

# Practical Guide to Handling Stress



## Handling Stress: A Guide

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## Foreword

Every day, teachers, lecturers and support staff working in schools, colleges and universities contact us to talk about stress they face at work and in their personal lives. We understand how the education sector is in crisis with workloads spiralling out of control. This can lead to a range of stress-related illnesses from physical ailments to mental health problems.

Our Education Staff Health Survey 2014 showed how an overwhelming majority of teaching staff across the UK have experienced stress, anxiety or depression in the past two years. Nearly nine in 10 blamed excessive workload for their ill health. Widespread symptoms from this included problems sleeping, headaches, lack of concentration and negative impacts on work performance and personal relationships.

Teachers like Alicia\*, who told us she collapsed after a lesson because of stress, are reluctantly signed off work when the situation reaches breaking point. Another teacher, Sarah\* was so overworked and stressed she wasn't fit enough to fight off a common cold which developed into a double chest infection and she was admitted to hospital.

Yet how much do we, as staff in education, really know about managing and reducing stress levels?

This self-help guide looks at how stress develops and explains the symptoms associated with stress and shares practical tips on how you can manage stress and stop feelings escalating.

### Get support:

**08000 562 561**

**08000 855 088 (Wales)**

**[www.teachersupport.info](http://www.teachersupport.info)**

\*based on real teachers

## Managing Stress – Stress Resilience

### What is stress?

People experience stress as they adjust to a continually changing environment. Stress has physical and emotional effects; pressure can create both positive and negative feedback. Positive pressure can energise you and help you reach your peak performance. However, too much pressure can turn into stress. Prolonged exposure to stress can be harmful to your physical and mental wellbeing. One of the first steps to managing stress is to understand what causes it.

### Sources of stress

There is a wide range of sources of stress. These include daily hassles, major life events, home and work. What are the things in your life that cause you stress?

Stress factors can include:

- ◆ Relationships
- ◆ Money problems
- ◆ Children
- ◆ Sickness
- ◆ Housework

Work stress factors include:

- ◆ Overload
- ◆ Relationships with colleagues and clients
- ◆ Pace of change
- ◆ Deadlines
- ◆ Unrealistic workloads or demands

### Stress management and prevention

In addition to managing your response to stress, it is helpful to identify ways to prevent harmful levels of stress and to build stress resilience.

Prevention

- ◆ Look at the root causes of stress
- ◆ Focus on building resilience to stress

Prevention ideas

- ◆ Keep a stress log – identify the sources of stress in your life
- ◆ Identify your signs of stress – be aware of your stress levels before it becomes unmanageable

Building Stress Resilience

- ◆ Exercise three to four times a week to reduce muscle tension
- ◆ Minimise intake of sugar, caffeine and other artificial stimulants
- ◆ Get enough rest
- ◆ Practise at least one relaxation exercise

## Stress signs

Know your stress signs. A second step to managing stress is to understand how you react to it. Which of the following signs of stress do you experience?

Common stress signs include:

- ◆ Headaches
- ◆ Indigestion
- ◆ Dry mouth
- ◆ Diarrhea or constipation
- ◆ Anxiety/excessive worry
- ◆ Difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Forgetfulness
- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Tearfulness
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Boredom
- ◆ Apathy
- ◆ Change in sleep patterns
- ◆ Withdrawal
- ◆ Accident proneness
- ◆ Reduced sex drive
- ◆ Increase in use of drugs, smoking or alcohol

Some of these signs may have causes other than stress. Check with your doctor if symptoms persist.

## Stress relievers

Get up 15 minutes earlier in the morning (making morning mishaps less stressful). Listen to music. Make time for fun. Unplug your phone.

## Stress strategies

### Step 1: Awareness

In order to manage stress, it is helpful to understand what causes your stress and how you react to stress. Ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ What are the sources of stress in my life?
- ◆ What are my emotional and physical reactions to them?]
- ◆ What are my strengths in dealing with stress? (e.g. 'I delegate well.')
- ◆ What are the limitations in dealing with stress? (e.g. 'I sometimes have difficulty saying no to work requests.')

## Step 2: Plan

Develop a plan of action by asking yourself these questions:

- ◆ What sources of stress can I eliminate or avoid?
- ◆ What sources of stress are changeable?
- ◆ What one change could I start with that would make the most difference in my life?
- ◆ Who can I enlist in helping or supporting me with this change?
- ◆ How can I include taking care of myself in my plan?

