

Recognising and managing stress

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What is stress?

Stress is our body's natural response to real or perceived threats. Stress can lead to your body activating its 'fight or flight' response, preparing to protect itself from the threat it has detected.

While chronic stress can be harmful, short-term stress can motivate us to act, which is useful in situations of danger or urgency.

Signs of stress

Physical	Emotional	Behavioural	Cognitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rapid heartbeat• Headaches• Fatigue• Insomnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mood swings• Anxiety• Difficulty concentrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Change in eating patterns• Change in sleeping patterns• Social withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty concentrating• Poor memory• Pessimism

Responding to stress

Identify your triggers

Challenge your perspective

Implement coping mechanisms

Identify your triggers

Take your time to think about what exactly it is that is causing you stress.

Some common causes of stress are:

- Unmanageable workload
- Workplace bullying
- Significant life changes, such as divorce or bereavement

Once you have managed to pinpoint what is causing you stress, come up with a strategy for how you might deal with it.

For example, if you are overwhelmed by your workload, make a list of your tasks. Then, speak to your manager about receiving additional support or reducing your workload.

Challenge your perspective

Stress might be exacerbated by the pessimism that comes along with it. Challenge these negative thoughts by focusing on constructive ones.

For example, instead of thinking that the situation is your fault and due to your lack of ability, tell yourself that you have the room to improve.

Implement coping mechanisms

Once you have identified what is causing you stress and created a plan of how you might deal with it, practice coping mechanisms that can allow you to relax when you are feeling the symptoms of stress.

Some examples are:

- Breathing exercises
- Physical activity
- Mindfulness

Strategies for reducing your stress



Journaling

Journaling your feelings can help you to process your thoughts and break down the situation. It may also help you identify positive aspects of your life, which can give you motivation and hope.

Exercise

Regular exercise can help to release endorphins that reduce the physical symptoms of stress and improve mental clarity.

Try to incorporate movement into your day. For example, going for a walk on your lunch break.

Healthy diet

A healthy balanced diet can increase energy and reduce fatigue. Instead of reaching for 'easy' junk food, plan out your meals for the week to make sure that you have healthy nutritious meals ready to go.

Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep is important for good cognitive functioning. Practice good sleep hygiene, such as going to sleep at the same time each night, and reducing screen time before bed or using a blue light filter.

Ask for help

When we are stressed, it can be easy to withdraw from others and become isolated. However, talking to someone you trust can help reduce the burden you're feeling, and you may find that they have had similar experiences to you.

Identifying your stress triggers

In order to be able to deal with your stress, you need to identify what's causing it.

External triggers are those that are outside of our control. Some of these are:



Environment

The environment that you're in can trigger a stress response. For example, noise, lighting, or temperature can all cause stress or make you feel uncomfortable.

Health problems

Health problems that have an impact on your life are also a common trigger of stress.

Work-related stress

Having an overwhelming or unmanageable workload can make stress levels worse.

Negative workplace relationships, or disagreements with your colleagues can also trigger your stress response and make it overwhelming going into work.

Significant life changes

Significant life changes, such as marriage, divorce, or bereavement, can all impact your stress levels.

Internal triggers are those that are associated with your internal thoughts and feelings. Some of these are:



Expectations

Having unrealistic expectations, either of yourself or of others, can lead to increased levels of stress, due to the feeling of not being able to measure up.

Worry

Persistent worry about events that haven't happened can further trigger your stress.

For example, worrying about an upcoming presentation or project deadline.

Lack of control

A perceived lack of control can be a common trigger for stress. Knowing that there is nothing you can do, and all you can do is wait can elevate stress.

Perspective

The perspective that you have can also impact your stress levels. Pessimism can lead to an already stressful situation worse.

For example, if you have had to ask for an extension to a project deadline, it may be easy to feel negatively about this and think you have failed. However, it would be more helpful to view it as an opportunity to complete the project to the best of your ability.

Managing your stress triggers

Eliminate your triggers

Reduce your triggers

Implement coping mechanisms

Eliminate your triggers

Once you have identified your triggers, identify which of them you can eliminate.

For example, if noise is a trigger for you, perhaps consider investing in noise cancelling headphones to reduce background noise.

Reduce your triggers

While you may not be able to eliminate all of your triggers, you can look to reduce the effects of them.

For example, you might struggle to get your errands done, in which case reorganising your day so you can dedicate a block of time to these can help.

Or if you are stressed because you think you won't be able to perform, try to challenge your negative mindset using facts, such as examples of when you have successfully completed a similar task in the past.

Implement coping mechanisms

Finally, if there are certain triggers that you simply can't avoid, it will help to identify coping mechanisms so you're able to prevent them from becoming too overwhelming.