

Stress Management

What is stress?

Stress is a state of mental and emotional strain that occurs in response to a demanding or challenging situation. When demands and challenges placed on us exceed our ability to cope, stress happens. When faced with a stressor (a situation or event that causes stress), our body responds by switching on the sympathetic nervous system, which triggers a release of hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. When these hormones are released, a number of physical changes occur in the body. For example, heart rate and blood pressure increase, our breathing becomes more rapid, and our muscles tense. Our body does this in order to react quickly and effectively to danger. Experiencing stress from time to time is part of normal life and can be helpful in motivating us to meet a challenge. However, if the stress response and the sympathetic nervous system are triggered often over a long period of time, it can have a negative impact on our mental and physical health.

How do you know you are stressed?

Many people do not know that they are stressed until they notice the physical symptoms of stress, such as:

- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Back and neck pain
- Increased blood pressure
- Chest pain
- Upset stomach
- Changes in appetite

However, there are also a number of psychological symptoms of stress that are also important to notice, such as:

- Worrying
- Insomnia (difficulty falling or staying asleep) or other changes to sleep patterns

- Irritability (feeling touchy or easily annoyed)
- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling overwhelmed

What can I do to manage my stress?

The symptoms of stress can get in the way of your everyday life, relationships, and the things that you enjoy, particularly when stress is at a high level for a long period of time. Try to start noticing what physical and psychological symptoms of stress you experience.

Knowing your symptoms of stress is important so that when stress is starting to build up you will be able to catch it and use a stress management technique before it reaches a high or unhelpful level.

In order to reduce the intensity of the symptoms we experience when stressed, we need to switch-off the sympathetic nervous system and switch-on the parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system is known as the ‘rest and digest’ system, and helps to produce a calm and relaxed feeling in the mind and body. Below, different strategies are listed that will help to switch-on this ‘rest and digest’ system. It is important to experiment and find out which strategies work best for you, as some strategies will work better for you than for other people – it is not a one size fits all approach.

Stress Management Strategies

Abdominal balloon breathing

Increased breathing rate is a common symptom of stress and anxiety and can lead to further symptoms such as dizziness, headaches, and weakness. Getting control over your breathing involves slowing down your breathing rate and changing your breathing style. This kind of breathing activates the ‘rest and digest’ system, signals to your mind and body that there is no danger that you need to react to and allows a state of relaxation.

- With one hand on the chest and the other on the belly, take a deep breath in through the nose to the count of four, and then slowly breathe out of the mouth to the count of six.



- Make sure your belly is inflating more than your chest and imagine that you are blowing up and letting down a balloon inside of your belly.

Take ten deep breaths and relax

- Sit in a comfortable position with your spine straight
- Gently close your eyes and take slow deep breaths
- On the out breath, tell yourself something comforting, such as “I am safe”, “I am warm”, “relax”, or “I feel heavy and calm”
- Repeat this for ten breaths

Progressive muscle relaxation

- As muscle tension is commonly experienced with stress, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an exercise in which you pay attention to and tense a particular muscle, and then release this tension. This technique should be practiced consistently to reduce muscle tension.
- You can find a script for this exercise at cci.health.wa.gov.au, or there are multiple guided series through YouTube or meditation apps.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction

Mindfulness-based techniques are effective in reducing stress by bringing your attention to what is going on in the present moment without judgement. Because your attention is focused on the present moment, there is little room to be focused on real or imagined worries that lead to stress.

Five senses technique

- Take a few deep calming breaths and pay attention to the environment around you



- Pay attention to the sense of sight, look around and notice five things that you can see
- Listen in to your sense of sound, what are four things that you can hear?
- Observe your sense of touch, feel the immediate environment around you, and notice the texture of three different things that you can feel
- Bring your attention to your sense of smell, what are two different things that you can smell in this present moment?
- Notice your sense of taste, what is one thing that you can taste right now?

Mindful colouring

- Mindful colouring can help you to focus your awareness on the present moment by noticing how you apply colour to a picture or design
- As you start to colour, let go of thoughts about yesterday or tomorrow, and bring your attention to the picture or design that you are colouring in
- If you find yourself judging whether the colouring is good or bad, simply notice these thoughts and bring your attention back to the picture or design and the act of colouring
- Notice each colour you select, whether you hesitated when choosing that colour, and what made you choose that colour
- Notice how each different colour makes you feel
- Continue to bring your attention back to the feeling and process of colouring whenever your mind begins to wander

Managing everyday stress

Along with relaxation strategies, taking time to take care of yourself in your everyday life plays an important role in keeping your stress levels manageable.

- Identify the cause of stress and use problem-solving: As discussed earlier, take some time to think about your signs of stress, and then when you know stress is coming up for you, identify what it is that is making you feel stressed (identify the stressor). Sometimes the situation causing you stress can be changed. Once you've identified the stressor, brainstorm all the possible solutions you can think of, weigh up the pros and cons of each possible solution, and select one to try out.
- Keep things in perspective: When we are stressed, it is common that our mind goes to the worst-case scenario, rather than the most realistic scenario. To identify whether your mind is falling into this trap, ask yourself "Am I overestimating how bad this will be?" and "Am I underestimating my ability to cope?".
- Look after your physical health: Keeping yourself fit and healthy can help you to manage stress when it comes up. Make sure to eat a healthy, balanced diet and to get regular exercise. Physical exercise often helps people to unwind and reduce any built-up energy that stress can cause.
- Take time out: Some people find that dedicating too much of their time and energy to any one thing can lead to stress as they may be neglecting or ignoring the other important aspects of their lives. Take time out of your day to unwind and relax, for hobbies and leisure activity, and for maintaining connection with friends and family.

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