



Stress

Explains what stress is, what might cause it and how it can affect you. Includes information about ways you can help yourself and how to get support.

If you want to contact us with any feedback, email contact@mind.org.uk.

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What is stress?

Stress is how we react when we feel under pressure or threatened. It usually happens when we are in a situation that we don't feel we can manage or control.

When we experience stress, it can be as:

- An individual, for example when you have lots of responsibilities that you are struggling to manage
- Part of a group, for example if your family is going through a difficult time, such as [bereavement](#) or [financial problems](#)
- Part of your community, for example if you belong to a religious group that is experiencing discrimination
- A member of society, for example during natural disasters or events like the coronavirus pandemic

If you feel stress as part of a bigger group, you may all experience it differently. This can happen even if the cause of your stress is the same.

“It's overwhelming. Sometimes you can't see beyond the thick fog of stress.”

When is stress a problem?

Sometimes, a small amount of stress can help us to complete tasks and feel more energised. But stress can become a problem when it lasts for a long time or is very intense. In some cases, stress can affect our physical and mental health.

You might hear healthcare professionals refer to some types of stress as 'acute' or 'chronic':

- **Acute stress happens within a few minutes to a few hours of an event.** It lasts for a short period of time, usually less than a few weeks, and is very intense. It can happen after an upsetting or unexpected event. For example, this could be a sudden bereavement, assault or natural disaster.
- **Chronic stress lasts for a long period of time or keeps coming back.** You might experience this if you are under lots of pressure a lot of the time. You might also feel chronic stress if your day-to-day life is difficult, for example if you are a [carer](#) or if you live in poverty.

“I had time off work with stress and anxiety issues. I was on a very slippery slope and getting further down said slope at a rapid speed. I was scared.”

Is stress a mental health problem?

Stress is not normally considered a mental health problem. But it is connected to our mental health in several ways:

- **Stress can cause mental health problems.** And it can make existing problems worse. For example, if you experience lots of stress, this might lead you to develop a mental health problem like [anxiety](#) or [depression](#). Or a traumatic period of stress might lead to [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).
- **Mental health problems can cause stress.** You might find coping with the day-to-day symptoms of your mental health problem is stressful. You may also feel stressed about managing medication, healthcare appointments or other treatments.
- You might use **recreational drugs or alcohol to cope with stress.** This could also affect your mental health, and cause further stress.

Signs and symptoms of stress

Stress can affect our emotions, our body and how we behave, in lots of different ways. Sometimes when we are stressed, we might be able to tell right away. But at other times, we might keep going without recognising the signs.

This section covers some of the common signs and symptoms:

- [How stress can make you feel](#)
- [Physical signs of stress](#)
- [How stress can make you behave](#)

“It was quite a revelation to notice my frantically beating heart, racing thoughts, hyperactive personality and behaviours all resulted from being massively and permanently stressed out.”

How stress can make you feel

If you are stressed, you might feel:

- Irritable, [angry](#), impatient or wound up
- Over-burdened or overwhelmed
- [Anxious](#), nervous or afraid
- Like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- Unable to enjoy yourself
- [Depressed](#)
- Uninterested in life
- Like you've lost your sense of humour
- A sense of dread
- Worried or tense

- Neglected or [lonely](#)
- Existing mental health problems getting worse

Some people who go through severe stress may experience suicidal feelings. This can be very distressing.

If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, it's a mental health emergency.

[Get emergency advice](#)

Physical signs of stress

The hormones that our bodies produce to respond to stressful situations can have many physical effects. These effects might include:

- Difficulty breathing
- [Panic attacks](#)
- Blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- [Sleep problems](#)
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches and headaches
- Chest pains and high blood pressure
- Indigestion or heartburn
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Feeling sick, dizzy or fainting
- Sudden weight gain or weight loss
- Developing rashes or itchy skin
- Sweating
- Changes to your period or menstrual cycle
- Existing physical health problems getting worse

If we experience high levels of stress, these physical effects can get worse. This can also happen if we experience stress for a long period of time.

