



talking about
stress



introduction

To have some pressure in our lives is normal and, indeed, unavoidable. But when there is too much pressure or it goes on for too long, and we don't get the chance to rest and recover, and when it becomes more than we can cope with then our health can suffer. This unpleasant reaction to too much pressure or other types of demand placed on us is called stress. Think of blood pressure – we all have it but when it gets high, we should do something about it – stress is just the same.

This booklet is for people in that kind of situation, and for their families and friends. It sets out some of the different ways stress can affect us and looks at how we can learn to cope more effectively. Sometimes this means that we need to change what we do, or how we behave. Sometimes it may require changes in our circumstances. Often both may be needed. It contains suggestions for how you can get help and tells you about books you can read. A selection of useful sites on the internet has also been included.

what is stress?

When we find ourselves under some kind of pressure, our bodies respond automatically by releasing adrenaline to ensure we are prepared for action and able to meet the challenge before us:

- muscles become tense
- our breathing becomes faster and shallower in an effort to get more air into the body, we may feel breathless
- heart races, pumping faster
- we feel like we want to run, yet legs might turn to jelly
- mind is racing and we may feel dizzy and lightheaded
- we have difficulty swallowing
- we may feel sick or have a lack of appetite
- we shiver or sweat more than usual.

This automatic reaction to a threatening situation is known as the 'fight or flight' response. The body produces hormones, including one called adrenaline, which help prepare our bodies either to run away or to be poised and ready to react. These changes are short-lived and die away when the pressure or threat stops, but they are useful in helping us achieve our goals. The body's response sharpens our mental and physical skills, focuses our attention, fires us up and is generally very helpful in helping us cope with pressure.

Too much pressure, on the other hand, makes us less productive and often results in health problems. So an acceptable amount of pressure can make us feel good and too much can make us feel vulnerable and out of control.

Stress affects people of all ages and from all walks of life. One in five people in Scotland has a problem with stress at any given time, and that figure is reflected around the world.

We tend to think that stress comes from being too busy and pressured, but it can be just as difficult to cope when we are in a situation where we do not have enough to do. Being unemployed or in a boring job which we don't enjoy, for example, can make us frustrated and stressed and we can find ourselves at a low ebb.

Some people learn to live with it and use it positively, others find it impossible to switch off and struggle to cope.

Although our bodies react to excessive mental pressure, it is not a physical problem. However it can make us more prone to illness. It can also affect our immune systems so that we can take longer to recover from illness. However, it is important not to get the physical effects of stress out of perspective. Given all the risk factors for heart attacks, for example, stress is a comparatively minor risk factor. To cope with stress many people eat more fatty foods, drink alcohol and smoke, all of which are linked with an increase in heart disease. These may seem helpful in the short term but in the long run further undermine well-being.

Prolonged stress though can be very debilitating. And can make us feel as though we are unable to take control of our own lives in ways we would choose. We find it increasingly difficult to cope with even the simplest tasks without getting tense and uptight.

Stress affects us in different ways:

- The way it affects our thoughts. For example:
 - we worry too much about things that we know do not merit such worry
 - we find it hard to concentrate
 - we have difficulty in making decisions.

- The way it affects our feelings:
 - we feel worthless, hopeless and depressed at the prospect of never getting on top of things or finishing anything
 - we have difficulty relaxing
 - we constantly expect the worst to happen.

- The way it affects our behaviour:
 - we are constantly tired and on edge, and irritable with those around us
 - minor interruptions, delays or frustrations can make us irritated, distressed or angry and that we become very emotional at the slightest upset
 - we lose interest in food or over eat
 - we smoke or drink too much.

- The way it affects our body:
 - we have panic attacks
 - our usual sleep patterns become disturbed, so that we find it hard to fall asleep, or need much more sleep
 - we suffer from physical health problems like headaches, indigestion or a sore back
 - we lose our sex drive.

understanding stress

Stress can turn our lives upside down. It can affect our feelings, our thoughts, our actions and our actual body processes.

We can feel anxious, frightened, sad, depressed, guilty, alienated, dissatisfied, and disappointed with ourselves.

We may think about all the things that might go wrong and see ourselves as a bringer of bad luck. We think of ourselves as being failures and have a pessimistic view of life and a low sense of self-worth.

"I was so much on edge all the time, constantly in a foul mood with the children. It was as if I was angry with the whole world, I took everything personally."

"This one person at work kept picking on me because I was different. At first I was able to shrug it off but it began to wear me down. I was scared to go in each morning knowing what I would face. It ruined my life for a year; I lost all confidence in myself and dreaded talking to other people. Luckily I got help. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't."

