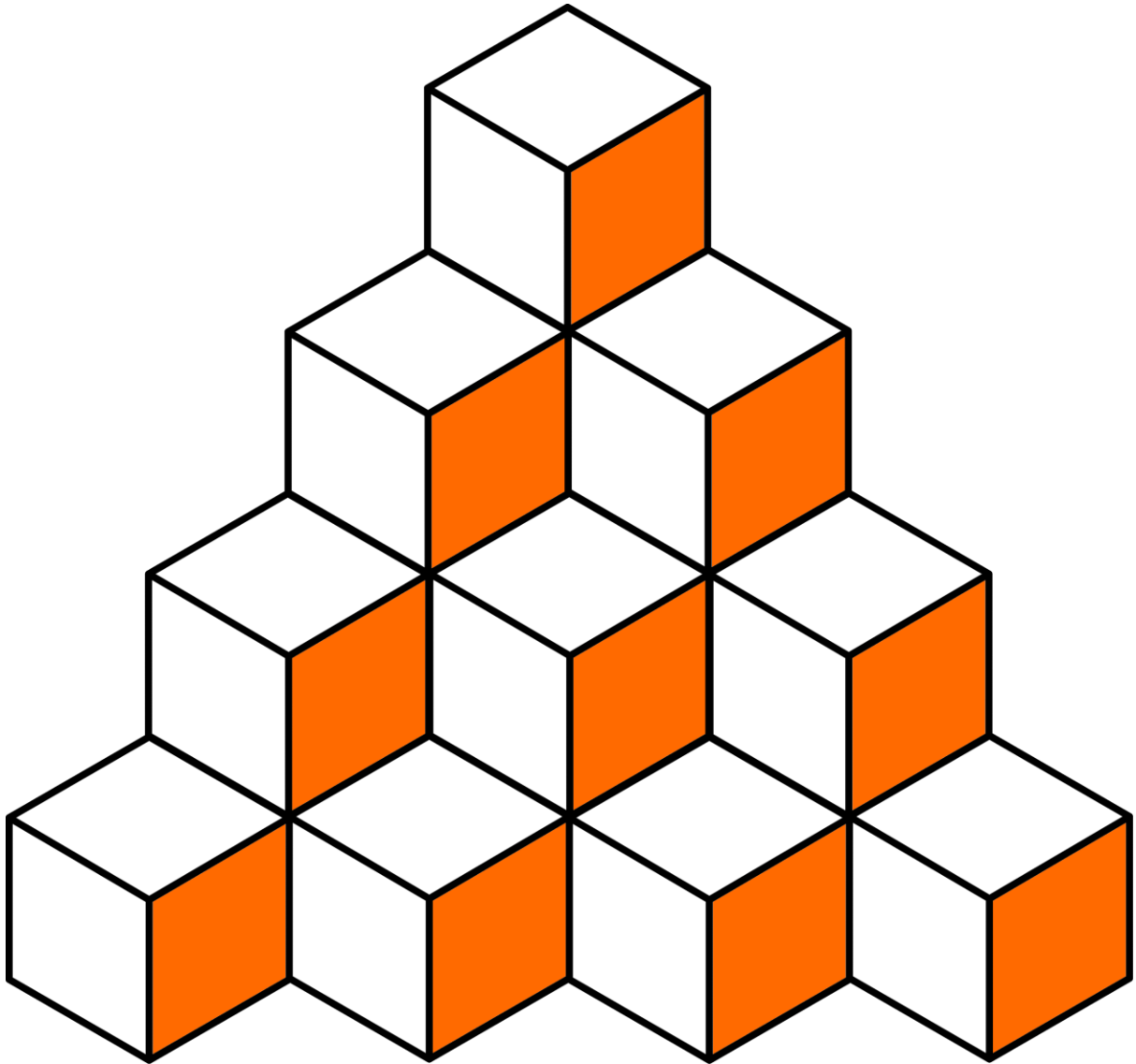


STRESS

# STRESS



# INFORMATION SHEET

# STRESS

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# STRESS

## What is stress?



We become stressed when the demands made of us are greater than our ability to quickly return to our usual state. Stress pushes us too far from our usual state of balance.

Stress can be sudden and extreme, or it can be prolonged over months or years. Stress can cause changes in the way the body works and alter the way we think and feel.

Many of these changes are the result of 'stress hormones' like glucocorticoids and adrenaline, both of which help prepare the body for action. These hormones are responsible for some of the unpleasant feelings we have when stressed.

## Signs of stress

We're all different when it comes to stress. Something that stresses one person may feel exhilarating to another. This has a lot to do with our temperament and how we think about stress.

A little stress can be a good thing, helping us to do our best. This positive stress is called 'eustress'. A little stress can make us stronger, faster and more focused.



**Distress**



**Eustress**



## STRESS

Too much stress, or stress that goes on for too long, can be overwhelming. It reduces resilience – our ability to ‘bounce back’ and return to our usual balanced state.