In some cases, stress may cause more severe or long-term physical health problems. These might include:

- **Takotsubo cardiomyopathy ('broken heart' syndrome).** This can feel similar to a heart attack. The British Heart Foundation has information about [takotsubo cardiomyopathy](#).

- **Secondary amenorrhoea.** This is when you don't get your period for three months or more. The NHS has information on [stopped or missed periods](#).

“I started waking up in the morning in a panic, feeling nauseous, with my heart racing. That feeling would stick around for as long as I was awake. 99% of the time, I felt like something really bad was about to happen.”

How stress can make you behave

If you feel stressed, it might make you:

- Find it hard to make decisions
- Unable to concentrate
- Unable to remember things, or make your memory feel slower than usual
- Constantly worry or have feelings of dread
- Snap at people
- Bite your nails
- Pick at or itch your skin
- Grind your teeth or clench your jaw
- Experience sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- Eat too much or too little
- Smoke, use recreational drugs or drink alcohol more than you usually would
- Restless, like you can't sit still
- Cry or feel tearful
- Spend or shop too much
- Not exercise as much as you usually would, or exercise too much
- Withdraw from people around you

“[It feels like] the world is closing in on me, I can't breathe and I'm running out of time.”

What causes stress?

Many things can cause stress. You might feel stressed because of one big event or situation in your life. Or it might be a build-up of lots of smaller things.

This might make it harder for you to identify what's making you feel stressed, or to explain it to other people.

You may experience stress if you:

- Feel under lots of pressure
- Face big changes in your life
- Are worried about something
- Don't have much or any control over the outcome of a situation
- Have responsibilities that you find overwhelming
- Don't have enough work, activities or change in your life
- Experience discrimination, hate or abuse
- Are going through a period of uncertainty

“Stressful life events, which in isolation might seem less significant, combined to have a real impact on my mental health.”

Why do certain things make me feel stressed?

How stressed you feel in different situations may depend on factors like:

- How comfortable you feel in certain types of situation
- What else you are going through at the time
- Your past experiences, and how these affect the way you feel about yourself
- The resources you have available to you, such as time and money
- The amount of support you have from other people

Some situations that don't bother you at all might cause someone else a lot of stress. This is because we are all influenced by different experiences. We also have different levels of support and ways of coping.

Certain events might also make you feel stressed sometimes, but not every time.

For example, if you go shopping for food with enough time and money, you may not feel stressed. But you might feel stressed if you have lots of other things to do, have a tight budget, or need to buy food for a big event.

“I get stressed when things get out of perspective – too much work, thinking too far ahead.”

What kind of situations can cause stress?

Many things can cause stress in different areas of our lives. These may include:

Personal

- Illness or injury
- Pregnancy and becoming a parent
- Infertility and problems having children
- [Bereavement](#)
- Experiencing abuse
- Experiencing crime and the justice system, such as being arrested, going to court or being a witness
- Organising a complicated event, like a holiday
- Everyday tasks, such as household chores or taking transport

Friends and family

- Getting married or civil partnered
- Going through a break-up or getting divorced
- Difficult relationships with parents, siblings, friends or children
- [Being a carer](#)

“My breakdown [...] was due to having a stressful job as a project manager and dealing with a marriage break up and subsequent divorce.”

Employment and study

- Losing your job
- Long-term unemployment
- Retiring
- Exams and deadlines
- Difficult situations or colleagues at work
- Starting a new job

Stressed about exams? We have info for young people to help you cope with exam stress at school or college

[Read more](#)

Housing

- [Housing problems](#), such as poor living conditions, lack of security or homelessness
- Moving house
- Problems with neighbours

Money

- Worries about [money](#) or benefits
- Living in poverty
- Managing debt

Social factors

- Having poor access to services such as medical care, green spaces or transport
- Living through a stressful community-wide, national or global event, like the coronavirus pandemic
- Experiencing stigma or discrimination, including [racism](#), [homophobia](#), [biphobia](#) or [transphobia](#)

[Read more about racism and mental health](#)

Can happy events cause stress?

