

How to Cope with Stress

Stress is an everyday occurrence for many people. We live in challenging times, where constant change, pressures from work, and the harmful influence of social media create an environment where we feel we have to 'do better' and are swimming against the tide.

The feeling of stress can be broadly attributed to our primal 'fight or flight' mechanism. Throughout history, humans have often had to face dangerous and life-threatening situations. As a result, we've developed a coping mechanism where our brain releases stress hormones that help us either escape from the danger or fight back.

The trouble with stress is that it becomes a problem when it is excessive, activated repeatedly or persists over time. We're unlikely to be attacked by wild animals, but are likely to have the pressure of work upon us every day. Being permanently in that state of 'fight or flight' eventually takes its toll on the body and makes us feel overwhelmed and anxious as a result.

Identifying when we're stressed



The fight against stress begins by identifying our stressors. Some common signs of stress to watch out for are:

- ✔ Constant worrying and feeling anxious
- ✔ Feeling emotional or tearful
- ✔ Poor sleep
- ✔ Moodiness or feeling irritable
- ✔ Forgetfulness or being accident-prone
- ✔ Increased smoking or drinking
- ✔ Headaches and other pains
- ✔ Skin rashes or irritation
- ✔ Changes in appetite

There are so many stressors that it would be almost impossible to list all of them, and many are due to situations that could even be considered to be positive. For example, a high workload, conflict with your boss, the breakdown of a relationship or bereavement are events that are widely known to cause stress. However, planning a wedding, organising a holiday or moving house can be equally stressful. It all depends on our own perceptions and tolerance levels.

Managing stressors

Once you have identified your stressors, you can divide them into three groups; those with a practical solution, ones that will get better with time, and those you cannot do anything about. You can take control of the situation by concentrating on the things you can change.

When people are under stress, they have a tendency to combine all their issues together into one insurmountable problem. To be resilient, we must learn to avoid this mindset by remaining objective and identifying where we have influence.

Although it might sound overly simplistic, breaking a problem down into smaller parts can make it a lot more manageable. Dealing with each part one-by-one has both the effect of solving the problem and creating the positive feeling of being proactive.

In most cases it is not the event itself making us feel stressed, but rather how we are interpreting it.

Stress can be visualised as a 'vicious cycle' with three elements; thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. If one of those elements is negative, it will have a knock-on effect on the others and perpetuate until the cycle is broken.



Thoughts:

"I keep applying for jobs, but get rejected every time. There's no point even trying."

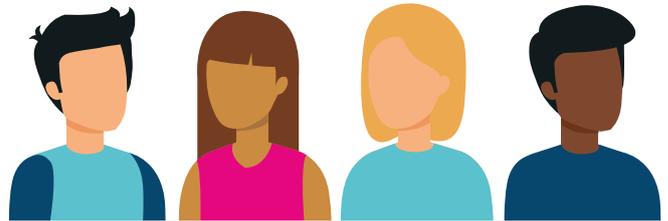
Feelings:

Depression, helplessness, anger.

Behaviours:

Stayed in bed instead of looking for a job. Started drinking more. Snapped at family members.

The negative behaviour would then bring about a new set of problems, along with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with them. The cycle can be broken by challenging one of the three elements.



Challenging negative thoughts

We cannot stop negative thoughts entirely. However, we can change how we react to them. We give our thoughts meaning, and from there we assign feelings to them that can cause stress (or more of it).

The meanings we assign to thoughts can be influenced by past experiences, such as our upbringing, the culture we come from, or anything else we have previously been through. This is why people who have been through traumatic experiences may feel particularly anxious towards certain situations.

Here's an example of how thoughts can translate into negative feelings:

- 1 You get an increased workload from a manager.
- 2 You *think* there's no way you can cope with that much work.
- 3 You *believe* you are destined to fail and possibly lose your job.
- 4 You *feel* anxiety and fear.

We can learn to alter those meanings and not let them have as much control over our lives.

If you heard a friend speaking that way about themselves, you wouldn't accept it. You'd tell them that they're strong enough to cope, or that they *are* a good person. That is what you need to do for yourself.

To do this, we need to think objectively by looking at the situation and how you'd see it from the perspective of another person. Sometimes we can be "too close" to a problem, and not see the bigger picture.

It can be beneficial to ask yourself the following questions to gain perspective:

- ✓ What am I reacting to? Why is it having this effect on me?
- ✓ What would the situation look like to someone else?
- ✓ What would I say if I was advising someone else?



Gaining perspective

Once we have this perspective, we can challenge negativity and dispel negative thoughts. From here, you can achieve a balanced argument.

Here is our example, but this time with advice from our theoretical friend:

- ① You get an increased workload from a manager.
- ② You *think* there's no way you can cope with that much work.
- ③ You *believe* you are destined to fail and possibly lose your job.

The advice?

"You are entirely capable at work with a great track record. Also, your manager doesn't want you to fail – if you're struggling, ask for help."

It's good to get in the habit of recognising that many of the negative meanings assigned to thoughts are grounded in *opinion*, rather than fact.

If you're worried about something happening, ask whether you simply think it will happen, or whether it *definitely* will. If you cannot change the outcome, there's no real benefit in worrying about it.

If you're anxious about failing in some way, are you focusing on your weaknesses and ignoring your strong points? Remember your past successes and how you achieved them. They are still valid, and there's no reason why it couldn't happen again.

Sometimes we can expect too much of ourselves. You can't always be perfect, and comparing yourself to others can be harmful. Something you'd consider to be a failure might be an incredible achievement in the eyes of someone else, so don't forget to gain that perspective.

For more advice and practical information on how to beat stress, including muscle relaxation and calming breathing techniques, visit our website at:

www.bounce-back.com/stress-elearning

