

# Stress

A self-help guide

## Using self-help tools

The strategies/tools suggested in this booklet are evidence based methods of managing your wellbeing and reducing the way that we feel has on our everyday life. We are all individuals, and may respond to situations in different ways, therefore not every tool will work for everyone. For example some people find meditation and reading really relaxing, whilst for others, doing another activity such as going to the gym might help them more. A helpful way of thinking about this could be to think “is my current method working for me?” If the answer is yes, then great, but if not, these strategies may be an alternative way that is more productive for you. Talk about this with your clinician if you are unsure.

As with any skill, self-help can take time, practice, and often dedication to succeed in the future. Just like riding a bike, you won't be able to ride it the first time you sit on one, and will probably have some falls along the journey! But with time, practice and exploration it is possible for everybody to improve their physical health, which will undoubtedly have a great impact on their emotional health and wellbeing.

**If you would like this booklet in a more accessible format, or, in another language, please contact [communications@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:communications@tavi-port.nhs.uk)**

## What is in this guide?

What is stress?	
Why use mindfulness?	
How does mindfulness work?	
Becoming mindful	
Mindful activity	
Using mindfulness to cope with unhelpful thoughts and experiences	
Further resources	

## What is stress?

At some point in your life, you will experience some form of stress. This is inevitably a normal part of life, and although at times you will be able to manage it, there will be times when you are not able to.

So, although stress is a normal and natural feeling to experience, it can have unpleasant effects and can impact the way a person manages their day-to-day life.

Different situations will be stressful for different people. Because no two people are the same, everyone will also cope differently.

## Types of stress

There are two types of stress that can affect someone:

**Internal:** This is stress that comes from *inside* of ourselves. It includes things like the way we feel, and attitudes that we have. For example, feeling guilty, resentful, or worried, or attitudes such as wanting to be the best, trying to meet the needs of those you care for, or doing well at your job. Moderate levels of stress can improve our ability to perform our daily tasks but high levels make it difficult to think properly and can make us feel physically unwell.



**External:** This is stress that comes from *outside* of ourselves. Stressful events can happen at any time, and quite often, we do not have any control over them. For example, things like a traffic jam, being made redundant, death of a loved one, a high workload can all be very stressful.

## Stress Jug

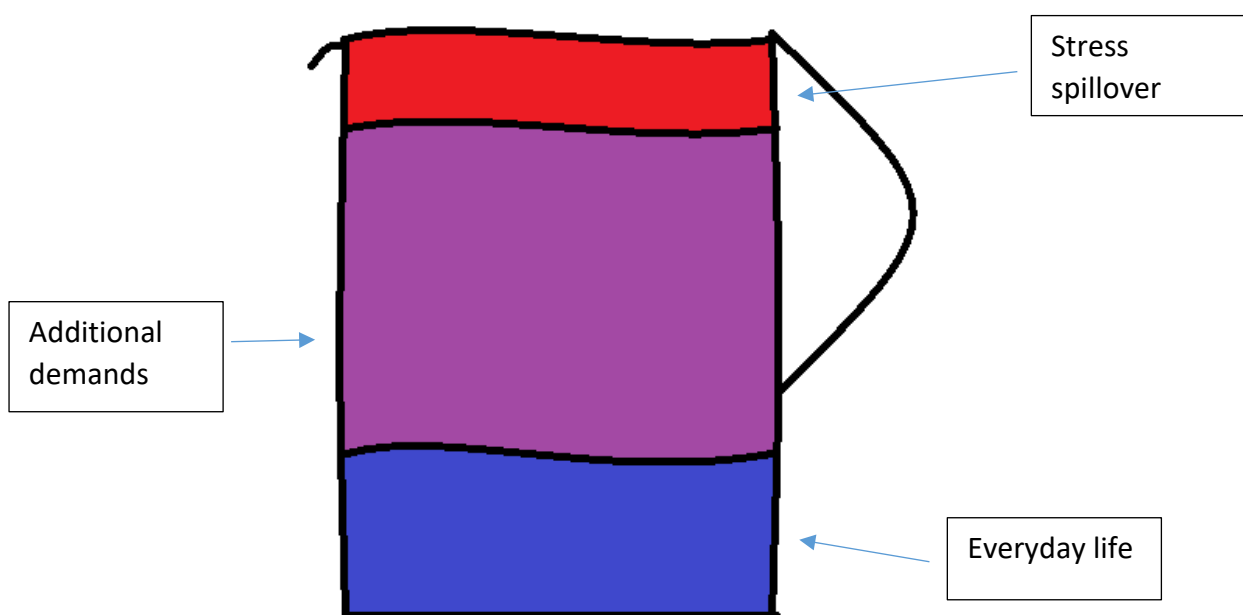
Everyone in the world only has a certain capacity for managing stress and stressful situations. Imagine that all of the stress you could manage was contained in a jug. The more full your jug gets, the higher the symptoms of stress you will experience. Also, the more full your jug gets, the less space you have to manage anything else, as your space becomes tighter. If you reach the top of your jug, then you will have no more space to add anything else on top, and the jug will overflow.