Some of these situations are often thought of as happy events. For example, you might feel expected to be happy or excited about getting married or having a baby.

But these events can bring big changes, and you might experience new or unusual demands. So they can still feel very stressful. This can be difficult to deal with, especially if you also feel pressure to be positive.

“I’ve never been more stressed in my life than the 6 months leading up to my wedding... everyone kept asking me if I was happy and expecting me to be excited all the time, but I just couldn’t feel it. I ended up getting really ill.”

Managing stress and building resilience

Being prepared for periods of stress can make it easier to get through them. And knowing how to manage our wellbeing can help us recover after a stressful event. Some of us may refer to our ability to manage stress as our resilience.

There are things we can try to build our resilience against stress. But there are also factors that might make it harder to be resilient, such as experiencing discrimination or lacking support.

This page has information on:

- [Barriers to resilience](#)
- [Tips for managing stress](#)

Barriers to resilience

The terms 'resilience' and 'managing stress' can mean different things to different people. We might understand them differently because our experiences shape how we feel stress, and how easily we can respond to it.

Some people may think that our response to stress is something that we can all easily control. But this is not true. There are some causes of stress that are beyond our control. And some ways of managing stress and building resilience are not always available to us.

This makes dealing with stress very personal – it may be harder for some of us than for others. Some experiences that can make it more difficult include:

- Having a long-term physical health condition
- Having a mental health problem
- Experiencing discrimination and hate, including [racism](#), [homophobia](#), [biphobia](#) or [transphobia](#)
- Living far away from family or friends, or having difficult relationships with them
- Experiencing [loneliness](#)
- Experiencing poverty and [money worries](#), including debt or problems with benefits
- Living in an area with poor access to services like healthcare, public transport and green spaces
- Being a single parent
- Being a [carer](#)
- Having poor quality [housing](#)
- Lacking safety and protection, such as living in areas with poor policing

Research shows that it is easier to develop resilience if we don't face these barriers. But many of these things are difficult or impossible to change.

Remember: if you face these barriers, this is not your fault. And it is not up to you to remove these barriers yourself.

“I believe that the root cause of my anxiety and stress was racism. This was further exacerbated by experiencing microaggressions at school and university.”

Tips for managing stress

Below are some tips you could try to help you manage stress and build your resilience. Trying these ideas won't make all the stress in your life disappear. But they could make it easier to get through stressful situations.

Look after your wellbeing

Taking care of your wellbeing can help you feel more able to manage stress. Different things will work for different people, but these are some ideas you could try:

- **Be kind to yourself.** Learning to be kinder to yourself can help with how you feel in different situations. Try to take breaks in your day for things you enjoy. And reward yourself for your achievements, even if they seem small.
- **Try to find time to relax.** This might feel hard if you can't do anything to stop a situation that is making you stressed. But if you can allow yourself a short break, this can help with how you feel. See our pages on [relaxation](#) for some tips and exercises.
- **Develop your interests and hobbies.** Spending time on things you enjoy could help distract you from a stressful situation. If stress is making you feel [lonely](#) or isolated, shared hobbies can also be a good way to meet new people.
- **Spend time in nature.** This can help to reduce stress and improve wellbeing. You could try going for a walk in a green space, taking care of indoor plants, or spending time with animals. Our [nature and mental health](#) pages have more information.
- **Look after your physical health.** Getting enough [sleep](#), staying [physically active](#) and eating a balanced diet can make stress easier to manage. Stress can sometimes make these things difficult to look after. But even small changes can make a big difference.

See our pages on [wellbeing](#) for more tips to support yourself.