Too much stress reduces our immunity to illness and can lead to mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression.

The effects of stress can add up over time - it can take us longer to get over stress as we get older.

### Some common illnesses made worse by stress

- Asthma
- Eczema
- Chronic pain
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Fast or irregular heartbeat
- Headaches
- High blood pressure

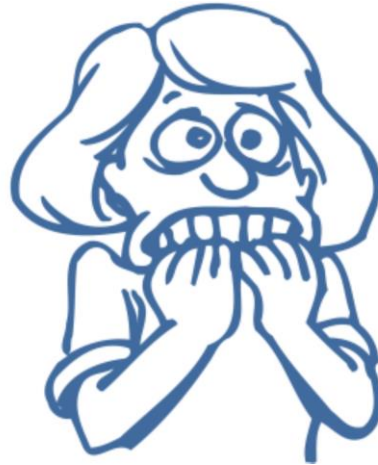
### How to recognise stress

Stress affects the way we think and feel, it changes our behaviour and has very real physical effects.

Here are some of the ways stress affects us:

### **‘Thinking’**

- Poor memory
- Poor concentration
- Pessimistic thoughts
- ‘Racing’ thoughts
- Worry



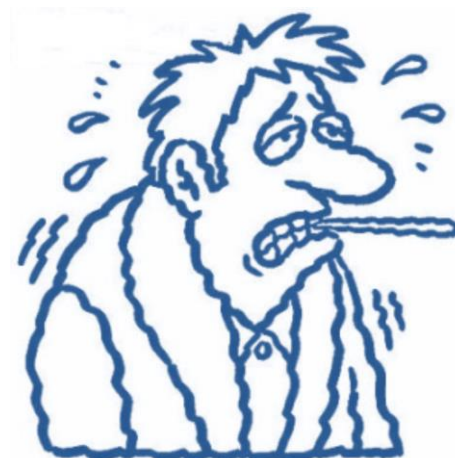
### **‘Feeling’**

- Moody
- Irritable
- Overwhelmed
- Resentful
- Unhappy



### **‘Physical’**

- Aches and pains
- Feeling sick
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of sex drive
- Coughs and colds



### **‘Doing’**

- Changes in appetite
- Changes in sleep
- Not going out
- Avoiding things
- Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to cope



When stressed, we might shut ourselves away from others, which can make it harder to get help. Long periods of stress can lead to long-lasting changes, so if we feel stressed, we might want to do something about it as soon as we're able.

### **What causes stress?**

Most of us find similar things stressful. Public speaking is a good example - most people find speaking in public stressful. Remember though, stress is very personal, stress affects people differently. Our genes, our life experiences and our outlook all play a part in how stressed we feel, and in what stresses us out.

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Things that can make stress worse ...

- Being unable to control our environment e.g., poor housing, redundancy, limited freedom, prejudice, stigma, restricted mobility.
- Life events such as poverty, unemployment & uncertainty at work.
- Conflict with other people, relationship breakdowns, bullying at work or school, domestic or emotional abuse.
- Major life events such as births, deaths, marriage and divorce.
- Things we usually think of as pleasant – holidays and new relationships can be stressful.
- Chronic health conditions, physical impairment, addiction, poor sleep.
- Having to keep secrets.
- Unrealistic deadlines and pressure at work or in education.
- Feelings of insecurity and self-doubt can make us more vulnerable to the effects of stress

### How stressed am I?

Have a look at the following four questions. They are from a questionnaire called the PSS-4.

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	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	4	3	2	1	0
In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	4	3	2	1	0
In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3	4
<b>My total =</b>					

Add up your scores for the four questions. Your score will be somewhere between zero and sixteen. There are no 'hard and fast' rules, but if your score is around eight or more, you may want to take stock of the amount of stress in your life.



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This won't give you a diagnosis – that's something only a qualified health professional can do – but it might give you a better idea about your symptoms.

### Reducing stress

Stress isn't an illness – it's something that affects us all. But too much stress or staying stressed for too long can make us ill, so you may want to discuss your stress levels with your GP or a health professional.

There are many approaches to managing stress. If at first you find one doesn't work, try different approaches until you find one you feel comfortable with and that works for you.

The first appointment with your GP can feel difficult, especially if you view being stressed as a 'weakness' (it isn't!) so it might be helpful to write down what you want to talk about before you go in. Make a note of any questions or worries you might have. Some people find it helpful to take a friend or family member along.

Sometimes it can be hard to summon the energy to get help. A simple 'phone call to your GP can get things moving and start you on the road to recovery.

### Avoid avoiding!

When we're stressed we might want to shut ourselves away from people. It can be very hard, but keeping active and staying with people can be very helpful. Remaining in work or returning to work might be very hard too, but can help us keep a sense of control. Keeping a normal daily routine is usually much better than withdrawing and staying in bed. We might feel like shutting ourselves away, but doing so can make things worse.

