



# Stress

Stress is a normal and essential part of life and refers to both positive and negative experiences. The duration, amount and type of stress can have a negative impact on mental health.

Stress is a normal part of life. It's the body's way of reacting to an environmental, emotional or mental challenge and it isn't always bad. A manageable level of stress can give you energy and motivation, improving your performance in activities like operational duties at work, sport or public speaking.

A lack of stress feels great when we're relaxing on holiday, but it can lead to boredom and fatigue if prolonged in the work environment.

When stress overwhelms your capacity to cope, it can negatively impact health, wellbeing, relationships, work and enjoyment of life. This may lead to reduced productivity and burn out.

## What happens when we feel stress?

The hormones that are triggered when you are feeling stressed are the same as those that trigger the body's 'fight or flight' response when you feel threatened. It's your body's way of trying to protect you, by preparing you to react quickly.

- Acute stress is short-lived and is the kind of stress you experience in pressured situations such as exams, giving a speech or playing competitive sport. Your body can easily bounce back from this stress if it is managed in a healthy way.
- Chronic stress occurs if the stress response continues after the threat has passed. It can also be the result of lots of stressors building up over time, never giving you a chance to recover. Chronic stress can create ongoing and long-term physical and mental health complications, which can include:
  - Headaches
  - Chest discomfort
  - Gastrointestinal issues
  - Anxiety
  - Sleep difficulties
  - Irritability
  - Poor concentration
  - Depression

## What can I do?

In the moment:

### Recognise that you are feeling stressed

The first step is to identify that you are feeling stressed. You might notice your shoulders are tense most of the day, that you hold your breath or sigh a lot, or that your teeth are clenched and causing jaw pain.

Developing an awareness of where you carry stress in your body can help you manage stress before it escalates. Mindfulness-based exercises can help with this. For more information the various types of mindfulness exercises, see <https://www.bluespacewellbeing.com.au/help-you/mindfulness>.

### Identify your stress triggers

Try to take stock of what creates stress in your life. You might notice that when you're around certain people, doing specific tasks, or facing particular situations, your stress levels increase. Monitoring how your stress levels change over a week can be a good starting point to develop an awareness of your stress triggers.

### Develop an action plan

Keeping things in perspective can help you manage stress. Ask yourself:

- Am I overestimating the likelihood of a negative outcome?
- Am I overestimating how bad the consequences will be?
- Am I underestimating my ability to cope?

### For stress that's out of your control

Stress you can't control might include things like major organisational changes or management directions, or unexpected life challenges like a death or chronic illness.

The best thing to do is try to adapt how you think and feel about the situation. You might not be in control of the stressful event, but you have control over how you respond.

### Other tips for managing stressful times:

- Stop and breathe before doing anything.
- Think about how you have coped in the past and the resources you used to help.
- Remind yourself that you will get through this time.
- Practice acceptance. You don't have to like the situation, but the sooner you accept it is happening, the sooner you can decide how to respond.
- Practice relaxation, breathing and mindfulness techniques to manage your physical response to stress.
- Remind yourself of the areas of your life where you do feel in control, for example your finances, family life or fitness.
- Focus on the things you can control and invest your mental and emotional energy in those.
- Give yourself some time to adjust to the change created by the stress.
- Express your emotions in healthy ways by talking to your friends and loved ones, seeing a mental health professional or writing your thoughts down.
- Ask someone how they have managed similar situations.
- Practice self-care by doing enjoyable activities, eating well, getting enough sleep and exercising.

## For stress within your control

Stress within your control could range from a workplace issue to tackling a physical health problem or personal conflict. The goal is to respond in a way that actively manages the situation.

- Stop and breathe before doing anything.
- Make a list of the stressful factors involved. Prioritise what needs to be addressed first, so you don't feel overwhelmed.
- Practice mindfulness and relaxation techniques.
- Practice active problem solving: Identify the problem, brainstorm solutions, weigh up the pros and cons of each solution, decide on a course of action and evaluate the effectiveness of the action. You might need to go through this process a few times to find the best solution.
- Make change where you can. This could be by asking someone for help, re-organising your schedule, taking a break or holiday, structuring your workload in a different way or having a conversation with the person causing you stress.
- Rehearse what you are going to say or do before entering a situation that you anticipate will be stressful. Practice what you are going to say out loud with a friend, or rehearse it step by step in your mind.
- Practice self-care through doing enjoyable activities, eating well, getting enough sleep and exercising.
- Know when to end a situation. Even if you've tried everything, the stress could continue.
- Weigh up the pros and cons of the situation and decide whether positive change is likely. Sometimes you may need to walk away from a situation or person in order to get your physical and mental health back on track.

## Support Information

Most people will be faced with major stress at some time in their life and it can feel overwhelming. Sometimes an outside perspective can help. There are several evidence-based treatment approaches that can help you manage stress in your life, including Cognitive Behavioural Stress Management, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

Talk to your GP about referral options to a mental health professional that specialises in these areas.



**Alcohol and Drug  
Information Services VIC**  
1800 888 236



**Turning Point**  
[www.turningpoint.org.au](http://www.turningpoint.org.au)



**Police Wellbeing Services**  
1300 090 995