“My advice would be if you're feeling stressed, be kind to yourself, everything starts with you.”

Build your support network

Research shows that having a good support network can help to build resilience and make stress easier to manage. Support from people you trust can make stressful situations easier to manage.

This support could include:

- **Friends and family.** Sometimes telling the people close to you how you're feeling can make a big difference. They might be able to help with some of the things causing you stress.
- **Support at work.** For example, this may be from your manager, human resources (HR) department, union representatives or employee assistance scheme. Your wellbeing is important and responsible employers should take it seriously. If you're worried that your workplace might not be supportive, our page on [work and stress](#) has some guidance that may help. The Health and Safety Executive has [information on work-related stress](#) that may also help.
- **Support at university or college.** For example, this could be from your tutors, student union or student services. See our pages on [student life](#) for more tips on getting support as a student.
- **Peer support.** If you're finding things hard, talking to people who have similar feelings or experiences can help. This could be face-to-face at a peer support group, or through an online community like Mind's [Side by Side](#). See our pages on [peer support](#) to find out more.

“The brain is like an engine; if you run it too hot all day, every day without checking the oil and water, it breaks.”

Identify your triggers

Working out what may trigger stress can help you prepare for it. Even if you can't avoid these situations, being prepared can help. Knowing what you can and cannot change could help you work out the best way to deal with stress.

Take some time to think about situations that might make you feel stressed. You could do this on your own or with someone you trust. You could consider:

- **Situations that come up often** and that you worry about, such as paying a bill or attending an appointment.
- **One-off events that are on your mind a lot**, like moving house or taking an exam.
- **Ongoing stressful events**, like being a carer or experiencing discrimination.
- **Something that you are worried about happening again**, such as going back to a place that you had a bad experience.

Reflecting on these things may sometimes be upsetting. If remembering or talking about these experiences makes you feel worse, you can stop.

Our pages on [trauma](#) have more information on stressful or frightening events that may be difficult to talk about.

“I think it’s very important to acknowledge your feelings. Be honest with how you’re feeling. If you’re not happy in any situation, it’s okay to leave. It’s also okay to ask for help.”

Organise your time

Some of us may feel stressed because we have a lot of things to manage in our lives. In this case, changing the way we organise our time can help us feel more in control.

If you think this may help, you could:

- **Try to identify when you have the most energy**, such as in the morning or in the evening. If you can, do your most important tasks around that time of day, to help you concentrate better.
- **Make a list of things you have to do**. Arrange them in order of importance. Try to focus on the most urgent thing first. You might find it helpful to create a timetable, planning when to spend time on each task.
- **Set smaller, achievable targets**. When we feel stressed, it's easy to set ourselves large or unrealistic goals. This might be to try to overcome the situation that is making us feel stressed. But often, this can make us feel more stressed and frustrated, if we don't reach the targets we set. Setting smaller, more achievable goals can help us feel more satisfied and in control.
- **Vary your activities**. Try to balance boring tasks with more interesting ones. And mix up stressful tasks with those you find easier, or that you can do more calmly.
- **Try not to do too much at once**. If you take on too much, you might find it harder to do any individual task well. This could make you feel even more stressed.
- **Be clear with others about what you can take on**. In some situations, it might not always be possible to say no to things, or tell people exactly how you feel. But if you can, let people know if their demands are unreasonable or unrealistic.
- **Have breaks and take things slowly**. It might be difficult to do this when you're stressed. But it can help to deal with things better and get through a stressful situation.
- **Ask someone if they can help**. For example, you could ask a friend or family member to help with some of your daily tasks. This can give you more time to spend on any tasks that are making you stressed.

“I need to take on enough challenges to keep me interested and engaged with the world, but not too many to the point where I am exhausted.”

Take action in your community

Sometimes, our stress might be caused or made worse by problems in our community, such as lack of access to services. Taking action against these problems can help how we feel in ourselves, as well as supporting others.

