



Stress

What is it and how do I know I'm feeling it?



Stress affects all of us at different times in our lives and it shows itself in different ways in different people.

What is Stress?

Stress arises when we believe that we are facing demands that we might find difficult to cope with. Stress is your body's way of responding to these demands. It can be both good and bad. If we have no stress in our lives we become bored and discouraged so we need a little stress to motivate us and keep us going. But too much stress can make us unwell.

The Stress Response

When we are faced with demands that we find overwhelming our bodies go into "fight or flight" mode. This literally means that our bodies prepare to fight or run from the cause of stress. A chemical called "adrenaline" is released and this gives us extra energy that we can use to deal with the situation. This is good if we are facing physical danger and can use up all this extra energy, but not so good if the stress is a response to something that is more emotional than physical and that our adrenaline won't help us with.

When we are faced with demands we are not able to meet on an ongoing basis we start to develop signs and symptoms that are often associated with anxiety and, if it goes on for a long time, we may start to feel down or depressed. The signs and symptoms of stress can affect all areas of our wellbeing – Physical, Emotional, Behavioural and Cognitive – in different ways.

Self-Assessment

At this stage it might be useful to start looking at how stress affects you and what causes that stress reaction in you. If you can spot the signs and symptoms of stress early on you are more likely to be able to deal with them effectively. And, if you know what your stress triggers are, you can take action to make changes either to how you live your life, to minimize the amount of time you are exposed to these triggers, or to how you respond to these triggers to minimize their effect on you.





Signs and Symptoms

Stress affects us in many different ways. Think about the last time you felt under pressure or stressed for any length of time. Now use the space below to identify how the stress affected you under the four headings given.

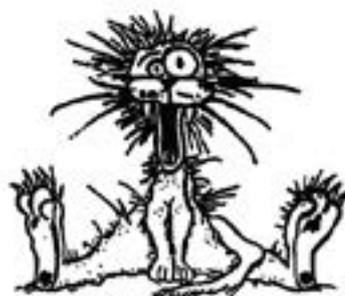
Physical How did I feel in my body?	Emotional What emotions did I feel?	Behavioural What did I do/want to do?	Cognitive What did I think?

Stress Triggers



Now we are going to look at the types of situations that tend to generate these stress reactions in you. We will call these your "Stress Triggers". Think back over the last number of days, months or years and try to identify some situations, events or encounters that generated the stress reactions you have identified.

Situation/Event/Encounter	My stress response



"STRESS"



Delving Deeper

It might be useful at this stage to look deeper into these situations/encounters/events to see if you can identify what particular aspects of them were the main triggers for your stress response. Examining each situation further using the headings below might help with this.

What was happening? (location/setting)	Who was involved?	Where did it happen?	When did it happen? (time of the day/ month/year)	What was most stressful about it for me?

Putting the Pieces Together



Look back at the last three worksheets and use them to fill in the worksheet below as a way of clarifying what you need to look out for in terms of signs symptoms and triggers.

My stress signals – Signs and Symptoms

My main stress triggers





Stress What Can You Do?

There are lots of different things you can do to combat stress. You can use these techniques to prevent it from occurring in the first place and to manage it when it does occur.



When you are feeling calm:

- Your mood is better.
- Daily irritations are more tolerable.
- Your body relaxes and your heart rate and blood pressure go down.
- Your level of agitation and frustration lessens.
- Your body can breathe freely again, let down your guard and become more open.

Calmness is something you have to actively create - it is not something that comes to you.

Meditation



Meditation is the gold standard of calming techniques. It has been used for thousands of years and is proven to be extremely effective in combatting the stresses of everyday life. It quiets your mind and re-programmes your body and, even though life may continue to be hectic, regular meditation helps you to manage this in a more effective way. It helps to clear your mind and re-programme your body. Meditation helps you re-focus and, when you are focused and clear, your mental health is better. It is easier to navigate a hectic life from a place of calm.

We tend to live in the future and the past and this increases our stress as we cannot do anything about either in the here and now. If we stay in the present, stress cannot take over. Mindfulness is a meditative technique that has been practiced for many years but has only really become widely popular more recently.

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention and focusing awareness – in short, being fully conscious of the here and now. It promotes physical, emotional and mental wellbeing through clarity and less stress. Practicing mindfulness will improve the quality of your daily life. Mindfulness meditation, also called insight meditation, is an exercise that trains your mind to stay in the present.

People are often put off meditation because they don't think they have the time. While many meditative practices can take time, mindfulness can be practiced anytime, anywhere and for short durations – literally a minute at a time.

