

From Distress to De-stress

A Guide to How You Can Help Yourself to Deal with
Stress and Anxiety



This guide is one of a series about good ways to deal with mental health problems. Such problems are very common and the things you can do to help with them have been shown to be effective.

Contents

Understanding stress and anxiety

How stress affects the body

Going from distress to de-stress

Top tips for de-stressing

Other tips for managing stress

Contacts for information help and support

Getting the most out of the booklet:

This guide asks you to think about your own circumstances and feelings as you read through it. You may find it helps to write in the spaces provided as a way to think more clearly about how you feel.

What you'll need:

- ❑ A pen and maybe a notebook for extra notes.
- ❑ Time for reading and thinking about how you can help yourself.
- ❑ Somewhere quiet to read and think.
- ❑ To keep going and pace yourself by taking one step at a time.
- ❑ Support from a family member, friend or health professional if possible.

If you are struggling to read and do the exercises in the booklet, do discuss this with a health worker, such as your doctor or practice nurse. Your concentration, energy or motivation levels may be low at the moment and there may be other things it would be better to try first.

Understanding Stress and Anxiety

Stress is a normal response to something that appears to be a threat. Stress affects how we think, how we behave and how we feel, both physically and in our mood.

The way the body reacts to stress is normal and sometimes it can even be useful. But, it can make you feel worried, fearful and anxious.

This booklet looks at your body's physical signs of stress because these can be very strong and frightening. It will also show you how you can get rid of them. It shows how you can use relaxation, breathing and other ways to go from 'Distress to De-stress'. Taking control of these physical feelings is a good first step to controlling feelings of anxiety.

Feelings of anxiety can take many forms, for example;

- ❑ *Panic*; strong, sometimes sudden feelings of panic or fear that are hard to control
- ❑ *Phobias*; a fear of an object or situation that would not normally trouble most people
- ❑ *Social phobia*; fear or anxiety in public or social situations
- ❑ *Health anxiety*; continued worry or fear about getting an illness
- ❑ *Generalised anxiety disorder*; worry or fear about many things
- ❑ *Obsessive compulsive disorder*; unwanted and continual thoughts and fears that can lead a person to repeat actions over and over again, trying to settle the anxiety
- ❑ *Post traumatic stress disorder*; continuing anxiety following a traumatic event

You may need to get more in-depth help to deal with these problems. A good place to start is to talk to your doctor.

Anxiety UK is an organisation that can provide more information and support about these problems, www.anxietyuk.org.uk
Helpline 08444 775 774 (Mon-Fri 9.30-4.30)

Understanding Stress

What is stress?

Stress is the feeling we have when our body reacts to something it thinks is a threat. The physical signs result from our body getting ready either to fight the threat or to run away from it. This is known as the 'fight-or-flight' response.

Stress is a normal reaction. A job interview, exams, taking a driving test, having to do something new or difficult at work – these can all make us feel anxious and stressed. This can sometimes help, for example, to push us to prepare for an exam or job interview. It can get us out of situations fast without thinking, such as jumping out of the way of an oncoming car.

When is stress unhelpful?

- Stress is a problem when we feel we can't cope with something and it's out of our control.
- Being stressed in situations where there is no threat/danger
- It affects how you live your life
- It stops you doing what you want
- Worrying affects your sleep
- Symptoms are severe/unpleasant
- It happens too often and for too long

Is stress a problem for you?

Over the page there is a list of symptoms caused by stress.

Please tick any that you often experience.

You feel...

- Anxious, worried, fearful, nervous
- Like something terrible is going to happen
- Like things are out of your control
- Tense/on edge/agitated
- Mentally and physically tired

You mind is...

- Racing/difficult to switch off
- Going over and over things
- Difficult to focus and jumps from one topic to another
- Over-estimating danger
- Underestimating your ability to cope
- Underestimating help available
- Unable to control or stop worrying
- Imagining the worse case scenario
- Concentrating on what your body feels like

Your thoughts might be...

- "I can't cope"
- "Things are out of control"
- "I'm going mad"
- "I'm going to faint/collapse"
- "I'm going to have a heart attack"
- "I'm going to make a fool of myself"
- "I've got to leave, now!"