When we are very stressed, these things might not feel possible. And at any time, they might feel tiring or stressful themselves. But if you feel able to do so, some things you could try include:

- **Mind campaigns.** Visit our [campaigns](#) page to find out how we are campaigning for change, and how to become a campaigner.
- **Community groups.** There might be campaigns or volunteering projects to improve your local area and community. [Do IT](#) has information on volunteer groups in your area. Or visit [myCommunity](#) for information on how to set up a community group.
- **Take part in local decisions.** Your area may have regular meetings of local, parish or town councils. You can often attend these meetings to have a say in decisions affecting your community. The UK Government website has a [tool to find your local council](#).
- **Write to your MP.** You can contact your local member of parliament (MP) to tell them about a problem in your area and ask them to take action. The UK Parliament website has information on [when and how to contact an MP](#).

Support for causes of stress

There may be different areas of your life that make you feel stressed. Some of these might feel difficult to change on your own, or without support and advice on what to do next.

We have lots of information to help you find support in different areas of your life, including:

- [Housing and mental health](#)
- [Money and mental health](#)
- [Insurance cover](#)
- [Mental health at work](#)
- [Coping when supporting someone else](#)
- [Coping as a parent with a mental health problem](#)
- [Abuse support](#)
- [Addiction and dependency support](#)
- [Racism and mental health](#)
- [Seeking help for a mental health problem](#)

Treatment for stress

There are no specific treatments for stress. But there are treatments for some of the signs and symptoms of stress. These might help if you are finding it difficult to manage stress yourself.

This page covers:

- [Speaking to your GP](#)
- [Medication](#)
- [Talking therapy](#)
- [Complementary and alternative therapies](#)

Visit our page on [managing stress and building resilience](#) to find tips for taking care of yourself when you feel stressed.

Speaking to your GP

Your GP might be helpful to speak to if:

- You are experiencing a lot of stress.
- You have felt stressed for a long time.
- Your feelings of stress are affecting your physical or mental health.

If stress is causing you physical health problems, your GP may run some tests to see how they can help manage the symptoms.

They may suggest some options to help you manage your stress, such as [wellbeing](#) and [relaxation tips](#). They might be able to refer you to social prescribing, if it is available in your area.

Social prescribing is a form of community-based treatment that helps you deal with social issues affecting your health. For example, this might include support for [loneliness](#), [money problems](#) or [physical activity](#). It can also help you find activities that improve your wellbeing, such as arts and gardening classes, or volunteering opportunities.

See our page on [talking to your GP](#) for tips on how to discuss how you're feeling with your doctor.

“Social prescribing helps you find lots of different activities and support in your local community that can help you turn things around.”

Medication

There is no specific medication for stress. But there are medications that can help reduce or manage some of the [signs and symptoms of stress](#).

For example, your doctor might offer to prescribe:

- [Sleeping pills or minor tranquillisers](#), if you're having trouble sleeping
- [Antidepressants](#), if you're experiencing depression or anxiety alongside stress
- Medication to treat any physical symptoms of stress, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or high blood pressure

Before deciding to take any drug, it's important to **make sure you have all the facts** you need to make an informed choice.

See our pages on [things to consider before taking medication](#) and [your right to refuse medication](#) for more information. Our pages on [coming off medication](#) give guidance on how to come off medication safely.

Talking therapy

Talking with a trained professional could help you find ways to deal with stress. And it can help you become more aware of your own thoughts and feelings.

You might also find talking therapies helpful if your stress has caused other mental health problems.

There are lots of different talking therapies. Some of them may help you. But not all of them will be suitable for your situation. Our pages on [talking therapy and counselling](#) have lots more information about different types of therapy.

Not all areas of England and Wales will offer talking therapy for stress on the NHS. You might need to ask your doctor what is available near you.

You may also be able to find therapy and classes from [charities and third sector organisations](#) to help with stress. This might include support from your [local Mind](#).