We may avoid places where something bad might happen, or get out of other places because they make us tense. We withdraw from 'normal' things in life because we think it will help protect us. The problem with this is that although it might make us feel better in the short-term, in the long-term it can make us feel worse as we lose confidence.

Our bodies can be affected too. On some occasions we may feel under the weather and edgy all the time, or we may be lethargic. At other times we may experience heart palpitations or headaches.

If we look at our lives, we may be able to identify particular areas of our lives which can cause stress. These may include:

- problems with relationships—with a spouse or partner, children, parents, friends, colleagues or neighbours
- money worries
- coping with unemployment or redundancy
- problems at work—changes to the job, an excessive workload, anxiety about a promotion or job security
- worries about personal health or the health of those close to us
- poor housing
- poor education
- feeling isolated or lonely, lacking support
- being abused or harassed

- being discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender, race or ethnic origin
- lacking control over our lives
- environmental factors like pollution, extreme temperatures or noise.

Some of these things we cannot foresee. They happen to us out of the blue. Others are unavoidable, events or changes over which we have little control, although we may feel that we are in some way to blame and have brought this on ourselves. We may also fall into the trap of feeling that we should be able to cope, no matter what has happened.

"I was so determined to get promotion that it took over my life. I worked flat out until I was exhausted, but kept myself going and eventually ended up drinking on the sly. At the end of it all, I didn't get the job. Looking back on it, I'm glad in a way, because I wasn't in a fit state to cope with it. I needed to get a grip of things again."

As well as the demands made on us by other people, each of us makes demands on ourselves. We may aim to achieve certain things, whether at work, at home or in our personal lives. We have expectations of what we should be able to do. If we find that we cannot meet the standards we have set ourselves, we may put ourselves under pressure to do better. That can produce an enormous amount of stress, despite the fact that our expectations may have been unrealistic in the first place or that we have been prevented from meeting them by things beyond our control.

Some people become more vulnerable to stress after a traumatic experience. Perhaps they have been bereaved, have been the victim of a serious crime or have suddenly become unemployed. As time passes they may find it difficult to recover, to get back on top of things, and instead feel constantly overwhelmed.

"We had been living in that flat for years. It was damp and there just wasn't enough room as the kids grew bigger. Then, all within a few months my mother was taken seriously ill and I had my hours at work cut back. It just got all too much. I didn't know which way to turn."

It is often a gradual build-up of stress from various different sources that can take us to breaking point, rather than one obvious trigger.

There are many steps we can take to learn to handle situations differently so that we are less likely to feel stressed. These are outlined later. It is important to remember however, that it is not necessarily our fault that we are reacting in this way. We may find

ourselves in intolerable situations, and we may have to make changes in our lives to make them more bearable.

what you can do

Stress can make it hard for us to cope with day-to-day demands. We become more and more exhausted, tense and irritable. Other people find it hard to be with us, and even the closest relationships can become fraught. The whole experience can make us feel we are losing control over our lives and that there is no way of regaining that control.

We may feel we have to give ourselves a kick to get over the stress we feel, but that kind of self-punishment can be destructive and can cause our self confidence and self-esteem to diminish. When that happens, we lose confidence in ourselves, start to withdraw and avoid doing things. We become more isolated which leads to depression and further isolation. It becomes a vicious circle.

Instead of creating such a self-destructive spiral, we can learn to accept that there are very real reasons for us to be stressed. It is natural, for example, to be affected by the death of someone close. 'Normal' people are affected by such stressful situations.

So by accepting that there are reasons for our stress, we can then take steps to help us reduce the effects and to learn to cope with it.

What works for each of us may be different, but these are some things that may help:

- Work out what it is that is making you feel stressed and what you can do about it. There may be some things that you cannot change, or not immediately, but there may be others that you can alter. For instance, if you feel swamped by the amount of work you have, try to sort out—perhaps with the help of a colleague or supervisor—which tasks are most pressing and then give them priority.

- Relieving stress is about how you handle it. Relaxation is an important factor in releasing tense muscles and clearing and calming the mind. Relaxation of muscles through massage can also be beneficial. Deep breathing exercises too can play a part in relieving stress. You can find out more about relaxation techniques from your doctor or counsellor, or from the organisations listed later. Your local library may be able to supply you with books or tapes.
- Allow yourself a breathing space. Treat yourself to something you enjoy.
- Physical activity can boost your mood, self-esteem and body image, improve sleep and reduce reactions to stress. Exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety and treat depression. If you have any concerns about your health, or any illness or injury, speak to your doctor or practice nurse before becoming more active.
- Try to eat and drink sensibly. Drink, drugs and cigarettes in excess are not good long-term solutions to stress. We only find ourselves needing more and more to cope.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, not only in coffee and tea but also in fizzy drinks and high-energy drinks. Some cold remedies and headache tablets have a lot of caffeine in them, which can add up when taken throughout the day.
- Try to make sure you get enough sleep. Try to stick to a routine of going to sleep at the same time every night, and getting up at the same time every day. Try not to eat or drink a lot late at night and don't drink a lot of

alcohol—it may help you fall asleep, but you may wake up during the night. Avoid working in bed. Make sure that your bed and bedroom are comfortable—not too hot, not too cold, not too noisy.

