

# MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY

**This factsheet is for anyone who has a long-term health condition and is experiencing stress or anxiety. It explains what stress and anxiety are, what causes them and how stress and anxiety can affect you. It looks at some of the things that you can do to help you manage your own stress or anxiety and includes information about some of the treatments that are available.**

Everyone feels stressed or anxious sometimes. It is a normal part of life. But feeling stressed a lot of the time can be bad for your physical and mental health. Living with a long-term health condition like chest, heart or stroke illness can be very stressful. Struggling to manage these stressful events can lead to anxiety.

## What is stress?

The physical feelings of stress are part of your body's reaction to being put under some sort of pressure. Stress triggers the release of hormones such as adrenaline into your body to give you the energy and strength to cope with threats or difficult situations. It can help you stay focused and alert. Being under stress is a normal part of life, but when you start to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, stress can become a problem.

Your response to stress will depend on what particular situations make you feel under pressure, and how you react to being put under pressure. Common causes of stress include work, money worries, relationships, major life events, having too much to deal with and feeling lonely. Sometimes stress builds up quickly, for example if you are stuck in a traffic jam or you are frustrated because you can't do something. But it can also build up over time in response to ongoing pressure.

Big changes in life often cause stress, especially when you feel they are out of your control. This is often the case when you have been diagnosed with a serious illness or you are living with a long-term condition.

## How can stress affect me?

Stress can affect how you feel physically and emotionally. It can also affect how you behave, leading to unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol or eating an unhealthy diet, all of which are risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

FACTSHEET

**Physical effects of stress include:**

- A racing heart rate
- Faster breathing
- Feeling sick or dizzy
- A dry mouth
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Tense muscles
- Restlessness
- Feeling tired

**Emotional effects of stress include:**

- Feeling worried or uneasy
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling frustrated and irritable
- Feeling afraid
- Feeling on edge and unable to relax
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling tearful and upset
- Needing reassurance from others
- Lacking in self-esteem
- Feeling angry or aggressive
- Feeling isolated or lost
- Feeling hopeless

**Effects on your behaviour include:**

- Smoking
- Drinking more
- Forgetting things
- Avoiding people and situations
- Not making decisions
- Finding it hard
- Snapping at people

**What makes me feels stressed?**

Keeping a diary can help you to work out what is making you feel stressed. A diary can also help you see how you react to different situations and what helps you cope. It may be useful to note:

- What made you feel stressed?
- How did you feel physically at the time?
- How did you react? Did it help?



When you have identified what it is that makes you stressed, try to work out ways of coping with the stress that may be less harmful. For example, using breathing and relaxation techniques, addressing the cause of your stress, asking for help, or simply accepting that there are some things you cannot change.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is an underlying or general feeling of unease, worry or fear. Everyone feels anxious at some point in their life, for example when you have a job interview or you are doing something new. This is normal and usually passes after the event. However, anxiety can start to become a problem if your feelings of anxiety last for a long time, your worries are out of proportion to the situation, you find your anxiety distressing and hard to control, or your anxiety affects your everyday life. If you feel that your anxiety is becoming a problem, speak to your GP or someone you trust to get some help.

## How might anxiety affect me?

Everyone feels something slightly different when they are anxious, but some effects include:

- Feeling on edge or restless
- Being unable to concentrate
- Being unable to sleep
- Feeling worried
- Having a racing heartbeat
- Breathing faster
- Trembling or shaking
- Sweating
- Having 'butterflies' in your stomach
- Feeling breathless or faint
- Needing the toilet more often
- Having tense or aching muscles

If your anxiety is particularly severe it can also cause a panic attack which can be very frightening or distressing.

## What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is when your body cannot control the physical symptoms of anxiety. During a panic attack you might feel that you are losing control or you are going to faint or even die. Panic attacks can be very frightening. They usually last between 5 and 20 minutes but can be longer and can come on very quickly.

## What can I do to help myself manage my stress and anxiety?

There are lots of things that you can do yourself to manage your feelings of stress and anxiety.



### Learn to relax

Learning how to relax is a really good way of coping with stress. It can make a difference to your mood and energy levels. Relaxation techniques that work for some people include breathing exercises, meditation, going for a walk, listening to music or relaxation recordings, or attending relaxation classes. Work out what helps you to relax and make sure you find some time in your day to do this.

### Be as active as you can

Regular physical activity, whether it's a brisk walk, gardening or yoga, can help to reduce your stress levels and clear your mind. If you're not able to do physical activities outdoors, or you have limited mobility, try to think about what you can do indoors such as exercising individual parts of your body one at a time.