Complementary and alternative therapies

You may find certain complementary and alternative therapies helpful in treating signs and symptoms of stress. This may include:

- Acupuncture
- Aromatherapy
- Some herbal remedies and cannabis-based medicines
- Hypnotherapy
- Massage

- Tai Chi
- Yoga and mediation

You can try some of these therapies on your own. Whereas others are usually done as part of a class or one-to-one session.

See our pages on [complementary and alternative therapies](#) for more about these therapies, and many others.

“Using mindfulness [helps me] to just allow some space to breathe and focus on the present moment.”

How can friends and family help?

This page is for friends and family of someone who is experiencing stress, who want to support them.

It can feel difficult if someone you're close to is feeling stressed. You might find it hard if you can't help them change the situation that is causing them stress. But there are still lots of practical things you can do to help.

Help them notice signs and symptoms of stress

Often, someone might not notice that how they feel or behave is a [sign of stress](#). For example, this may include having problems sleeping, or drinking more alcohol than usual.

You may be able to see these signs in someone else. This could even be before they recognise it themselves.

If you've noticed this, you could let them know and ask how you can help. Try to be gentle when starting this conversation, in case it is something they are not aware of or feel sensitive about.

Listen to how they feel

Having a chance to talk could help them feel calmer and more able to deal with their stress. Being there for them and listening without judging them can help.

“[My friends can help by] making me a cup of tea, holding me while I cry, making me laugh...”

Reassure them

When someone is in the middle of a stressful time, it can be hard to see when it might end. Let them know that situations change and can get better.

Help them relax

You could help them research relaxation techniques and find ways to practise them. For example, this could be a weekly yoga class, or setting aside time for breathing exercises at home. This might become something that you could do together.

“When I'm stressed I need friends to hug me. It's amazing how good a single hug can feel.”

Help identify their triggers

It may help to talk about things you've noticed that might trigger their stress. But remember that they might also find this conversation stressful. Try to stay open-minded and avoid judging them. Being patient can also help.

“Not putting extra pressure on me... letting me know they're there but that I don't have to do anything.”

Help with causes of stress

There are many situations or experiences that can cause stress. You might be able to help them look for support for some of these issues. For example, this could be help with debt, housing problems or difficulties at work.

Support them to seek help

You could help them contact their GP, go with them to an appointment or do some research on mental health and wellbeing. See our pages on [helping someone else seek help](#) for more ideas.

Look after yourself

If someone around you is very stressed, you might feel stressed too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after your own wellbeing. Having good wellbeing can make you feel more able to help someone else.

See our pages on [wellbeing](#) to find tips for supporting yourself.

“[I want them to] understand that I may be irritable but I don't mean to hurt them in any way.”

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- [Mind's helplines](#) provide information and support by phone and email.
- [Local Minds](#) offer face-to-face services across England and Wales. These services include talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- [Side by Side](#) is Mind's support online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Other organisations

Anxiety UK

[03444 775 774](tel:03444775774) (helpline)

[07537 416 905](tel:07537416905) (text)

anxietyuk.org.uk

Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

Do IT

doit.life

Lists UK volunteering opportunities.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

hse.gov.uk

Information and guidance on health and safety law in the workplace.

Mind Tools

mindtools.com

Tips and articles on personal effectiveness, management and leadership.

NHS UK

nhs.uk

Information about health problems and treatments, including details of local NHS services in England.

Samaritans

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[116 123](tel:116123) (freephone)

jo@samaritans.org

Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS

samaritans.org

Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone who needs to talk. You can [visit some Samaritans branches in person](#). Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on [0808 164 0123](tel:08081640123) (7pm–11pm every day).

Stress Management Society

stress.org.uk

Information about stress and tips on how to cope.

You and Your Hormones

yourhormones.info

Information on hormone-related conditions and treatments.

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References are available on request.