- Find someone you can talk to and use their support to talk through your feelings. Not everyone finds this easy. But it may be a surprise to discover that others are feeling the same way as you.
- If you're not the sort of person that finds it easy to talk about your feelings, try taking up a sport or a hobby along with other people. It can prove to be a good form of relaxation and distraction.
- Try to pace yourself and tackle one thing at a time. Be realistic about what you expect of yourself. Learn to say 'no' to other people, some of the time at least. Set aside time for yourself to do what you enjoy.
- Some people find spiritual practice helps either in the context of organised religion, or in something less structured, such as meditation. In a group setting, it can provide the additional benefit of social support.

"It was a real effort at first to put that time aside each week, and get out of the house for an hour. But I soon came to look on it as a life saver. That was my space and I guarded it fiercely!"

self help

A lot can be gained from meeting other people with similar experiences. It can be valuable to find out we are not alone and to learn how others cope or have coped with similar sorts of difficulties. The encouragement and support from other people who understand what we are going through can be helpful.

"I learned a lot by coming to the group sessions, but the most powerful thing was that I realised that it wasn't just me who felt this way. Here was a bunch of other people who were in the same boat, but who were also finding ways of getting to grips with things again."

"It's been a life-saver for me coming here. The others gave me lots of reassurance. They were very patient. I felt better just because I was able to talk about things openly."

A self-help approach can be an important part of treating stress, and self-help books can help us find out important information about it, and how it affects us. They can also help us learn new skills to help us challenge worrying thoughts, and to help us learn ways of building confidence and facing up to fears.

It can be very helpful too to learn some relaxation techniques. There are relaxation tapes available, we can learn skills through a self-help organisation, or we can download or listen to relaxation resources on the internet. In addition, many people find it helpful to attend a self-help group, which can provide mutual support and are an important source of information.

Self-help groups can provide a lot of moral support and encouragement. They may also offer advice and training in relaxation and information on complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, acupuncture and homeopathy.

getting help from others

We may find that what we can do on our own is not enough, but sometimes it can be difficult to accept help too. It can be hard for us to be open about our fears and anxieties, but it can also be an enormous relief to stop putting on a brave face and to find that other people can help us overcome our problems.

There are different sources of support available, each offering different kinds of help. It is worth contacting one of the organisations listed later to find out what is available locally.

In many cases, there are social factors behind stress and we may find that the local social work department or housing office might be useful in helping with stress. But life can be difficult, whatever the social circumstances. People with no money problems and no work problems can be just as susceptible to stress as everyone else. Stress does not discriminate.

counselling and psychotherapy

It can be valuable to have an opportunity to talk things over with someone outside your immediate circle of family and friends. Counselling and psychotherapy give people the chance to talk through their problems. Both focus on present day feelings and difficulties, which may be current or rooted in the past, and enable us to take more control of our life and to cope in the longer-term. Waiting lists can be long, a sign of how many people are seeking help, but it is worth being patient.

There are many types of treatments that are termed 'therapy' and it is important to make a distinction between relaxing therapies like aromatherapy and reflexology which help cope with the problem without actually addressing the causes, and psychotherapies that support people and help them address the causes themselves, and provide a long term solution. Apart from finding which approach suits us best, we also need to find a counsellor or therapist we feel we can trust.

Some employers provide employee assistance schemes, where staff can have access to the services of a trained counsellor. This counselling should be entirely confidential and independent from the employer.

medical treatment

A large proportion of visits to the doctor are stress-related, but many more people do not seek medical help and struggle to deal with it on their own. It may be that they do not realise they have a problem. Some people are embarrassed to admit they have stress. Others may not be ready to ask for help, or may not believe that the doctor or health practitioner will understand or even know how to deal with the problem.

Some people will turn to their doctor when they experience the first signs of stress. It is important to have a check-up to rule out the possibility of physical illness.

You may also want to talk about alternatives to drug treatment, such as counselling, psychotherapy or self-help. Your doctor or practice nurse may be able to put you in touch with these other sources of help, including stress management groups in the area.

