

A guide to Stress and how to build resilience

This guide is designed to help you identify the early warning signs that you're becoming overwhelmed by stress and offer some top tips on developing new coping skills to stay well.

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Freephone 0808 801 0808 | helpline@retailtrust.org.uk

What is stress?

One of the more common myths surrounding stress is that it's an illness. It's true that unchecked, sustained stress of any kind can cause us to develop mental and physical health problems but stress in itself is not an illness. Instead, it's a set of circumstances which can cause you to feel out of control, overwhelmed and ultimately, burnt-out.

We can't always control what happens to us in the course of our day-to-day lives but we can learn to manage stress in a proactive way. We can use techniques which not only get us through difficult times but also help us to develop coping skills when we inevitably face stressful events again in the future.

Remember that we all have different 'tipping points' and some stressors are more difficult to cope with for some people than others. We are the sum of our life experiences, and we all have varying triggers and responses because of this.

Common causes of stress

Stress can be caused by all sorts of things. Some events are life-changing such as a relationship breakdown, a bereavement, or redundancy, while other sources of stress can include a quarrel with a friend or partner, a poor performance review, or short-term money worries.

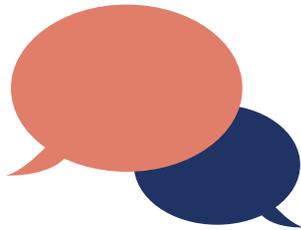
Remember that you're not alone

There are plenty of people you can call on to help you to manage before you become overwhelmed:



retailHUB advisor

Speaking with a trained and experienced counsellor



Friends and family

Talking your worries through with a trusted friend or family member



Your GP

Particularly if you're experiencing any physical or mental health problems

Does work-related stress impact on our wellbeing differently than stress at home?

It's important to remember that whether the source of your stress is home or work-related, your body's physiological and psychological responses are the same. In other words, your body and mind can't tell the difference between the cause of the stress. However, the coping skills you can develop, and those you already use, will enable you to tackle the source of the stress and come through a more resilient person.

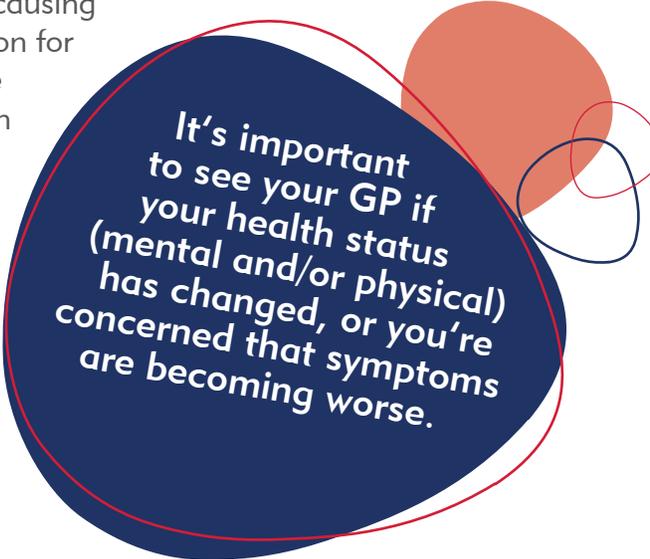
Early warning signs

It can sometimes be easier for us to identify that others are stressed before we notice the signs in ourselves. This is the paradox of stress: the more stressed we are, the less we notice what's happening within us. However, when we think about our own signs and write them down, it's much easier for us to be able to step back in the early stages and call upon both our internal resources, as well as seeking support from people who can help us.

Early warning signs that we need help coping manifest in three different ways:

- Emotional (and cognitive: the way we process information)
- Physical
- Behavioural.

Consider that by the time stress is causing us physical illness, it's been going on for some time. We all have 'vulnerable spots' in our bodies which are often the first to tell us that we're stressed such as cold sores, other skin problems, backache, headaches and tummy upsets.



It's important to see your GP if your health status (mental and/or physical) has changed, or you're concerned that symptoms are becoming worse.

Examples of early warning signs

Keep in mind that some signs such as tearfulness can be both behavioural (crying) and emotional (feeling like you want to cry). In fact, you might find that some of your signs fall under all three areas.