Some of your jug will already be filled with the issues of life that we cannot avoid (i.e. money, family, not having enough time for yourself, lack of sleep etc.) Therefore, if you have a large source of stress in one area of your life that is filling your jug, your capability to manage stress in the other areas will be compromised. You may feel that you manage your stressful job very well, for example, but feel that you are unable to cope with any stresses at home or vice versa.

However, you are able to partially empty your jug on a daily basis, you can avoid it 'overflowing' which will help you to reduce your symptoms and to feel more in control. It may be that you are unable to change the main contributor to your stress, but if you can do something about your other source of stress, you will feel better able to cope.

You can empty or reduce the amount of 'liquid' in your jug daily by using self-help techniques to:

1. Look at your stressors and see if there is anything you can do to reduce the level of stress they produce. Can you look at the problem in a different way?
2. Identify if the stressful situation is really your responsibility. If not, could it be delegated to someone else or could your energy be better used in another way?
3. Relax a bit more. A relaxing activity is dependent on the individual – so find what works for you.



## Symptoms of stress

Symptoms of stress can be split into 4 categories: cognitive, which affects the way we think, emotional, which affects the way we feel; physical, which affects the way that we feel physically, and behavioural, which affects the way that we behave.

<b>Cognitive symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Memory problems</li><li>• Indecisiveness</li><li>• Inability to concentrate</li><li>• Trouble thinking clearly</li><li>• Poor judgement</li><li>• Seeing only the negative</li><li>• Anxious or racing thoughts</li><li>• Constant worrying</li><li>• Loss of objectivity</li><li>• Fearful anticipation</li></ul>	<b>Emotional symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Moodiness</li><li>• Agitation</li><li>• Restlessness</li><li>• Short temper</li><li>• Irritability or impatience</li><li>• Feeling tense or 'on edge'</li><li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li><li>• Sense of loneliness and isolation</li><li>• Depression or general unhappiness</li><li>• Low self-esteem</li></ul>
<b>Physical symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Headaches/backaches</li><li>• Muscle tension/stiffness</li><li>• Diarrhoea/constipation</li><li>• Nausea/dizziness</li><li>• Insomnia</li><li>• Chest pain/rapid heartbeat</li><li>• Weight gain/weight loss</li><li>• Skin breakouts (hives, eczema)</li><li>• Loss of sex drive</li><li>• Frequent colds</li><li>• Hot flushes</li></ul>	<b>Behavioural symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eating more or eating less</li><li>• Sleeping too much or too little</li><li>• Isolating yourselves from others</li><li>• Procrastination, neglecting responsibilities</li><li>• Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to cope/relax</li><li>• Nervous habits (nail biting, pacing)</li><li>• Teeth grinding or jaw clenching</li><li>• Overdoing activities (e.g. exercising)</li><li>• Overreacting to unexpected problems</li><li>• Picking fights with others</li></ul>

Can you think of any more specific to you?

---

---

---

---

---

## The fight/flight response

The symptoms that you experience when stressed are perfectly natural reactions caused by adrenalin. The automatic reactions are triggered by the fight or flight response, which is designed to keep us safe in times of danger. Our bodies automatically recognise when we feel a threat and respond appropriately – releasing lots of adrenalin which causes our heart rate to rise and our breathing to increase. This helps us to either ‘fight’ to fight the issue ahead, or ‘flight’, run away from the issue. Our bodies developed at a time when it was essential to react quickly to danger in order to survive. For example, for a Stone Age man, it was very useful for them to react quickly to danger in order to keep themselves safe.

The fight or flight response, however, has become less useful in the modern world. For example, nobody will ever have their life in danger by giving a presentation (although it might feel like it!) The fight/flight response does however have *some* benefit in the modern world, for example, if we ever step out into the road and a car suddenly comes.