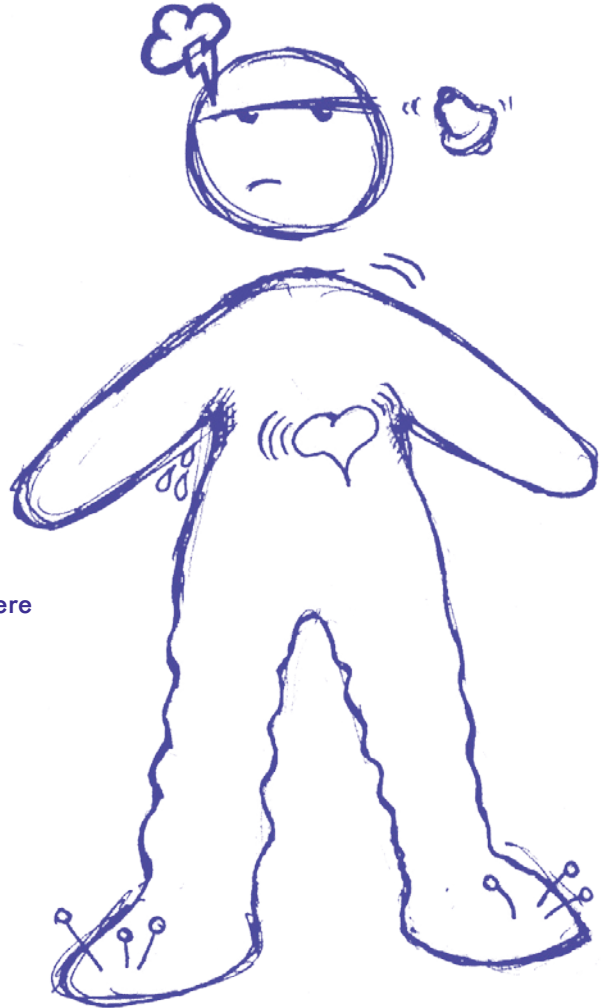
You might behave by...

- Not being able to sit still and/or finding it hard to relax
- Starting one job before finishing another
- Avoiding situations where anxiety might occur
- Leaving situations that make me feel stressed/panicky
- Trying to do things perfectly or trying to control events to prevent danger
- Eating more or less
- Drinking, taking drugs and/or smoking more

Physical symptoms of stress

Please tick any symptoms that you experience regularly:

- Can't sleep
- Dizzy
- Tired
- Headaches
- Blurred vision
- Pupils dilate
- Tearful
- Ringing ears
- Hot and flushed
- Heart racing
- Heart palpitations
- Chest pain
- Butterflies in stomach
- Feel sick
- Need to go to toilet
- Can't concentrate
- Forgetful
- Depersonalisation -
feel like you are not really there
- Dry mouth
- Throat tightening
- Different taste/smell
- Neck & shoulder -
Muscles tense
- Breathing fast & shallow -
Hyperventilation
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Leg muscles tense
- Shakiness
- Numbness/tingling toes & fingers



This is how stress can affect the body.

No wonder we can feel so bad when we are stressed out.

What keeps stress and anxiety going?

You can see from the lists you have just looked at that stress and anxiety can be looked at as

- Physical feelings
- Difficult and distressing thoughts
- Strong emotional feelings
- Things you do (behaviour)

Feeling stressed and anxious can become hard to deal with when each of these makes the others worse, for example;

“I think I can’t cope with my job (*thoughts*). This gives me feelings of worry and panic at the thought of going to work (*emotions*). These feelings make my body feel tense and my stomach feel upset (*physical*). So I decide to take the day off (*behaviour*). But this makes me think even more that I can’t cope (*thoughts*).”

This is often called a “vicious cycle” because it feels as if it goes round and round and it’s hard to make it stop. It also makes it harder to deal with those parts of your life that are causing you stress in the first place.

What tends to work best is to tackle this big problem a bit at a time. Look at where you may be able to break this cycle, even if it is only doing a small thing.

In this booklet we will look at how to start breaking the cycle by gaining some control over the physical feelings of stress and anxiety. This should help you to look at some of the other feelings, thoughts and behaviours bit by bit until you feel more in control.

This way of looking at stress and anxiety, and similar problems like feeling depressed, is the basis of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This is a common talking treatment for people needing help in managing their difficult feelings. This way of tackling problems is known to work well for many people.

While this booklet will help you to start making changes in the *physical symptoms of stress*, there are other booklets which will help you to:

- manage your thoughts
- change your behaviour
- focus on managing anxiety in more detail

They are available

- free to borrow from your local library
- to buy from the website: www.fiveareas.com
- free to download from: www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp

How Stress affects the body

The Stress Response (Fight and Flight System)

Our bodies are really good at protecting us from danger. When the body senses a threat it releases lots of the hormone adrenaline into the blood. This makes the body ready to react to the danger. It is an automatic reaction that you do not control.