**Look after yourself**

Make sure that you look after yourself: try to eat healthily: get enough sleep and keep as active as you can.

**Talk to someone you trust**

Talking to someone you trust about what is making you stressed or anxious can help. Share your worries with someone and don't keep things bottled up. Just having someone listen to you and show they care can help you to feel less anxious.

**Try not to do too many things at once**

If you have too much on at the same time you can end up feeling unable to cope, which can make you feel worse. It can help to get organised and make a list of things you need to do with the most important things first. This will help you to feel more in control of your situation.

**Do something you enjoy and are good at**

Spending time doing something you enjoy such as taking some time to read, play music or go out to the garden can help you forget your worries for a while. Achieving something, however small, can boost your self-esteem and improve your mood.

**Be mindful**

There is considerable evidence that mindfulness is useful in reducing stress. Mindfulness is about being aware of your thoughts and feelings in the present moment. It is a simple, effective and enjoyable way of taking some time out from the stress of everyday life and focusing on the important parts of your day and your life. Mindfulness is not tricky to learn. There are various ways of doing that – online, local courses or apps or even old, fashioned books and CDs! See [www.franticworld.com](http://www.franticworld.com) and [www.bemindful.co.uk](http://www.bemindful.co.uk) for ideas.

**Complementary therapies**

Some people find that complementary therapies, such as yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, and reflexology, help them to cope with the symptoms of stress and anxiety better.

## **What treatments are there for stress and anxiety?**

As well as finding ways to help yourself, there are treatments that your GP can offer you for managing stress and anxiety. These include self-help resources, talking treatments and applied relaxation.

### **Talking treatments**

Talking treatments such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help if you are struggling with stress and anxiety.

- Counselling gives you a space to talk about your thoughts and feelings. It can be offered one-to-one in a private and confidential setting or in group sessions.
- CBT is a type of talking treatment which aims to identify the connection between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour and help you develop practical skills to manage these.

Your GP will be able to refer you for the most appropriate type of therapy for you. However, waiting lists for talking therapies available through the NHS can be very long. Some people don't want to wait and chose to look for a private therapist, but this can be quite expensive. You can find a qualified therapist through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

### **Medication**

As part of your treatment, your doctor might prescribe medication to help you manage your symptoms. Some people find it useful to try talking treatments and medication at the same time, or you may be offered medication while you are waiting for a talking treatment.

## How can family and friends help?

It can be really difficult when someone you care about is experiencing stress and anxiety but there are things you can do to help.

- **Listen to them.** Take time to sit down with your loved one and really listen to them. Let them speak without interrupting them too much and try to understand what they are going through without judging them.
- **Try not to pressure them.** Don't force the person to face situations they are not ready for as this can actually make them more anxious. Stay calm and listen to them so you can support them to do what they feel comfortable with.
- **Ask them how you can help.** This helps your family member or friend feel more in control as they might know exactly what they need support with.
- **Encourage them to seek help.** If you feel that your loved one is not coping very well,, encourage them to seek help. This could be through their GP or a support group. You might be able to help them book an appointment, go with them to it or look at other sources of support together.

## What other support is available?

- Understanding your health issues is an important first step in coming to terms with what you are going through. We have a variety of information about living well with a long-term condition. Visit [www.chss.org.uk/publications](http://www.chss.org.uk/publications) to find out more.
- The CHSS Advice Line nurses provide confidential, independent advice on all aspects of living with a long-term chest, heart or stroke condition. To speak to one of the Advice Line nurses call 0808 801 0899 (calls are free from landlines and mobiles).
- Hearing how other people are coping with a long-term illness can be a life-line for some people. To find out if there is a support group near you, call the Advice Line nurses or visit [www.chss.org.uk/groups](http://www.chss.org.uk/groups).

## Useful contact details

### Helplines

#### CHSS Advice Line

[www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 801 0899

Email: [advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)

#### Breathing Space

[www.breathingspace.scot](http://www.breathingspace.scot)

Tel: 0800 83 85 87

A confidential phonenumber for anyone in Scotland feeling low, anxious or depressed.

### Self-help resources

#### Steps for stress

[www.stepsforstress.org](http://www.stepsforstress.org)

A simple guide to stressing less and enjoying life more

#### Moodjuice

[www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/)

Offers information, advice to those experiencing troublesome thoughts, feelings and actions

#### Living Life to the Full

[www.llttf.com/](http://www.llttf.com/)

The Living Life to the Full course is a life skills course that aims to provide access to high quality, practical and user-friendly training in life skills.

### Find a therapist

#### British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy

[www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists](http://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists)

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,  
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line Nurses

**0808 801 0899**

Call FREE from landlines and mobiles