## Why do I get stressed?

Both chronic (ongoing) stress and acute (sudden) stress can have a large impact on the way that we function in our day-to-day lives. For example, it can affect the way that we:

- Perform at tasks that we do regularly
- Concentrate
- Remember things
- Socialise with others

It can also affect:

- Our confidence in our abilities
- The way that we maintain relationships with family, friends or colleagues
- Our ability to maintain our home and our work

If you are finding it difficult to carry out tasks, or, if you are finding that your tasks are taking longer than usual, it might be a sign that you are stressed. This can result in you feeling more stressed over the long term.

As mentioned before, it is normal to feel stressed in a number of situations. Quite often, there is little that we can do about the specific event or situation itself, but we can always try to control our reaction or actions to them.

The amount of stress an event or situation causes is often linked to:

- The importance we place on it
- Our core beliefs (strongly held beliefs about ourselves that influence what we think and how we feel)
- Our thoughts about the situation
- How we are feeling emotionally

## **The importance we place on the event or situation**

Imagine the following two situations:

1. You have a day off from work with no plans, so you decide to go to the gym. When you get into the car, it doesn't start.
2. You have a meeting with your manager at work this morning. When you get in the car to leave, it fails to start.

The *event* is the same for both i.e. the car does not start; but, the way that the person will interpret the event will be very different, usually because of the beliefs the person has attached to the two different scenarios.

## **Our core beliefs**

Core beliefs are strongly held beliefs about ourselves that influence the way that we think and how we feel. They usually influence us without us realising and we hardly ever consider or challenge whether or not these beliefs are true.

Common negative core beliefs can include:

- I am unlovable
- I am not good enough
- I can't trust anyone but me
- I am not worthy

Our core beliefs can also be about how other people and the world 'should' be and include our ethics and values. For example:

- Life should be fair
- Everyone should put in the same effort as me
- The world is dangerous
- People will hurt me

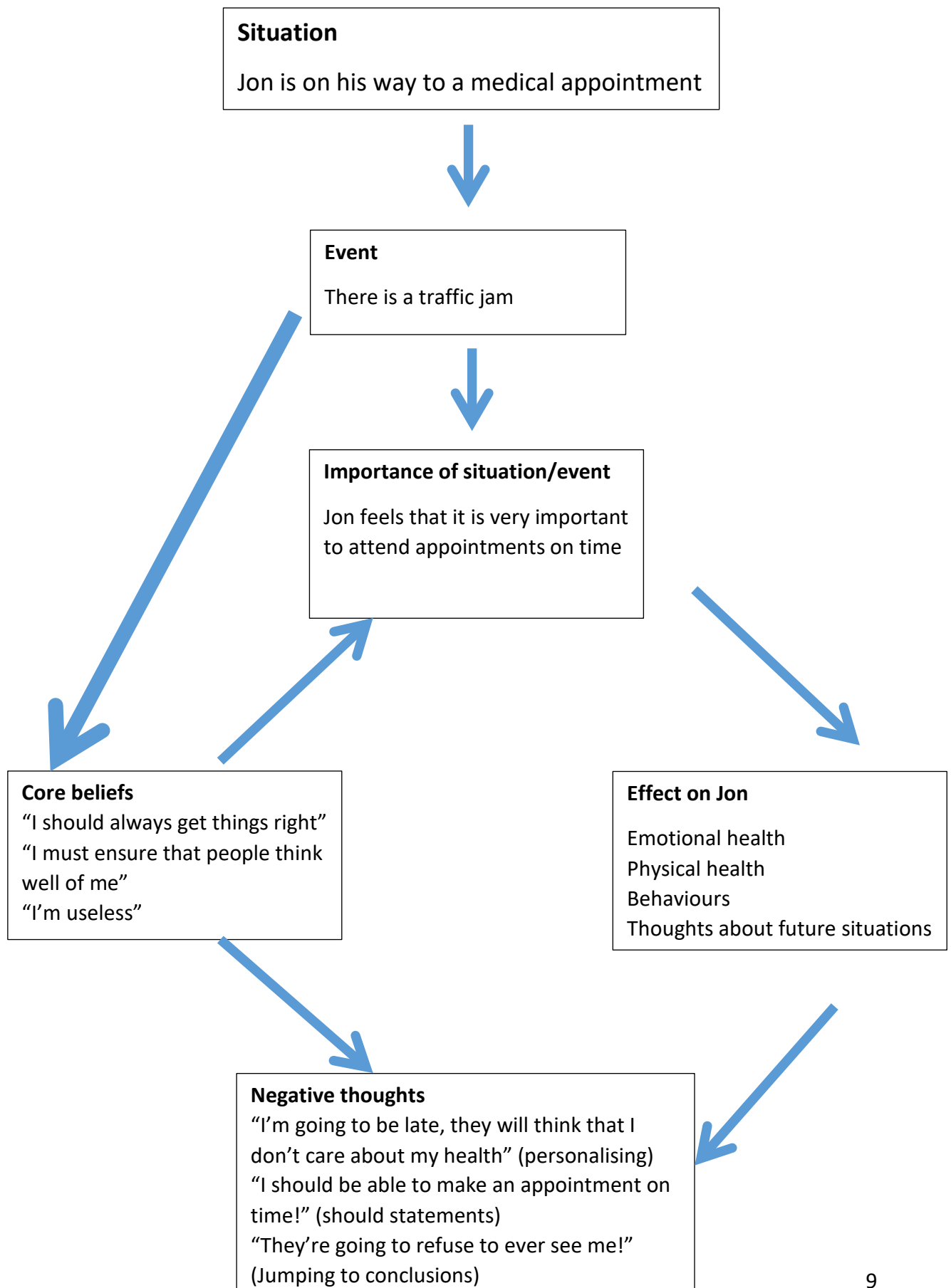
Every human in the world has a set of core beliefs that they live their lives by, however, some people's core beliefs can be unhelpful to them. Quite often, just being aware of what your core beliefs are can help you to see the situation in a different way, if you feel they are unhelpful.