Imagine a caveman, hunting and gathering. If a sabre-toothed tiger jumped out, he needs to either *fight* it or run away (*flight*). Adrenaline makes the heartbeat and breathing faster. This gets blood to the muscles and brain. The caveman is now more alert. His muscles have more strength and can keep going for longer. When he has run away or fought the tiger, the effects of adrenaline wear off and his body then returns to normal.



The problem is that our bodies have this 'fight or flight' reaction to things that stress us out, like driving in rush hour traffic. But we rarely flee or fight our way out of the situation. This means that the stress is not 'burnt off' and it keeps on affecting our bodies.

The physical affects of stress can feel dangerous but it is normal. The table over the page lists the main symptoms of stress. It also explains why the body has that response.

What happens	Why
Heart racing Heart palpitations	Pumping blood to get oxygen and glucose to the arm and leg muscles and the brain.
Breathing fast and shallow Shortness of breath Chest pain Tight chest	Body needs more oxygen so the chest muscles are being used a lot
Headaches	Brain is working overtime. More blood to brain so it is ready for action
Tense neck & shoulder muscles Tense leg muscles Shaky legs and arms	The body is getting ready for action and more blood is going to muscles
Butterflies in stomach Feel sick	Less blood to stomach and intestines
Numbness / tingling toes and fingers	Less blood to fingers and toes
Vomiting Need to go to the toilet	Body wants to be lighter for escape
Dry mouth Throat tightening	Body does not want to digest food when running away or fighting
Sweating Hot and flushed	The body is getting ready to cool you down. Extra activity will make you hot
Tired	Nervous system uses up energy even when the body is at rest
Blurred vision Pupils dilate	Pupils get bigger to see surroundings better. Eyes take time to focus close up
Tearful	Reaction to worry and the physical symptoms of stress
Can't concentrate Forgetful Feel like you are not really there Can't sleep Ringing in ears Strange taste / smell	Nervous system is overloaded. The brain is trying to process too much information at once.

Hyperventilation

Sometimes when we feel scared or stressed we can tend to over-breathe and this can create more problems.

The body reacts by:

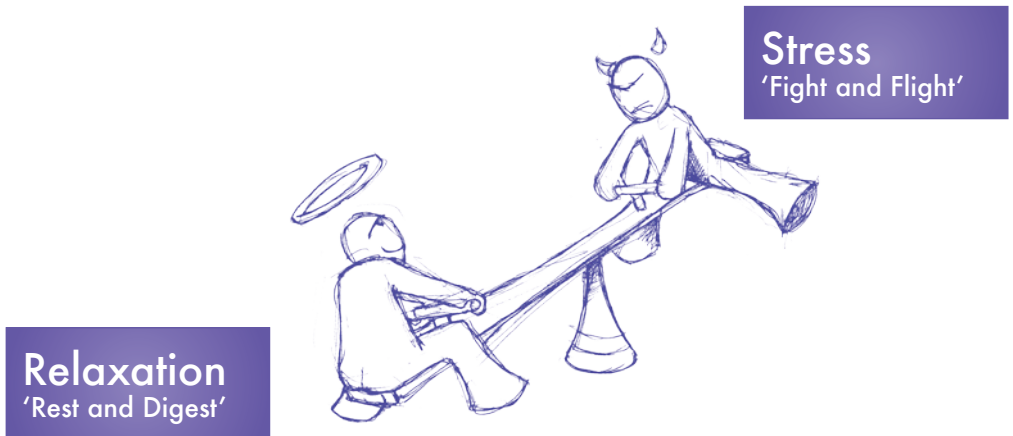
- Less blood goes to the brain - so you could feel dizzy, confused, have a sense of unreality. It may make your vision blurry and you feel breathless or as if you are choking.
- Less blood gets to other parts of the body - so you can get numbness / tingling in hands and feet, faster heart rate and tight muscles.
- Chest tightness or pains - your chest muscles are doing a lot of work

Hyperventilation is not dangerous. The symptoms will get less as you take control your breathing.

Going from Distress to De-Stress

So now you know what is happening to your body, the good news is that you can do something about it.

The opposite of the 'Fight and Flight' system is the 'Rest and Digest' system. They are like two sides of a seesaw. The 'Fight and Flight' System is at one end and the 'Rest and Digest' System is at the other end. When stress is high, relaxation is low and when relaxation is high, stress is low.



The body cannot be stressed and relaxed at the same time

How to De-Stress using Relaxation

Sometimes when we focus on what is stressing us out; it can make us feel even more stressed. This is because it sets off the 'Fight and Flight' system. So instead we need to set off the 'Rest and Digest' system to help the body and mind to deal with things more easily and with a clearer head.