## Step 3: Action

Put your plan into action. Choose one strategy to add to or change about your current strategies for dealing with stress. Practise a relaxation technique (breathing is one of the most effective ways of reducing tension). Identify what you do well at in managing your stress (use your past experience as a resource). Deal with the sources of stress that you can change (create a plan to eliminate, reduce or avoid these sources).

## Stress tips

- ◆ Share your concerns – talk to someone
- ◆ Do something you enjoy
- ◆ Take a brisk walk
- ◆ Exercise
- ◆ Take a break
- ◆ Get a change of scenery
- ◆ Set aside time for yourself

## Relaxation technique

Find a comfortable place to sit, close your eyes and begin to pay attention to your breathing. Take a deep breath in and exhale slowly. Continue breathing deeply and imagine a relaxing holiday spot. As you continue to breathe slowly, look around at the sights; imagine the sounds, the smells and the like. See yourself relaxed in this place. As you bring your attention back to the room you are in, remember that you can visit this place again anytime.

## Other ideas

Additional ideas to reduce or combat stress include:

- ◆ Counselling
- ◆ Yoga
- ◆ Meditation
- ◆ Hypnosis
- ◆ Bio-feedback
- ◆ Relaxation tapes
- ◆ Massage
- ◆ Complementary medicine

## Eleven Tips for Dealing with Stress

### 1) Put your body in motion

Physical activity is one of the most important ways to keep stress away, by clearing your head and lifting your spirits. Physical activity also increases endorphin levels – the natural ‘feel-good’ chemicals in the body that leave you with a naturally happy feeling.

Whether you like full-fledged games of football or tennis, or you prefer walks with family and friends, it’s important to get up, get out and get moving.

### 2) Put your body in motion

If your body was a car, you wouldn’t go for a long drive without filling up on petrol first. Likewise, begin each day by eating breakfast to give you the energy you need to tackle the day. Eating regular meals (this means no skipping dinner) and taking time to enjoy them (nope, eating in the car on the way to the way to the gym doesn’t count) will make you feel better too.

Make sure to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, proteins (peanut butter, a chicken sandwich or tuna salad) and grains (wheat bread, pasta or some crackers) – these will give you the power you need to make it through those hectic days.

Don’t be fooled by the jolt of energy you get from soft drinks and sugary snacks – this only last a short time, and once it wears off, you may feel sluggish and more tired than usual. For that extra boost of energy to sail through work or any long day, grab a banana, some cheese and crackers or a cereal bar for some power-packed energy.

### 3) LOL (laugh out loud)

Some say that laughter is the best medicine – well, in many cases, it is! Did you know that it takes 15 facial muscles to laugh? Lots of laughing can make you feel good – and that good feeling can stay with you even after the laughter stops. Head off stress with regular doses of laughter by watching a funny film or cartoons, reading a joke book (you may even learn some new jokes yourself) or even make up your own riddles – laughter can make you feel like a new person!

Everyone has those days when they do something really silly or stupid – instead of getting upset with yourself, laugh out loud! No-one’s perfect, life should be about having fun!

### 4) Have fun with friends

Being with people you like is always a good way to ditch your stress. Get a group of friends together to go the cinema, listen to music or play a board game – or just hang out and talk. Friends can help you work through your problems and let you see the brighter side of things.

## 5) Speak to someone you trust

Instead of keeping your feelings bottled up inside, talk to someone you trust or respect about what's bothering you. It could be a friend, a parent, someone in your family, from your religious community or a colleague. Talking about your problems and seeing them from a different view might help you figure out ways to deal with them. Just remember, you don't have to do it alone!

## 6) Take time to chill

Pick a comfy spot to sit and read, daydream or even take a snooze. Listen to your favourite music or work on a relaxing project like putting together a puzzle or making jewellery.

Stress can sometimes make you feel like a tight rubber band – stretched to the limit. If this happens, take a few deep breaths to help yourself unwind. If you're in the middle of an impossible problem, take a break! Finding time to relax after (and sometimes during) a hectic day or week can make all the difference.

## 7) Take time to chill

Fatigue is a best friend to stress. When you don't get enough sleep, it's hard to deal with your problems – you may feel tired, cranky or you may have trouble thinking clearly. When you're overtired, a problem may seem much bigger than it actually is. You may have a hard time completing a task at work that usually seems easy, you don't do your best in sports or any physical activity, or you may have an argument with your friends or partner over something really stupid.

