

Stress

How to cope

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 sometimes.
- Some stress can be helpful. Too much stress may make you ill.
- Stress affects everyone differently, but there are common things you can look out for.
- There are many different causes of stress. Although stress is not an illness itself, it can make you unwell if it is very bad or if it lasts a long time.
- You might not be able to avoid stress but there are things you can do to 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.¹ Stress increases hormones in your body to help you deal with pressures or threats. 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. However, if you're constantly under

stress, stress hormones will stay in your body. This will lead to symptoms of stress.²

[Top](#)

2. What are the signs of stress?

Stress affects different people in different ways. Below is a list of some of the common signs. 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	Worry about future	Crying
Sweating	Imagining the worst	Eating more or less
Stomach problems	Being forgetful	Biting your nails
Muscle tension or pain	Not concentrating	Avoiding others
Feeling tired or dizzy	Feeling irritable	Sleep problems
Sexual problems	Racing thoughts	Rushing things
Bowel or bladder problems	Going over and over things in your mind	Drinking or smoking more
Dry mouth	Making mistakes	
Short of breath	Feeling low	

[Top](#)

3. What causes stress?

Different things can cause stress. If you know what makes you stressed you can find ways of reducing it.

A situation or event could make you stressed. Below are some examples of things that can cause stress. This does not cover everything that makes someone stressed.

Situation	Event
Not having a job	Getting married or divorced
Not sleeping well	Being diagnosed with an illness
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

How your thoughts can affect stress

Stress affects everyone in different ways. It can depend on your personality, upbringing, your work or home life and other things. Some people are more affected by stress than others. For example, you might put a lot of pressure on yourself because you think you should be able to do things you can't.

Worrying about a problem can sometimes be helpful. It might make us plan how to resolve an issue. But sometimes we can focus on the negatives. We may worry about things that might never happen or that we cannot change. This kind of worrying can lead to stress.

[Top](#)

4. Are stress and mental illness linked?

The effect of mental illness on stress

If you have a mental illness this may lead to stress. This could be because you:

- have to give up work because you are unwell,
- spend too much money when you were unwell and get into debt,
- are discharged from mental health services but don't feel ready,
- don't get on well with your doctor, care coordinator, or anyone else involved in your care,
- are worried about how long it will take you to recover from your illness, or
- are worried about side effects if you are taking medication.

The effect of stress on mental illness

If you have a mental health condition stress can make the symptoms of your illness worse. This 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. Experiencing a very stressful or traumatic event could cause Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in some cases.

Many people use alcohol or drugs to relax and forget about their problems or cope with stress. However, using alcohol or drugs in this way is only a short term solution. It can make your mental health a lot worse in the long run.

You can find more information about:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Drugs, alcohol and mental health

at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

[Top](#)

5. How can I help myself?

The first step in tackling stress is to work out what is causing it. Once you know this, it should be easier to deal with the situation. It will help to focus on the things you can change.

If you don't know what is making you stressed, it might help to keep a 'stress diary' for a few weeks. You could write down when you feel stressed. You should include what happens just before or after you feel stressed. There is a template for a stress diary at the end of this factsheet.

Example

Sara has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Recently she has started drinking more alcohol and has had difficulty sleeping. She is not sure why. A friend suggests that she keeps a stress diary and Sara does this. Sara realises that she feels stressed because she is not working. She 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. Sara also has an interview coming up about her benefits entitlement. Sara finds that things are getting too much for her to deal with and she feels stressed. Writing things down has helped Sara see what is causing her stress. She gets advice about her benefits from her local Citizens Advice centre so she understands what benefits she is eligible for. She makes an appointment with an employment agency for people with disabilities. She then asks her mother for help looking after her children. Now she feels more on top of things and starts to sleep better.

Below are some ideas about how to reduce stress.

Get practical advice

If you can change the thing that is causing you stress you could get advice about how to do this. There are various places you can get practical advice on different issues. It may be hard to know where to start. An advice service could give you some guidance. If you need advice about an issue like housing, benefits, money or employment speaking to an expert may help. You can find details of different organisations that give practical advice in the 'Useful contacts' section at the end of this factsheet.

Manage your money

If money is tight, this can cause stress. If you struggle to pay your bills you could get into debt. You could reduce this by making a budget sheet. This would 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. You can find more information about:

- How to deal with debt
- Options for dealing with debt

at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

Plan your time

If you plan your time this can make you feel more in control of things. 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,
- take action - don't put things off, and
- set yourself steps and goals for complicated tasks.