## **Our thoughts about the situation**

Any thought we have about an event or situation is closely linked to our core beliefs. They often create and maintain a large proportion of the stress that we experience. If you are experiencing emotional distress, it is common to think negatively. This type of thinking will create and maintain emotional distress.



## Example - Jon



## The impact of negative thinking on stress

Sometimes, thoughts can be useful and help to guide us in the right way, however, sometimes, thoughts can be unhelpful and can cause us to perceive a situation in a way that might not be true.

We are also much more likely to be harsh on ourselves than we would be with our friends or family. This, along with thinking negatively, can cause intense stress and unhappiness and can also damage self-confidence. Negative thinking also affects your performance as you lose self-confidence, which affects the way that you are able to concentrate at a time when you need to focus.

Do you make any of the following thinking styles?

### All or nothing thinking

Thinking in black and white terms, where you don't allow for any 'grey' areas

*"It has to be 100% perfect, otherwise there is no point in me even trying"*

### Jumping to conclusions

When we make a negative interpretation of an event, even though we do not know all the facts.

*"My manager asked me to see her in her office today, I think I'm going to be in trouble"*

### Catastrophising

This happens when we make a negative interpretation of an event, so much so that we predict the outcomes of what will happen and start to believe that outcome.

*"I was late to work again today. My manager asked me to see her in her office, and it means I'm going to be in trouble. She will think that I don't care about my job and will probably fire me, and because of that I won't have any money. How will I afford my house and feed my family without a job?"*

### "Should" statements

We try to motivate ourselves by saying things like "I should do this" or "I ought to do that", but these statements can often leave us feeling pressured and unmotivated. When you direct "should" statements towards others, you often end up feeling frustrated. For example, if you are waiting in line and someone pushes in front of you, you might say "They should be more courteous! They should be less self-centred and thoughtless!"

### **Discounting positives**

Focusing on negatives and not giving praise for the positive things that you are doing.

*“So what if I managed to get all my chores done today, that’s only what is expected of me”*

### **Personalising/labelling**

When we see ourselves as the issue and cause of something that is actually external to us.

*“Monique ignored me when I said hello to her today, maybe she doesn’t like me anymore as I didn’t make her a cup of tea the other day”*