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Ask yourself, 'if there's something I'm avoiding, what could I do differently?

Make a note of your answer below.

### Deal with the difficult things

Putting off problems can make them mount up. Are there things in your life you're putting off dealing with? Might an advocate or some extra support help? The Citizens Advice Bureau can help with a range of issues from housing to money worries. Doing things to address our problems relieves the burden and makes us feel 'in control' again.

Ask yourself, 'what small thing could I do today that would help me begin to feel better about myself?' Make a note of your answer below.

### Repairing Relationships

People with strong relationships are happier, healthier and live longer. Close relationships with family and friends provide love, meaning, and support and increase our feelings of self-esteem. Wider social networks can bring us a sense of belonging. If you're struggling with a difficult relationship, or stress is causing problems in your relationship you can contact [Relate](#) (UK), or you could speak to your GP about other types of relationship counselling.

### Avoiding alcohol and drugs

Alcohol is a depressant – it can lower the mood. Other non-prescribed drugs are best avoided. If you think alcohol or drug use might be a problem and you live in Wales, you can contact the CALL helpline on 0800 132 737 or text 'help' to 81066 (UK).

### Take care of your body

Keeping active makes us happier as well as being good for our physical health. We don't need to run marathons - there are simple things we can do each day. Maybe take the stairs instead of the lift and devote a few minutes each day to gentle exercise. We can also boost our well-being by unplugging from technology, by getting outside and - importantly - making sure we get enough sleep.

### Keep aware of the world around you

Learning to be more mindful can do wonders for our well-being in all areas of life – everyday things like our journey to work, the way we eat or our relationships. It helps us get in tune with our feelings and stops us dwelling on

## STRESS

the past or worrying about the future - so we get more out of each day. Search for mindfulness classes near to where you live.

### Gratitude

Positive emotions like joy, gratitude, contentment, inspiration, and pride are not just positive at the time. Research shows that regularly experiencing positive emotions creates an 'upward spiral', helping to strengthen our ability to deal with current and future stressors.

Although we need to be realistic about life's ups and downs, it does help to focus on the good parts of any situation - the 'glass half full' rather than the 'glass half empty' approach. Try keeping a 'gratitude journal' - a personal record of the things we can be grateful for each day. It's not only something that helps build our resilience, it's something to look back on when times are tough.

### Meaning and purpose

People who have a sense of purpose feel happier, more in control and get more out of life. They also experience less stress, anxiety and depression. But where do we find 'meaning' and 'purpose'? It might be our faith; maybe it's being a parent or doing a job that we feel makes a difference. The answers are different for each of us, though they often involve being part of something bigger than ourselves.

### Self-help resources

There are many good books and websites that can help. Again, your GP, practice nurse or primary care mental health practitioner will be able to recommend from a range of excellent and helpful material. Some of the material in this information sheet has come from 'Action for Happiness', part of a UK charity devoted to wellbeing and reducing inequality.

### Act now!

The sooner you reduce your stress levels, the sooner you'll feel better! Speak with your GP or a health professional for extra information or to get on the road to a lower-stress life today!

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The questions in the PSS-10 ask you about your feelings and thoughts **during the last month**. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by marking how often you felt or thought a certain way. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one question. This assessment is not intended to be a diagnosis. If you are concerned about your results in any way, please speak with a qualified health professional.

**0 = Never | 1 = Almost Never | 2 = Sometimes | 3 = Fairly Often | 4 = Very Often**

1	In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	<input type="text"/>
2	In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	<input type="text"/>
3	In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?	<input type="text"/>
4	In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? R	<input type="text"/>
5	In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way? R	<input type="text"/>
6	In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	<input type="text"/>
7	In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life? R	<input type="text"/>
8	In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things? R	<input type="text"/>
9	In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	<input type="text"/>
10	In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	<input type="text"/>

Total PSS score =

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The PSS-10 consists of ten multiple choice questions. Items include choices on a 5-point scale. Items numbered 4, 5, 7, and 8 (marked with the letter 'R') are the positively stated items and require reverse scoring. PSS-10 scores are obtained by reversing the scores on the four positive items, e.g., 0=4, 1=3, 2=2, 3=1, 4=0 and then summing across all 10 items. Total scores will range from zero to forty. There are no 'low' or 'high' categories; the PSS-10 is best used to compare your own results over time to see how you are feeling about stress. The Perceived Stress Scale is not a diagnostic instrument; there are no diagnostic score cut-off points.

### Disclaimer

This material is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. We have used all reasonable care in compiling the information but make no warranty as to its accuracy. We recommend you consult a doctor or other health care professional for the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions, or if you are at all concerned about your health.

## References

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2. Cohen, S., & Williamson, G. (1988). Perceived stress in a probability sample of the U.S. In S. Spacapan & S. Oskamp (Eds.), *The social psychology of health: Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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