Why does Relaxation work?

Relaxation techniques allow the 'Rest and Digest' system to take over.

The body can then de-stress itself and reduce the unpleasant symptoms of stress.

It can reduce the usual level of adrenaline in your blood. So it takes more to stress you out than it did before!

It can improve your physical health, for example, it can lower blood pressure.

Relaxation
'Rest and Digest'



Stress
'Fight and Flight'

The relaxation techniques covered in this guide are:

- Controlled Breathing
- Calming Breath
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Turn to the next part of this guide to learn how to use these.

Top Tips for De-Stressing

Breathing Exercises

Breathing is a simple way of taking back control of your body. It reduces the physical symptoms of stress.

1. Practise as much as possible - try at least 2-3 times a day
2. Get comfortable - where everything feels 'just right' ;
Not too hot, not too cold
Not too hungry, not too full
Nothing is too tight: Loosen any tight garments and take off shoes, watch, glasses etc if you want to.
3. Find a quiet location with nothing to distract you.
4. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with.
5. Make a decision not to worry about anything - if you don't do it quite right, don't worry, just practise some more.
6. Try to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. (Don't get too worried about this as it is better to breathe than not!)

Sometimes when people first begin to use controlled breathing they can feel dizzy. This is because the brain is not used to getting lots of oxygen. So *it is a good idea to lie down or sit when you practise breathing for the first few weeks.*

If you have concerns about doing this type of breathing and its effects on your health (if you have breathing problems for example) go and talk to your doctor before you start.

Controlled breathing

Breathing is a simple way to take back control over your body. There are two parts to controlled breathing. When you start practising you need to lie down comfortably with your eyes closed. Let your arms, legs and feet flop out to the sides and let your mouth fall open if it feels comfortable.

Part One

1. Start by breathing out (exhale). This empties your lungs.
2. Then breathe in (inhale) and count how long it takes you to fill your lungs.
3. Now breathe out and take longer than it took you to breathe in. So if you breathe in to the count of 4, breathe out to the count of 6.
4. You could also hold your breath for a couple of seconds at the end of your in breath (but only if that is comfortable for you).
5. As you breathe out, feel your stomach fall. Try and breathe out as slowly as possible. And repeat for at least 5 minutes.

Part Two

1. Take your hands and place them on your stomach - at the level of your belly button.
2. As you breathe out *pull your stomach* in as much as possible.
3. Next breathe in and *push your belly out*. Don't worry about moving your chest. You should feel your hands rise up as your stomach goes out. Breathe in as deeply as feels comfortable. See the diagram over the page.
4. As you breathe out, feel your stomach fall. Try and breathe out as slowly as possible. And repeat for at least 5 minutes.

Breathing diagrams

Breathing Out (exhaling) with the diaphragm



Breathing In (inhaling) with the diaphragm



Practising is the Key

You may find that it feels weird and uncomfortable when you first start breathing this way. This is because it is different from how you have been breathing for years.

You may need to remind yourself to use your belly to breathe while you are getting used to it. But after a while it will become a habit. You will breathe with your belly without having to think about it. It will just happen!

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Lie down comfortably with your eyes closed. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes. Try to practise controlled breathing.

Next follow this guide. Remember to hold each area in turn and then let it relax:

1. *Hands:* Clench your fists. Hold for 7-10 seconds and then release for 15-20 seconds. Hold ... and then relax.
2. *Arms:* Tighten both your forearm muscles and then biceps in turn. Hold ... and then relax.
3. *Head:* Raise your eyebrows and clench your eyes shut in turn. Hold ... and then relax.
4. *Jaw:* Open your mouth so wide that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Then stick out your tongue. Hold ... and then relax.
5. *Neck:* (Be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury.) Pull your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back. Hold ... and then relax.
6. *Shoulders:* Raise them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Next push your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold ... and then relax.
7. *Stomach:* Suck your stomach in. Hold ... and then relax.
8. *Lower back:* (You should not do this exercise if you have lower back pain.) Arch it up. Hold ... and then relax.
9. *Buttocks:* Pull them together tightly. Hold ... and then relax.
10. *Legs:* Squeeze your knees together. Next tighten your calf muscles. Hold ... and then relax.
11. *Feet:* Point your toes downward (like a ballerina!). Hold... and then relax.
12. *Toes:* Curl your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.

Check your body for any tension that is left in any muscles. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.

You can download an audio of a PMR exercise from www.studentnet.manchester.ac.uk/counselling/self-help/downloads/

Getting a good night's sleep

Without a good night's sleep everything can feel like it is hard work. Getting a good night's sleep can be difficult at times, especially if you are stressed out about something (or things!).