Getting the right amount of sleep is important to recharge for the next day. Don't resist, get to bed early!

## 8) Keep a diary

If you're having one of those crazy days when nothing goes right, it's a good idea to write things down in a diary to get it off your chest. Write down how you feel, what's going on in your life and things you'd like to accomplish or improve. You could even write what you do when you're faced with a stressful situation and then look back and think how you handled it later. Find a quiet spot, grab a notebook and pen and start penning your thoughts.

## 9) Be organised

Do you have too much to do, but not enough time? Did you forget to complete that piece of work? Are you feeling overwhelmed or forgetful at work? Being unprepared can make for a very stressful day. Getting everything done can be a challenge but if you place a little and organise your time and resources, it can make it a little easier.

## 10) Lend a hand

Get involved in an activity that helps others. It's almost impossible to feel stressed out when you're helping someone else. It's also a great way to find out about yourself and the special talents you never knew you had. Signing up for a community project is a good idea, but helping others is as easy as saying hello, holding a door or volunteering to walk a neighbour's dog.

If you want to get involved in a more organised volunteer programme, try working at a local community centre or helping at an old people's home. The feeling you will get from helping others is greater than you can imagine! You can also find volunteer opportunities by searching online.

## 11) Learn ways to better deal with anger

It is normal to be angry sometimes – everyone gets mad at some point. The important thing is to deal with your anger in a healthy way. It will help to cool down first and then focus on positive solutions to problems. This will help you to communicate better with the people in your life, and you can even earn more respect along the way. The next time something really has you stressed out, try these steps:

- ◆ Try to calm yourself down before doing or saying anything
- ◆ Tell the other person what the problem is and how it makes you feel.
- ◆ Try to think of some solutions. What would the good and bad results of those solutions be?
- ◆ Explain your solution to the person you are upset with and try to put it into action together

## Hints to Avoid Harmful Stress

### Work out your priorities

Keep a list – make the task possible. Prioritise the tasks in order of importance and tick off when done. Include the important people in your life as priorities and attend to these relationships.

### Identify stressful situations

Make a note of events that leave you emotionally drained, with one or two ways to reduce the stress for each. When they occur, use them as an opportunity to practise your stress-reduction techniques, then, keep notes on what works for next time.

### Learn to reframe comments

Don't react to imagined insults. It is a waste of time and energy to be oversensitive to imagined insults, innuendo or sarcasm. Give people the benefit of the doubt; talk over the situation with someone you trust. They may have another spin on what was said.

### Think before you commit yourself to other people's expectations

People can often perform tasks merely to feel accepted by other people. Practice saying no to requests that are unreasonable or more than you can handle at the time – rather than suffer subsequent regrets and stress. Consider whether you should learn to rely less on the approval of others. Again, talk this over with someone you trust.

### Move on – don't dwell on past mistakes

Feelings of guilt, remorse and regret cannot change the past, and they make the present difficult by sapping your energy. Make a conscious effort to do something to change the mood (e.g. mindfulness technique or something active you enjoy) when you feel yourself drifting into regrets about past actions. Learn from it and have strategies in place for next time. Learn to forgive yourself for past mistakes.

### Take your time

Don't let people rush you. Frenzied activities lead to errors, regrets and stress. At work, if rushed, ask people to wait until you finish working or thinking something out. Plan ahead to arrive at appointments early, composed and having made allowances for unexpected hold-ups. Practice approaching situations 'mindfully'.

### Don't get road rage

Take your time on the road. Develop an 'I will not be ruffled' attitude when driving in the car. Drive defensively and give way to bullies. Near misses cause stress and strain, so does the fear of being caught for speeding. If

possible, avoid peak-hour traffic. If caught in it, relax by concentrating on deep breathing or 'mindful driving'. Advanced driving lessons can also be useful.

### Think positively

Smile whenever possible – it's an easy way to improve how you feel. Try and find something positive to say about a situation, particularly if you are going to find a fault. You can visualise situations you have handled well, and hold those memories in your mind when going into stressful situations.

### Cut down on drinking, smoking and drugs

They only offer temporary relief and don't solve the problem. They can create more problems in terms of physical and mental health. Consider the effects you are looking for (sedation or stimulation) and how else you can achieve them.

## Strategies at Work to Reduce Stress

While you are travelling in to work, take a minute to relax and pay attention to your breathing – slow it down and even it out – this will help you reduce tension that may be building up. Each morning, take a few minutes of quiet time away from any distractions.

