



What can I do
about stress?
An employee guide

health matters

 **Gateshead**
Council

www.gateshead.gov.uk

Why an employee guide on stress?

Employee health and employee attitude surveys have identified stress as a key concern for employees.

The council has a number of measures in place to help employees:

- Wellbeing at Work Policy - Mental Health
- Bullying and Harassment Policy
- Health & Safety Policy
- Free 24 Hour Confidential Telephone Counselling Line
- Sickness Absence Procedures
- Return to Work Interviews
- Exit Interviews
- Achievement and Development Interviews
- Recruitment and Selection Accreditation
- Training sessions in Stress Awareness, Time Management and Assertiveness
- Work Life Balance Initiatives such as Flexible Working Hours, Job Share and Part Time Working, Career Breaks, Special Leave and Homeworking
- Health at Work Initiatives and Health Promotion

This is what the council has done so far but tackling stress is a joint responsibility. This guide aims to help you find practical ways to deal with pressure. Read on to find out what you can do.

What is stress?

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as:

“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. It arises when an individual believes that they cannot cope with what is being asked of them.”

Stress should not be confused with pressure. A certain amount of pressure can have a positive effect and improve performance. It may spur you on to solve a difficult problem or challenge you to achieve a goal but a build up of pressure without release can lead to stress.

Why is it important to tackle stress?

Stress is not an illness or a weakness but prolonged stress can trigger mental health problems like anxiety and depression. Other health problems related to stress include back pain, indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome, psoriasis and tension headaches. You need to be able to work out when healthy pressure starts turning into unhealthy stress by spotting the stress signals.

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What are the typical stress signals?

Signs and symptoms of stress vary from one person to another. It is useful to know your own stress signals so that you can identify the cause and try to do something about it.

You can control the effects of too much pressure and avoid stress by understanding how stress affects your mind and body. It is important to recognise changes in yourself, which may be the early signs of stress.

Behavioural Signals	Physical Signals	Emotional Signals
Poor timekeeping	Headaches	Irritability
Increased smoking	Tiredness	Poor concentration
Increased alcohol intake	Muscle tension	Difficulty making decisions
Changes in eating habits	Breathlessness	Sleep Problems
Loss of interest in personal appearance	Palpitations	Mood swings
Making mistakes	Skin irritation	Tearfulness
Withdrawal from supportive relationships	Vague aches or pains	Feeling tense
Obsessional behaviour	Frequent colds, flu or other infections	Loss of confidence or lack of self esteem
Inability to relax	Indigestion	Being cynical

Is everyone affected by stress?

Stress can affect anyone and may be caused by domestic pressures, work pressures or a combination of the two.

- If you are extremely competitive, ambitious, impatient or a perfectionist, you may be more prone to the effects of stress.
- Some types of job may be more stressful than others.
- Events in your personal life such as divorce, bereavement and moving house may make you feel more stressed. Even happy events like marriage or promotion can take their toll.
- Your age, health, financial situation and satisfaction with your life in general can all affect how you react to too much pressure.

How can I avoid becoming stressed?

There are lots of things you can do to help yourself deal with and prevent stress. The key is to adopt coping strategies that work for you. Sometimes we create our own stress by thinking or expecting too much of ourselves. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, using your time wisely, improving your work and personal habits and learning to relax, all play a part.

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How can I maintain a healthy lifestyle?

- **Stay active**

Find something you enjoy such as swimming, walking or dancing. Aim to build up to at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week, where you raise your heart rate, feel warmer and are slightly out of breath. If you have any health problems or are over 40, check with your doctor first.

- **Eat healthily**

Always remember to eat breakfast. Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and a balance of bread, potatoes, milk and dairy products, meat, fish or alternatives. Enjoy your food and don't rush or skip meals. Make sure that you take a proper lunch break at work and try to get away from your workplace if possible.

- **Get enough sleep**

Form a regular sleep pattern and make sure you are getting the amount of sleep your body needs. Try to get between six and eight hours a night. Stick to a bedtime pattern so that your body knows it is time for sleep and go to bed about the same time each night. Don't have the bedroom too hot or too cold and make sure your bed is comfortable. Don't exercise less than two hours before bed-time as this will energise you. If you can't sleep, don't lie in bed tossing and turning. Get up and do something or read a book.

- **Stop smoking and drink less caffeine**

Nicotine and caffeine can actually increase the effects of stress. Try replacing tea and coffee with caffeine free alternatives like herbal teas.

- **Drink more water**

Aim to drink between one and two litres a day.

- **Don't misuse alcohol or other drugs**

Alcohol and drugs can cover up signs of stress and make everyday problems worse.

How can I manage my time wisely?