The good news is that you can use all three of these exercises to help you get to sleep at night!

So when you are lying in bed at night, trying to sleep, start with your breathing. Firstly, use your belly to breathe; then focus on extending your out breath. If you have restless legs or feel agitated, you could try the progressive muscle relaxation exercise to relax your body.

**Remember to be patient, and just keep practising.
It takes time to learn new skills: how long did it take you to learn to walk?**



Other Tips for Managing Stress

Improve Your Physical Health

- *Eat Well* - Eating the right things and avoiding the wrong things can affect your mood. It can also affect your ability to cope with stress. The Food and Mood booklet on the www.mhim.org.uk website has lots of good information.
- *Get Physical* - Physical activity is great for releasing stress. Find an activity that you enjoy. It could be walking while you listen to an audio book. The Physical Activity and Mood booklet on the www.mhim.org.uk website has lots of good information.
- *Listen to music* - Can help to relax or give you energy.
- *Take time out to play* - Having fun is a great way to reduce stress.
- *Get to know your own physical symptoms of stress* - You can use relaxation exercises to reduce them as soon as they start.

Change your Behaviour

- *Reduce your commitments* - Allow some time for yourself. You can't do everything yourself, so don't be afraid to ask for help.
- *Take one thing at a time* - Things can sometimes feel overwhelming. Decide what is most important. Then tackle the most essential job first.
- *Treat yourself* - Take time out, enjoy being yourself and do something just for you.
- *Distract yourself* - Having something else to focus on helps to lessen stress. So you could try out a new hobby!
- *Avoid self-medication* - Using drugs or alcohol can often become an extra problem.
- *Ask for help if you need it* - There are useful organisations at the back of this booklet.

Change your Thoughts

- *Challenge your thoughts* - Just because you think it, doesn't make it true.
- *Be creative*; express yourself by painting, writing, dancing. The 'Get Creative' booklet is on the www.mhim.org.uk website and has lots of good ideas.
- *Do something for others* - It makes you feel good and helps put your own life back in perspective.
- *Talk to someone you really trust* - Just talking about what is stressing you out can make you feel better.
Or use a telephone helpline (see below)

Talking Treatments or Therapies

Your doctor may recommend that you talk to someone who can listen to how you are feeling and help you to deal with difficult thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Some therapies may be quite brief and others continue for longer periods. You may find that the therapy follows suggestions that are similar to those in this guide.

In Manchester you can also ask to see a therapist yourself and they will suggest which form of therapy will suit you best.

- For NHS service in North Manchester; 0161 231 0017
- For NHS service in Central Manchester; 0161 861 2236
- For NHS service in South Manchester; 0161 946 8260
- Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner Service (citywide); 0161 226 3871

You could try computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (cCBT) - three FREE websites are:

- www.livinglifetothefull.com;
- www.moodgym.anu.edu.au; and
- www.ecouch.anu.edu.au

cCBT, with personal support in using it is also available from Self Help Services at venues across Manchester, 0161 232 7854

Anxiety UK: is an organisation that can provide more information and support about these problems, anxietyuk.org.uk

- Helpline: 08444 775 774 (Mon-Fri 9.30-4.30)

Especially for young people;

Emerge 16/17, support for 16 & 17 year olds, 0161 226 7457

42nd Street, for ages 13 to 25, 0161 832 0170 (Mon, Thu & Fri 12.30pm-4.30pm)

For older people;

Age Concern Counselling Service 0800 027 57 87

Things to do in a crisis or emergency:

If you need help and support urgently, you could contact your GP, or you could use a phone line to talk with someone;

- Samaritans; 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours)
- NHS Direct; 0845 4647 (24 hours)
- Saneline; 0845 767 8000 (6pm to 11pm daily)
- Crisis Point 0161 225 9500

Some other useful organisations

- Manchester Community Health Trainers support people with making small changes that benefit their health, e.g. better diet or more exercise.
0161 861 2546
- Citizens Advice Bureau for advice on money, housing etc. 08444 111 222
- Shelter, for help with housing problems 0844 515 1640
- Lifeline, for advice about drugs 0161 272 8844
- Manchester Carer's Forum, for support for carers 0161 819 2226

For more Information

Manchester libraries have books and guides about mental health in each branch as well as computer internet access.

Here are some websites that will give you more information about stress and anxiety, and about local services.

www.mhim.org.uk, the mental health in Manchester website with links to a wide range of information, including other languages

www.selfhelpservices.org.uk, Self Help Services in and around Manchester