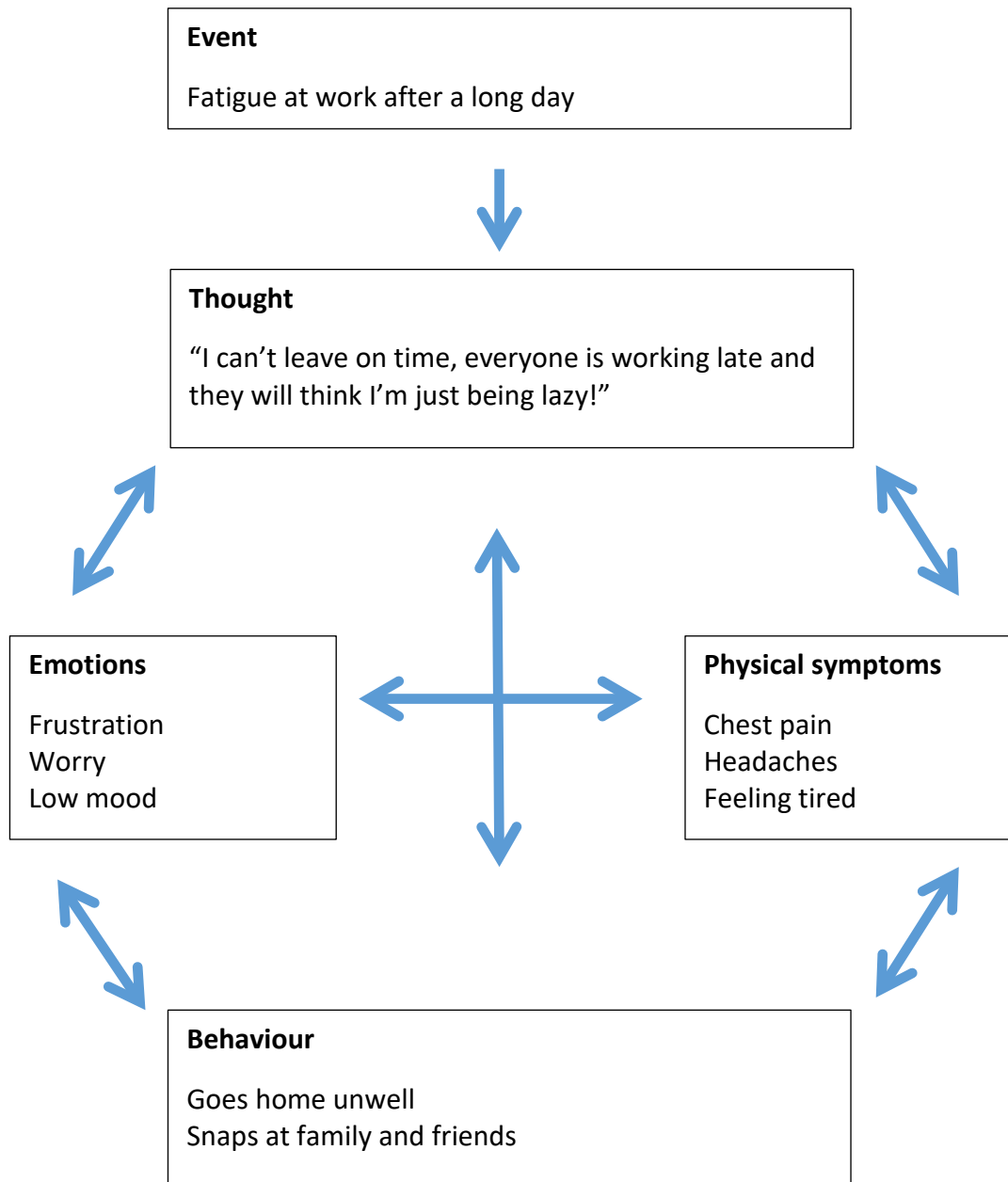
### **Challenging unhelpful thoughts**

It is important to try and recognise when you are having a thought that might be unhelpful towards the situation you are in. Once you have done this, you are able to challenge it to improve the way that you think.

- Is your thought rational? (this does not mean can it happen, but is it really rational, all things considering?)
- Are you making a thinking error
- What is the evidence for your thought being true?
- What evidence is there to go against your thought?
- What would you say to a friend if they were in your situation? Would you be as judgemental or harsh?
- How can you rephrase your thought to include positive affirmations?

## Stress and the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy 5 Areas Model

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the most popular form of therapy available on the NHS. The 5 areas model is a diagram that is used within CBT to show how an event can impact on the four symptomatic areas: thoughts, emotions, physical symptoms and behaviour.