- **Be Aware**

Make time to step back, take a look at yourself and your actions and reflect on what you've done. Make yourself aware of how you spend your time. Keep a diary and jot down everything you actually do at home and work. Do this for a week and then look at how you spend your time. Was everything necessary? Did you have enough time? How could you have used your time more effectively? Decide on activities which were of little or no benefit. Look at specific problems that stopped you using your time well and look at how your own behaviour made it difficult to use your time wisely.

- **Make a list**

Set goals by writing down everything you have to do. Decide what is important and what you can do later.

- **Don't overdo things**

You can't do everything at once. Set goals that are challenging but achievable and don't put things off. Don't take on too much and learn to say "no".

- **Take a break**

Physically removing yourself from a stressful situation, even for a few minutes can give you the strength you need to tackle the problem. Take a walk around the block! Don't be afraid to relax for a moment to regain your energy. Try to avoid working long hours and take proper holidays when you can. Take breaks away from your work area each day.

- **Pace yourself**

Work at a steady pace and finish one task at a time rather than juggling lots of unfinished tasks.

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How can I improve my work and personal habits?

- **Identify stress sources**

Write them down. Which do you make yourself? Which are part of the job and which do other people create? Think about the things you can change and make efforts to do something about them. Accept that some things cannot be changed and that's just the way it is. Try asking "On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being death, how important is this?"

- **Talk about it**

Talking about things helps to put them in perspective and stops you from bottling things up. Speak to your manager, colleagues or friends as soon as possible if you are experiencing a problem.

- **Learn from your mistakes**

Accept that things do go wrong every now and then. Treat mistakes as a learning experience on which to build rather than as a failure.

- **Be positive**

Positive thoughts like joy, happiness, achievement are more likely to bring positive results like enthusiasm, calm, wellbeing. It is so easy to fall into negative thinking where we think of the glass being half empty instead of half full. Negative thoughts lead to a downward spiral which will make you feel worse. Try to be optimistic and look for the good in things and people. If someone is showing signs of being under pressure, offer them support.

- **Be kind to yourself**

Acknowledge and celebrate your successes.

● **Have a social life**

Keep in touch with friends and make time to have a social life away from work and home. Get involved by joining a club or course or evening class. Meeting new people and starting new groups can make a difference.

● **Create a work free area at home**

Decide on a trigger to act as a signal to separate work from home. Something simple like locking the car door or opening the front door can act as a cut off point to help you forget about work until the next day and help you create a sanctuary in your own home.

How can I learn to relax?

Relaxation is not just about collapsing in front of the television. Its purpose is to give our nervous system a break. Exercises where we focus on our breathing or on releasing tension from our muscles are very beneficial because they help us to still our minds. You need to find the right method for you.

● **Breathing**

When stressed, we tend to breathe more rapidly or even hold our breath. Use as many opportunities as possible each day to just become aware of your breathing. This will help in stressful situations. Take a deep breath in, feel the air entering your nostrils; your abdomen expands and your lungs fill with air. Imagine your breath revitalising your whole body. Slowly breathe out and imagine all the tension draining away. Stand still and breathe consciously. Notice the relaxing effects this has on your body and mind.

● **Relaxation**

Play a relaxation disc when in the car or in the bath. Next time you are in a traffic jam, use the time to relax. Getting angry and frustrated is not going to make the traffic move any faster and is likely to have a negative effect on you. Stretch your arms and neck, relax and listen to the radio.

● **Massage**

When you are extremely busy and want to feel more energised, a five minute self massage can do a world of good. Try this mini ear massage. Using your index finger and thumb, apply pressure and make small circling movements on your ear. Using your index finger, apply pressure on the bone just behind your ear. Finally give your ear a really good rub. A complete massage that you can do in minutes even at work!

● **Other suggestions**

Natural therapies can be successful in helping you to cope with pressure and avoid stress, as they work on all parts of the body, mind and spirit. Natural remedies include acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, shiatsu and reiki.

Try taking a warm bath with a calming essential oil like lavender, take up painting, gardening or listening to calming music. Visit your local sauna or Turkish bath or have a go at yoga or tai chi.

Don't blame others or wait around for someone else to change your life. Take control and make the changes now.

Who can I contact for further advice or information?

Occupational Health – 0191 433 3273

Personnel Services – 0191 433 2213

Health & Safety - 0191 433 2272

Your Trade Union

Lancaster LifeAssist – 0800 0685 155 (Free telephone counselling line)

Alcohol & Drug Problem Service – 0191 219 5600

Smoking Cessation Service – 0191 283 1145

Bereavement Helpline – 0191 410 9911

Citizens Advice – 0191 477 1392

Consumer Credit Counselling – 0800 138 1111

North East Council on Addictions – 0191 490 1045

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