Physical signs

- Unexpected tearfulness
- Significant weight loss or gain within a short period of time
- Changes in sleep (sleeping too much or too little)
- Feeling totally drained.

Emotional or cognitive signs

- Feeling unable to face the day
- Lack of focus or feeling distracted
- Outbursts of anger
- Feeling snappy and impatient.

Behavioural signs

- Drinking more than usual
- Withdrawing from other people
- Making regular mistakes at work or home
- Being late or missing work.

Write down your early warning signs to help manage your stress

Physical signs

Emotional or cognitive signs

Behavioural signs

Stress is something every human being deals with from time to time. Life isn't always easy but when our foundations are shaky and we don't have coping skills to call upon, we can start to burnout and are very vulnerable to developing physical and mental health problems.

What is resilience?

“Resilience is the ability to demonstrate adaptability and flexibility in fast-paced, pressured and diverse environments.” Roden (2002)

On the whole, people who are less likely to become overwhelmed by stress are those who display a number of common behaviours and attitudes, all of which can be learned and practised throughout our lifetimes.

These include:

- A healthy and enjoyable life balance (such as varied interests, people they can count on when things are going wrong, involvement in their community)
- Effective pressure management techniques
- Self-responsibility and a sense of purpose in life
- Identification of personal values
- Prioritisation and time management
- Effective decision making skills
- Flexible or learned optimism
- Continuous self-development.

What is the 'fight or flight' response?

When faced with stress of any kind, we experience what you've likely heard referred to as the fight or flight response. Stressful situations can be useful in the short-term. For example, feeling nervous before an exam or a job interview can make you feel more alert and enhance your performance. However, if you're dealing with acute stress over a sustained period of time, your ability to concentrate may well suffer.

When we feel stressed – whether in the short-term, or over time – we are likely to feel anxious although this doesn't mean that we necessarily suffer from an anxiety disorder. Feeling anxious when we're under pressure is normal and serves to tell us that something isn't quite right and needs to change.

Stress-related anxiety triggers the release of hormones, such as adrenalin. For example, say that you're being chased by a lion; adrenalin causes your heart to beat faster to carry blood where it's most needed; you breathe more quickly to provide the extra oxygen required for energy; you perspire to prevent overheating, and your mouth may feel dry as your digestive system slows down to allow more blood to be deflected to your lungs, heart and muscles. These and other changes in your body enable you to take action and protect you in a dangerous situation, either by running away or fighting the danger. After the danger has passed, your body returns to its normal functioning without any damage being done to it.

However, this fight or flight response isn't just present when we're facing a physically dangerous situation – the body reacts in the same way to other situations you find emotionally upsetting (an intense workload, or problems with your partner, for example). In these cases, you don't have the option of fight or flight but are likely to have to stay and deal with the situation in the moment. Therefore, the body can't return to normal as quickly as it would when faced with a physical danger. Recovery can take longer and if the stress is ongoing, the body and mind won't have the chance to rest and bounce back.

Top tips

Things you can do to help yourself bounce back when you're feeling overwhelmed by stress, and build resilience as you go.

Get enough sleep

Between seven and eight hours of nightly sleep tends to be seen as the norm, although only you can tell if you are getting too little – or too much – sleep. To find out more download 'How to get a better night's sleep' from our website at retailtrust.org.uk/downloads

Exercise

Did you know that even 30 minutes of activity, five times a week can lift your mood and reduce anxiety?

Plan your meals

It's worth planning your meals in advance to ensure that you're giving your body everything it needs to work optimally. Avoiding sugar highs can also help.

Remember to breathe

When we become stressed or anxious, we tend to breathe more erratically and quickly which in turns makes us feel more stressed. Find a comfortable position and breathe deeply.

Take time out

Even 15 minutes of 'you time' a day brings positive benefits.

Think positively

Turning negative thoughts into positive actions will make you feel more in control and able to manage the challenges that life brings.

Get organised

Don't try to organise everything at once, just one task a day can bring a sense of calm to an otherwise overwhelming to do list.

Ask for and accept support

Start with something small. You could ask your partner to do the grocery shopping once a fortnight for example.

Get creative

Spending time creating something focuses the brain in much the same way as meditation does, bringing calm and perspective.

Take time to recover

Just as you need time to recover from a physical illness or injury, so too should you ensure that you take time to recover after a period of stress.