make us start planning how to resolve our problems. But sometimes we find ourselves focusing only on the negatives or worrying about things that might never happen or about things that we cannot change. This can lead to stress.

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## **3. Are stress and mental illness linked?**

### **The effect of mental illness on stress**

Mental illness may bring stress into your life. This might be caused by some of the following things:

- Having to give up work because you are unwell,
- Spending too much money when you were unwell,
- Being discharged from mental health services,
- Not getting on well with your doctor or care coordinator,
- Worrying about how long it will take you to recover from your illness,
- If you are taking medication, worrying about the side effects.

## **The effect of stress on mental illness**

Stress can make the symptoms of your illness worse and can make it more likely that you will become unwell.

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. Also, experiencing an extremely stressful or traumatic event, such as a serious accident, assault or abuse, could lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in some cases.

Many people use alcohol or drugs to relax, forget about their problems and cope with stress. However, using alcohol or drugs to avoid problems is only a short term measure and it can make things a lot worse in the long run.

You can find more information about anxiety and depression at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

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### **4. How can I help myself?**

The first step to tackling stress is to work out some of the things that might be causing it. Once you have found this out, it will probably be easier to decide how to deal with the situation. Focus on tackling the things you are able to change.

We have some suggestions for ways you can reduce your stress levels below.

#### **Change your lifestyle**

- Limit your caffeine intake

Coffee, tea and chocolate contain caffeine. Caffeine may make stress worse in some people, so think about limiting these and having alternatives instead. This could just mean having one cup of tea in the morning, or you could try herbal tea instead. Reducing your caffeine intake might also help you to get better sleep.

- Eat a well balanced diet

There is more information about this at:

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/D/diet/>

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthy-eating/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx>

- Take regular exercise

Exercise is a great stress reliever. On top of that, you can make it a hobby, you can set goals and it can help you to stay healthy. There are lots of ways to exercise, and people enjoy different things. You could try:

- Cycling
- Walking
- Gardening and housework
- Going to a gym
- Sports (team or single)

- Get enough sleep

Most of us know what it feels like to not be able to sleep and how frustrating this can be, and how it feels to wake up feeling like you haven't slept well. Sleep problems can have a big effect on us and make mental health problems a lot worse.

Talk to your doctor if you have a problem with sleep. There are some things you can do to try to get better sleep. These tips are often called 'sleep hygiene':

- Get into a routine - go to bed and wake up at the same time,
- Try reading before bed,
- Don't watch the clock,
- Make sure the conditions are right- temperature, light and noise might affect your sleep,
- Don't watch TV or use a computer in the bedroom,
- Don't drink caffeine in the evening.

- Do something for yourself every day

It is important to do things because you want to, not because you have to. This could include reading a book, watching a film or eating something you enjoy (in moderation if it's not good for you!).

- Try relaxation techniques

Relaxation can help you to:

- deal with stress, and
- prevent stress.

Common techniques that people use to relax include:

- Meditation,
- Mindfulness,
- Aromatherapy,
- Yoga.

You can find out more in our '**Complementary Therapies**' factsheet at [www.rethink.org/resources](http://www.rethink.org/resources). Or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

### **Manage your time and money**

- Manage your time
  - Write lists
  - Share tasks with others if you can
  - Take action - don't put things off
  - For complicated tasks, set steps and goals
- Budgeting

If money is tight, this can cause stress. You might be able to reduce this by budgeting well.

The Money Advice Service is a good place to start. You can find out more at: [www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk](http://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk)

### **Talk to someone**

Get things off your chest by telling someone about the way you are feeling. Talking things through is a good way of easing conflicts with other people that might be causing you stress. You may feel more comfortable talking to someone you know, or you might prefer to call an emotional support line. We have listed some at the end of this factsheet.

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## **5. Can my doctor help?**

If you feel that your stress levels are too high, you can speak to your GP. What your GP will do for you will depend on how bad your stress is, whether they think you have an illness and what is available locally. You could be offered:

- Self-help advice
- Stress management classes
- Stress support groups
- Counselling
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- Anger management support
- Medication

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**NHS Choices** is the country's biggest health website. It has useful information on stress and how to treat it.

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Stress>

**Mental Health Foundation** offers information and advice on a variety of mental health topics including stress, anxiety and depression. Their website has suggestions on how to manage stress yourself:

020 7803 1100  
Colechurch House  
1 London Bridge Walk  
London SE1 2SX  
United Kingdom

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>



The following organisations offer emotional support to people who want to talk about any problems they are having.

**Samaritans**

**Tel:** 08457 90 90 90 (24 hour)

Samaritans Head Office  
The Upper Mill  
Kingston Road  
Ewell  
Surrey  
KT17 2AF

**Email:** [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

**Web:** [http://www.samaritans.org/talk\\_to\\_someone.aspx](http://www.samaritans.org/talk_to_someone.aspx)

**Saneline**

**Tel:** 08457 678 000 – 6pm – 11pm Mon-Sun

Saneline Head Office  
First Floor Cityside House  
40 Adler Street  
London  
E1 1EE

**Web:** [http://www.sane.org.uk/resources/contact\\_us](http://www.sane.org.uk/resources/contact_us)

**Sanemail**

[http://www.sane.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/support/email/](http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/email/)

**Supportline**

**Tel:** 01708 765200 (hours vary)

SupportLine,  
PO Box 2860,  
Romford,  
Essex  
RM7 1JA

**Email:** [info@supportline.org.uk](mailto:info@supportline.org.uk)

**Web:** <http://www.supportline.org.uk/>



**Listing your problems**

<p><b>Big problems I can change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li></ul> <p><b>What I'm going to do today</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li></ul>	<p><b>Small problems I can change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li></ul> <p><b>What I'm going to do today</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li></ul>
<p><b>Big problems I cannot change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li></ul> <p>Do I need support? e.g. friends / family / emotional support</p>	<p><b>Small problems I cannot change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li><li><input type="radio"/></li></ul>



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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization 'Stress at the Workplace' Available at:  
[http://www.who.int/occupational\\_health/topics/stressatwp/en/](http://www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/stressatwp/en/) (Accessed  
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This factsheet is available  
in large print.



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## Rethink Mental Illness

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

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### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback  
PO Box 68795  
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.



Leading the way to a better  
quality of life for everyone  
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0300 5000 927  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

### Need more help?

Go to [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights. Or talk to others about your problem at [www.rethink.org/talk](http://www.rethink.org/talk).

### Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0300 5000 927. We are open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday 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 between 10am and 2pm, 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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