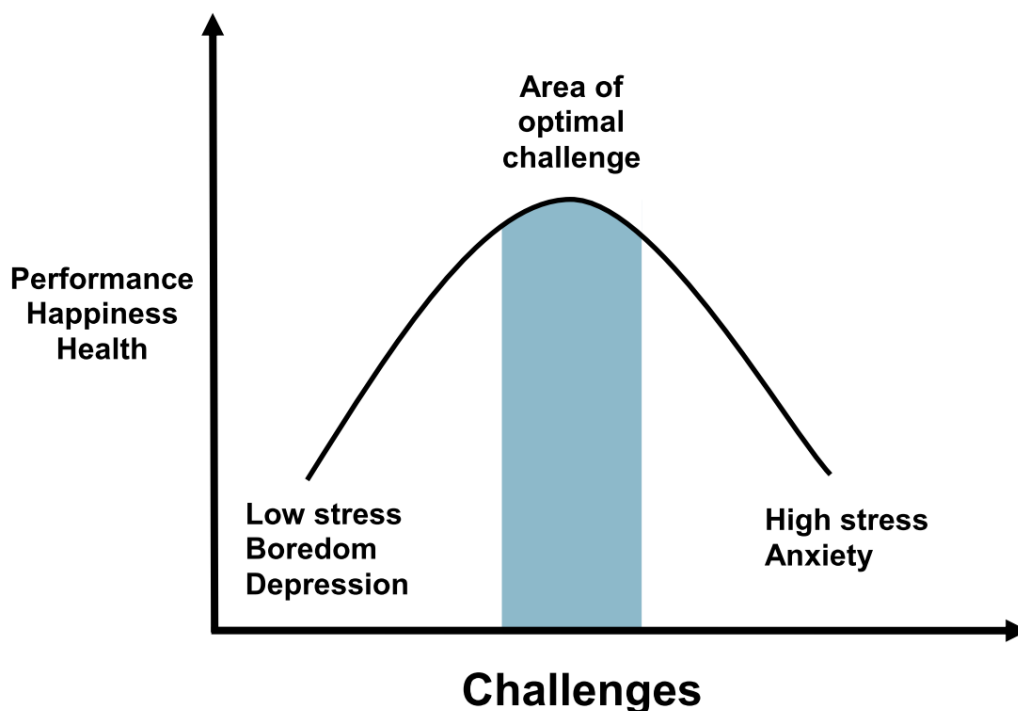
## But isn't some stress good for me?

Evidence shows that people in general tend to perform better when they are working towards a deadline or have a structure with an end goal. Some people also like to live life under pressure and strive on challenges and deadlines. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that pressure is not the same as stress.

Stress = when we have **lost control** of a situation or event that is challenging

Pressure = when we are still **in control** of the situation or event that is challenging

Even if we cannot directly control the outcome of an event that is challenging, we can still control some of the things around it, like our reaction, or a plan of things to get done. This means that we are able to somewhat reduce the amount of stress we feel.



If you are not challenged at all in your life, you might notice that your performance, happiness and health is low. This will be because you are not being motivated by anything, and if you feel this over a long period of time, you may start to experience depression. If, however, you are challenged far too much, you will also notice that your performance, happiness and health will be low, and this may be because you are very stressed and may not feel able to manage. This over time may lead to you experiencing anxiety. Therefore, it is important to try and challenge yourself just enough where you feel in control of the situation, which allows for your performance, happiness and health to peak.

## Strategies for reducing stress

In order to help yourself, it is important to equip yourself with a set of tools that you can use for when you feel stressed.

**Take control of what you have:** Sometimes you can't always change the situation, but you can control your actions and reactions around it. It might be helpful to channel the part of the situation that you can control, even if this is simply tidying your house, or filling the car up with petrol so that you are prepared.

**Establish the root cause of the problem (if you can!):** Try to tackle this rather than the consequences, perhaps your core beliefs are fuelling some of the stress that you are experiencing. If not, there might be an underlying situation or event that is. If so, is there anything you can do about that?

**Keep expectations of yourself realistic:** Sometimes we can expect so much more of ourselves than we would of other people. If your friend or colleague was in your situation, what would you say to them? Sometimes it can be helpful to think of things in this way to give us a more balanced viewpoint.

**Set boundaries and manage your time:** If we do not set boundaries about when and what we do, it can quite often spill into our free time, which can cause stress in the long term. Unrealistic expectations about what we can achieve in a day can also increase your stress. Try to remember to take regular breaks, which will help your productivity, as well as taking time to relax and look after your own health and wellbeing. Using to-do lists, with an accurate estimate about how long each task will take can also help.

**Ask for support:** We tend to be really bad at asking others for help or support, but remember, everyone needs help at one point or another and it is nothing to be embarrassed about! This could be for a number of reasons including to ask for another person's perspective/ideas or for help with the tasks that are stressful.

**Communicate with others:** It is important to talk to family, friends and colleagues about how you are feeling. Sometimes just having a chat and a cup of tea can help to offload, and they may have some helpful suggestions that you can make. It can also help you to feel more understood by others, which in itself, might reduce some stress that we experience. It's also important to remember that if you are saying yes to someone, you are saying no to yourself.