A prescription of anti-anxiety medication may be made (for example benzodiazepines which are tranquillisers). They can offer some relief and can be helpful in the short term to get through a crisis. Regular use of these drugs may lead to dependence and is likely to result in the return of fear or panic symptoms when discontinued. As a result, they are generally only prescribed for a short period of time. Tranquillisers are now rarely used and few are recommended for more than one month.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, your doctor may also prescribe sleeping tablets, again for a short time.

A number of medications originally approved for treating depression are thought to be effective at reducing worry and panic and you may therefore be prescribed these. Most anti-depressants take two to four weeks before they have any effect on our mood, so it is important not to give up too quickly if we do not feel better straight away.

Antidepressants should be taken as prescribed. Some patients experience mild symptoms when stopping, reducing or missing the dose. These can include dizziness, nausea, anxiety and headaches. The drugs however are not associated with tolerance and craving. Antidepressants should be taken for at least six months after symptoms have disappeared, because this greatly reduces the risk of the symptoms coming back. It is important to then go back to your doctor to find out if you need to continue with treatment. Some people may be advised to continue treatment for longer than six months.

It is important you get your doctor to explain the treatment offered. You will also receive an information sheet with the tablets prescribed from your pharmacist.

working with others

In some situations, we may not be the only ones affected by stress. Others may be exposed to the same sets of pressures and it may be helpful to act together to begin to get things improved. It is worth speaking about our concerns with other people around us to see if they feel the same.

For example we can agree to act together with work colleagues, perhaps through a trade union, to bring to the attention of management the pressing concerns at work that are affecting us all. For legal reasons employers must make their workforce aware of the signs, symptoms and dangers of stress as well as actions and techniques for combating and minimising it.

In the case of a housing problem that is causing stress, we might be able to get together as a residents' group or tenants' group to push for necessary changes or improvements. Acting together like this is more likely to succeed than if we act by ourselves.

Whether we are seeking help on an individual basis or as part of a group there are various sources of information and advice which can help.

These include:

- the Citizens Advice Bureau which advise on a range of practical and legal matters
- credit unions which can help with financial affairs
- Consumer Credit Counselling Service can help sort out credit problems
- tenants' associations or community associations which can help with housing problems
- trade unions or professional associations which can help with work-related issues.

the role of partners, family and friends

You can help by being patient and understanding, by listening to the person and encouraging them to talk about what is making them feel stressed, and asking what you can do to support them.

Stress can put an enormous strain on even the strongest relationships. It affects how someone behaves and how he or she gets on with other people. As far as possible, try to accept that their anxiety is a real problem and look for ways to show how much you still care and are there for them when they need you. This can be very reassuring at a time when they feel frightened of being unable to meet the demands made of them.

Instead of trying hard not to think about their worries, those with feelings of anxiety should be encouraged to try to learn new ways of challenging and re-balancing their worrying thoughts. For instance a new job interview can be seen either as a test of your worth as a human being, or an opportunity to learn more about the job and to acquire interview skills. If you can help someone to see their life more as a learning experience than as success or failure this can help them to deal with stress. Failure can be a state of mind, not a reality. Stressed people tend to think in black and whites, and you can help them to see things differently. Providing practical support and encouragement is important.

Encourage the person to talk about how they feel and ask what you can do to support them. Let them set the pace but encourage them to make more changes at

a realistic rate. They may need you to help in practical ways with everyday chores, but it is important that you don't take over. As your partner, friend or relative gets their confidence back and becomes less anxious, they can gradually pick up their responsibilities again, and it is important that you do not act to overly protect them by taking over all their responsibilities.

Someone who is stressed may need some prompting and support to seek help. You can assist by finding out about local support groups or relaxation classes. The organisations listed later can help with this. You could also go with your friend or relative to a group or to a doctor's appointment. One thing to watch out for is offering too much reassurance and support.

It is not easy being close to someone who is stressed and tense a lot of the time. It can be upsetting to see them in such a state and feel you are helpless to change things. It can also be exhausting and draining. You may feel guilty that you are in some way contributing to their situation. You may feel angry at the impact their moods and behaviour have on your own life.

It is important that you look after yourself and consider your own needs too—make time to do the things you enjoy. Find an outlet for your feelings, so that you have someone to talk to about your concerns. After all, if you can take care of yourself, you will have more patience and energy to help your partner, friend or relative.

If you are doing a lot to help out practically, you may feel resentful and become increasingly worn out by the burden of it. If you notice symptoms of depression or find that

you are no longer enjoying life as you used to, you may be experiencing symptoms of a depressive illness. If this is the case, please discuss these issues with your doctor or healthcare practitioner who can advise you how best to seek help.