During your journey in, notice any body tension (shoulders, neck, etc.) and try and concentrate on relaxing them before you get to work.

Once you arrive, take a moment to prepare yourself for your workday. Take note of your body posture while at your desk. Use your breaks to relax rather than just pause. Change your environment at lunchtime; try not to eat at your desk even if it's only for 10 minutes – take a walk.

Every hour, stop for one to three minutes and socialise with a colleague, preferably about non work-related subjects.

At the end of each day, retrace your activities, acknowledging and congratulating yourself on what you have accomplished that day. Make a list for the next day, so in the morning you know what needs to be done and there is some structure to your day.

During your journey home, begin the transition from work to home, think about other things besides your current workload or projects. When you get home, change out of your work clothes so you can completely relax and end the workday, mentally as well as physically.

## Challenges in the Workplace

Pressure at work is inevitable. It can be a source of positive motivation to succeed or it can be an overwhelming dark cloud that hinders morale, relationships and performance.

### Different levels of stress

It is important to understand different levels of stress and how this can manifest at work.

### Stress

Stress is a normal, physiological adaptation to change. Healthy stress serves as a motivational drive to survive and succeed. When people are stressed, say by hunger, they act to relieve the stress by finding food and eating. When people are stressed by feelings of financial insecurity, they work hard to make sure they can provide for themselves and their families.

### Distress

This is a destructive form of stress. Distress can manifest itself as high blood pressure, insomnia, irritability or poor job performance. During periods of distress, people often overreact and engage in self-defeating behaviours – like the man who goes to the pub after work to calm his nerves after a stressful day. He drinks too much, sleeps in and comes to work late with a hangover causing more stress in his life, not less.

### Overload

Often called burnout, this results from long-term exposure to distress. Overload causes exhaustion and fatigue, depression, accidents and poor performance at work. Working long hours for an extended time or for many months without days off to recuperate are common causes.

### Productivity versus overload

Stress brings both positive and negative aspects to the workplace. Providing for families, getting a promotion and making more money are all normal stresses that can motivate employees and increase productivity. Conversely, when stress becomes severe or overwhelming, worker morale and productivity declines. Through effective training and communication, good managers can learn to recognise the sources and signs of stress and can create a balance of healthy stress, opportunity and encouragement. In the following section are some things to be aware of and look out for.

### Sources of stress

Keep in mind that what motivates one worker may overwhelm another. Be aware of what happens outside the workplace. Stresses from home and other outside sources can dramatically affect productivity and morale.

The causes of stress generally come from three sources:

- ◆ An uncontrollable or unpredictable event can cause distress. This might include a serious accident, the loss of a loved one or a sudden job change.
- ◆ Being overwhelmed causes harmful stress. Too many things can be on someone's plate at once, or things come at one too fast.
- ◆ People working beyond their capabilities, skill level or coping resources is a risk. Common examples are taking on a new job without proper training, parenting stepchildren or caring for an elderly parent.

## Signs and symptoms of workplace stress

Signs an employee may be stressed include withdrawal from others include:

- ◆ Increased accidents, incidents and errors
- ◆ Increased absenteeism or lateness
- ◆ More frequent illness and visits to the doctor
- ◆ Emotional outbursts
- ◆ Easily upset or angered
- ◆ Increased use of alcohol or other drugs

## Lighten the load

In today's fast-paced world, the pressure to overwork and produce beyond prior limitations is constant. Understanding that humans need time to recuperate and recharge their batteries is central to reducing stress in the workplace. Companies that fail to recognise the need for recuperation spend valuable time and capital addressing the symptoms (listed above) of overload, which, in the long run, is counterproductive.

## Tips for managers to help reduce workplace stress

Encourage employees to periodically unplug from workplace stress by taking time off and curtailing too many long days on the job.

Encourage employees to contact the employee assistance programme for stress-related or personal problems. Encourage skill development towards new challenges. Plan monthly 'stress busters', such as birthday parties or team-building activities; stress-reduction workshops; or motivational speakers.

Invite top management to talk with your employees about their goals, successes and challenges. Be quick to praise right thinking and initiative. When confrontation is necessary, do it in private, stick to performance and never admonish the person.

Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

This guide was based on tip sheets produced by Teacher Support Network Advice Centre service provided by Workplace Options on behalf of TSN/Recourse.

*'Managing Stress – Stress Resilience' – Workplace Options (Reviewed 2014). London: Author. Content ID: 42451*

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