**Glass half full:** It can be challenging to focus on the things that you do have when you are going through a period of stress or difficulty. Trying to keep an objective view and not take things personally as well as reflecting on the things that we do have can help us to maintain a balanced view.

**Environment:** If all else fails, you are always able to control your environment and declutter by cleaning, filing, sorting out books or managing your space.

**Control your breathing:** See next page

## Breathing control

Breathing exercises have been used for centuries across different cultures to help people to focus and relax at times of stress.

It allows you to take time to recompose yourself and gather your thoughts whilst reducing any unhelpful physical symptoms that you might be experiencing.

When we get stressed, the first thing that happens is we start to breathe in a shallow way, which kickstarts the fight or flight response, causing us to feel more stressed. This may make us feeling more panicky as you feel the need to gasp for air.

A breathing exercise is easy and discreet to implement, allowing people to start one at any time they feel stressed.

As you inhale, count to three and breathe in slowly, taking air down deep into your stomach. As you exhale, count to four and breathe out slowly. Maintain a slow and steady rhythm whilst you're doing this and try to avoid holding your breath between each count.

## Distraction techniques

It can also be helpful to take time out of a situation to help you to think clearer. Sometimes though, it is very difficult to completely remove yourself from a situation as it might not be practical or possible. If this is the case, it might be useful to use a distraction exercise.

### **Visualisation**

This can be very useful when you are in a situation that is causing you stress, but you might not be able to immediately escape (such as being on a crowded train or plane).

- Imagine yourself walking to a door
- Open the door and walk down three steps, taking a deep breath for each step
- You walk into an environment that you associate with feeling relaxed and calm. This could be a familiar space, a happy memory or somewhere in your dream.
- What can you see?
- What can you hear?
- What can you smell?
- What can you touch?
- Spend a few minutes in this place, enjoying the feeling of relaxation
- When you feel ready, start to make your way back up the steps, taking a breath for each of the 3 steps. Make your way back through the door and back into the present situation

## Mental exercises

These can also be helpful to temporarily help you to change your shift of focus. For example, counting backwards from 100 in multiples of 4, thinking of the lyrics to a song or playing a memory game can be useful.

## Physical activity

Anything that gets you moving will help you to change your focus. This can be going out for a walk or going to the gym, but it can also be something as simple as going to the loo, or washing up your coffee cup.

## 5 things

You can also use your senses to focus in on your environment. In your environment, think of 5 things that you can see, 4 things that you can hear, 3 things that you can touch, 2 things that you can smell and 1 thing that you can taste. This will help to 'ground' you, taking yourself away from your thoughts and the stressful situation, allowing you to revisit it calmer.

## Muscle relaxation

Another exercise that you can use to relax is muscle relaxation. This is especially useful if you are feeling the physical effects of stress.

Sit comfortably and start by taking a few deep breaths. When you are ready, start to focus on your body, tensing and relaxing each of your muscle groups in the following order.

- **Feet:** point your toes away from you, hold, and then relax
- **Calves:** bend your foot at the ankle towards you, hold for a second, and then relax
- **Thighs:** push your knees together, hold, and then relax
- **Bottom:** clench your buttocks together, hold and then relax
- **Stomach:** pull in your abdominal muscles, hold and then relax
- **Hands:** clench your fists, hold, and then relax
- **Wrists:** rotate your wrists slowly, 5 times in one direction, and 5 times in the opposite an relax
- **Fingers:** stretch fingers wide apart, hold, and then relax
- **Arms:** bend your arms at the elbow, bringing your hands up towards the shoulders, hold and then relax
- **Shoulders:** hunch your shoulders up towards your ears, hold, and then relax
- **Neck:** pull your chin forwards onto your chest, hold, and then relax. Then pull your neck back, hold, and relax
- **Jaw:** clench teeth together, hold and then relax
- **Lips:** press tightly together, hold, then relax
- **Eyes:** screw up eyes tightly, hold, then relax
- **Forehead** – frown hard, wrinkle forehead, hold then relax

Spend time on each muscle group, and relax each group, notice what it feels like when you tense and when you let go.



## Lifestyle changes

It is important to maintain a healthy work-life balance – if you are not giving yourself time to enjoy yourself and take a break from work and other activities you ‘have’ to do, it can really result you in feeling tired and stressed out. Try to make time for your family and friends as well as time for hobbies and leisure interests. Remember, we work so that we can live, we don’t live to work! Try not to regularly exceed your work hours and if you have to take work home, try to allocate only a set amount of time to do it, and set boundaries about how much you will do. If this is an ongoing issue, it might be worth you speaking to your manager about managing your workload.