Find an outlet for your feelings, someone you can talk to about your concerns. It might be your doctor, a close friend or another member of a support group for people in situations like your own. After all, if you take care of yourself, you will feel more confident in helping your friend or relative.

looking ahead

It is not easy to overcome the effects of stress when it is persistent or intense. Our confidence may be seriously shaken and may take time to rebuild. It may not be possible

to remove or overcome completely whatever has caused the stress, but there are various steps we can take to get help from others and to equip ourselves better to cope.

"I do still find myself on the verge of getting really stressed from time to time. The difference now is that I have a much better idea of how to handle it. To me that is the key, otherwise I'd simply have to spend a lot of life hiding away from things."

By thinking about the situations you find stressful you may be able to deal with them better in future. Learning techniques to relax can be beneficial in avoiding the build-up of tension.

There may be times when you hit setbacks, perhaps if something unexpected or more difficult crops up. It needs patience to carry on and not be discouraged but if you do, you will gradually feel more confident.

A key element of change is challenging your fears and tackling any avoidance that may cause stress. Facing up to stress is really important. It takes courage, but with a clear plan and a step-by-step approach, you can succeed.

useful addresses

The national organisations listed below can put you in touch with local sources of help in your area.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)

151 West George Street
Glasgow G2 7JJ
Tel: 0141 248 1400
Helpline: 08457 47 47 47
www.acas.org.uk

ACAS provides confidential help on all employment matters. For courses relating to stress in the workplace write to the address above.

Breathing Space

Tel: 0800 838 587
www.breathingspace.scotland.co.uk

Breathing Space is a free, confidential phone-line you can call when you are feeling down. The phone-line is open from early evening right up until two in the morning. Advisors will listen, and try to help prevent problems getting worse, offer advice and suggest local people who can help with specific problems.

The International Stress Management Association

PO Box 26
South Petherton
TA13 5WY
Tel: 07000 780430
www.isma.org.uk

ISMA is a charity that promotes the prevention and reduction of stress.

Mental Health Foundation

For general information on mental health as well as specific information on stress at work.
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

NHS24

Delta House
50 West Nile Street
Glasgow G1 2NP
Tel: 08454 24 24 24
www.nhs24.com

NHS 24 is a 24-hour health service for Scotland.

Safe and Healthy Working

This service provides a free and confidential professional advice line to employer and employees in Scotland's small and medium sized enterprises.
Tel: 0800 019 2211
www.safeandhealthyworking.com

**Scottish Association for
Mental Health**

Cumrae House
15 Carlton Court
Glasgow G5 9JP
Tel: 0141 568 7000
www.samh.org.uk

The Scottish Association for Mental Health is the major voluntary organisation in Scotland working to promote mental health.

Stresswatch Scotland

23 Campbell Street
Kilmarnock KA1 4HW
Helpline: 01563 574144 Monday to
Friday from 10.00am – 6.00pm.
www.StresswatchScotland.com

useful websites

www.cccs.co.uk

CCCS is a charity dedicated to providing confidential, free counselling and money management assistance to financially distressed families and individuals.

www.glasgowsteps.com

STEPS

www.livinglifetothefull.com

Living Life to the Full

suggestions for reading

There are many publications about stress and your doctor or local library will be able to suggest some to you. Here are a few that might help.

**The Complete Idiot's Guide to
Managing Stress**

by Jeff Davidson
Published by Alpha Books, 1999.
ISBN 002-862955-8

How to Cope with Stress

by Peter Tyrer
Published by Sheldon Press, 2003.
ISBN 085-969880-7

**How to Cope Successfully with
Stress**

by AnnA Rushton.
Published by Wellhouse Publishing
Ltd, 2004.
ISBN 190-378418-2

**The Relaxation and Stress
Reduction Workbook**

by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins
Eshelman and Matthew McKay.
Published by New Harbinger
Publications, 2000.
ISBN 157-224214-0

**The Stress Workbook
(Overcoming Common
Problems)**

by Joanna Gutmann.

Published by Sheldon Press, 1998.

ISBN 085-969787-8

Understanding Stress

by Greg Wilkinson

Published by Family Doctor

Publications, 2000.

ISBN 189-820591-4

Other topics covered by the *Talking about...* series are:

- Anxiety
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Bereavement
- Depression
- Eating Disorders
- Manic depression
- Personality Disorders
- Phobias
- Postnatal depression
- Schizophrenia
- Self Harm

Contact your local health promotion resource service for copies.
You can access their details via www.show.nhs.uk

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For further information please contact Health Scotland.