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. We have listed some of these at the end of this factsheet.

Make lifestyle changes

Limit your caffeine intake

Coffee, tea, energy drinks and chocolate contain caffeine. Caffeine may make stress worse in some people. You could try limiting how much caffeine you have. You could have herbal tea instead. Reducing your caffeine intake might also help you sleep better.

Eat a balanced diet

Eating a healthy and balanced diet is good for your mental and physical health. There is more information about this at:

www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthy-eating/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx

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 or going to the gym. You could join a sports team. Doing housework or gardening is also a way to exercise.

Get enough sleep

It can be frustrating not to be able to sleep. Sleep problems can have a big effect on us and can make mental health problems worse. Sleeping badly can also increase stress. You can talk to your doctor if you have a problem with sleep. There are some things you can do to try to get better sleep, such as getting into a better routine.

You can get more information on healthy eating, exercise and sleep in our 'Good health guide'. You can download this for free at

www.rethink.org/resources.

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 or eating something you enjoy.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is being aware of the present moment and paying attention to this. It can be helpful for people who are stressed and anxious. If you are stressed you may be worry about the future or go over and over the past. If you practice mindfulness you try to focus on the 'here-and-now'. You can find an online mindfulness course here:

Be Mindful <http://bemindful.co.uk>

Use relaxation techniques

Relaxation can help you to deal with stress you have. It can also stop you getting stressed. Some people relax using meditation, aromatherapy or yoga.

You can find out more about these approaches in our '**Complementary and alternative treatments**' factsheet at www.rethink.org/resources. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

[Top](#)

6. Can my doctor help?

If you are struggling to cope with stress you can speak to your GP. It can help to write down a list of things you'd like to discuss with your GP. This can be helpful if you are feeling anxious or worried. It could help you remember the questions that are important to you. If you have kept a stress diary you could take this with you.

The GP could offer self-help advice. They could suggest stress management classes or support groups in your area. They could refer you for counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or suggest medication.

You can find more information at www.rethink.org about:

- GPs- what to expect from your doctor
- Talking therapies

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

[Top](#)

Managing Stress (Teach Yourself) by Terry Looker

This practical guide to stress management helps with assessing and identifying stress, and on developing a personal plan for dealing with stress.



The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook by Martha Davis

Effective and up-to-date techniques for relaxing the body, calming the mind, and refreshing the spirit. A comprehensive yet simple adaptation of the most effective relaxation techniques.

Self-help guides

Get Self-Help www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stress.htm

Mood Juice www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/stress.asp

NHS Northumberland

www.nrw.nhs.uk/pic/leaflets/Stress%20A4%202015.pdf

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 (Monday to Friday 8am-8pm, Saturday 9am-1pm)

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. Sometimes you might be able to get a home visit or advice by email. Most areas of the country have a local CA. Search on their website for your local service.

Telephone: 08444 111 444 (England), 08444 77 20 20 (Wales)

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 (Monday to Friday 9am to 9pm and Saturday 9.30am to 1pm)

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

Webchat: via website

Website: www.nationaldebtline.org

Shelter

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

Telephone: 0808 800 4444



Email: [form](#)

Website: <http://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 (Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm and Saturday 8am to 4pm)

Email: [form](#)

Website: www.stepchange.org

Emotional Support

Samaritans

Available 24 hours a day providing confidential support for people in emotional distress. They offer a non judgemental service and can be contacted by telephone, letter, e-mail and mini-com. 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 (4:30pm -10:30pm everyday)

Email: [Contact form](#)

Website: www.sane.org.uk

Support Line

Offers help to individuals on any issue. They provide non-judgemental, confidential support and advice to enable the caller 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

¹ NHS Choices. *Struggling with stress.*

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/understanding-stress.aspx> (accessed 20 January 2016).

² As note 1.



Stress Diary

Time	Stressful event	Level	Reaction	Coping response

© Rethink Mental Illness 2014

Last updated February 2016

Next update February 2019

Version 4

This factsheet is available
in large print.



Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

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 17106
Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



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

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



[facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://www.facebook.com/rethinkcharity)



twitter.com/rethink_



www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.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 0300 5000 927 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?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to www.rethink.org/donate or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.