### Exercise

Physical activity is a very useful way of managing your stress. Although exercising won’t do anything to directly improve your stressful situation, it will release lots of endorphins and other feel good hormones, as well as using up the adrenalin that you produce when stressed, as well as relaxing the muscles. Exercising also helps to strengthen the heart and improve blood circulation.

Remember, you don’t have to join a gym or attend a sports club to exercise, you can simply go for a brisk walk, join a club, or do anything else that you find enjoying. If you don’t currently enjoy exercising at all, start off small, for example, getting off the bus a stop early, or taking the stairs instead of the lift, and set yourself realistic goals that you can achieve (e.g. by the end of this week, I want to have climbed 4 flights of stairs every day).

### Healthy eating

Did you know, the food you eat can have a huge impact on your mood and the way that you feel. For example, if you eat sugary food, you are much more likely to experience ‘sugar highs’ and ‘sugar lows’, making your blood sugar level spike and fall dramatically. This in turn is more likely to make you feel more irritable and stressed (ever heard the phrase ‘being Hangry?’) You are also much more likely to crave sugary food if your blood sugar level crashes again.

You can manage this by eating food that is made up of complex carbohydrates, such as brown rice, brown pasta or wholegrain or brown bread. Lean protein sources such as chicken and turkey will also help to manage your hunger. If you are vegetarian or vegan, it is important for you to try and ensure that you reach your protein recommendations for the day through eating healthy vegetarian or vegan protein sources, such as lentils, beans, pulses and foods such as tofu, seitan, or tempeh. Try to aim for at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables in each day and aim to drink around 8 glasses of water a day.

Caffeine can also have a similar effect on the body as sugar, causing your system to spike and crash, mimicking the feeling of stress. If you are stressed and drink a lot of caffeinated drinks, try to reduce your drinks to 1 a day, or cut them out completely if you can.

## Sleep

Quite often, sleep is one of the first things that can get affected when we are feeling stressed.

- Try to get a regular routine. Try to go to bed only when you are tired, and make sure that you wake up at the same time every day. Napping during the day will only affect the quality of sleep you have later on, so it is best to not nap no matter how tired you are!
- Another useful thing that you can do is to check your bedroom environment. What about your mattress, the temperature of your room, the light and the noise levels?
- De-stress before bed. Many people who are stressed complain of their thoughts going into overdrive before they drift off to sleep. Try to put a stop to nagging thoughts by 'putting your thoughts away to bed'. You can do this by writing them down on a notepad and physically putting the pad away in a drawer. Every time the thought crops up, say to yourself "I have put the thought away to bed, there is nothing I can do about it now, I will think about this tomorrow when I wake up and I can do something about it"
- Listen to a relaxation tape, practise some mindfulness (please see the separate mindfulness booklet that you can download for free) or do a relaxing activity, like having a warm bath.
- Try to not look at any screens which emit 'blue light' such as laptops, smart phones, tablets or TV screens at least an hour before bed. Instead, use that time to do something relaxing such as reading a book or listening to a radio show.
- Try to get enough exercise. The healthier you are, the better you will sleep.
- Complementary remedies have been proven to help. Try lighting candles, using herbal sprays or diffusers, or conducting light exercise like yoga or pilates.
- Try reverse psychology: try with all your might to stay awake and resist falling asleep. You can also interrupt unwanted thoughts by repeating a soothing word to yourself or visualising a landscape that has pleasant memories for you.
- Try to not use sleeping pills. Talking to your GP can be useful, and although long term use of sleeping pills is unhelpful, sometimes, they can be helpful to get you back into a routine.

## Further resources

### **Tavistock and Portman's Living Well Service**

Advice and information on where to get further support to help and improve your physical health

<https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/care-and-treatment/treatments/physical-health/>

email: [physicalhealthlead@tavi-port.nhs.uk](mailto:physicalhealthlead@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

### **Headspace**

Online mindfulness course and app

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

### **Calm**

Online mindfulness guided meditation

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

### **Free mindfulness resources**

[www.getselfhelp.co.uk/mindfulness](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/mindfulness)

[www.freemindfulness.org/download](http://www.freemindfulness.org/download)

**Please also talk to your clinician at the Trust for further advice and information on managing stress.**