

Stressbusting Tips



Stress seems to be the buzz word of our times. Whilst some stress is healthy and motivating the pace of modern life, commitments and responsibilities to juggle, and the prevalence of social media and information overload can combine to leave us overwhelmed.

There are numerous ways in which we are compromised when we are under stress. Frequently it leads to anxiety and poor concentration; emotionally it can make us short tempered or upset. Stress registers physically in our bodies by releasing stress hormones, raising blood pressure, lowering immunity and disrupting sleep. In the short-term this can result in minor illness - colds, tension headaches, rashes or eczema flare-ups. Long-term stress has been linked with conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, depression and high blood pressure.

The bottom line is that we know that too much stress is bad for us and that we need to find ways of managing it. The good news is that there are many ways to reduce stress so that you can enjoy life more. We will share some suggestions in this helpsheet to get you started. If there is anything you would like to discuss further please contact one of our highly trained advisors on the Adviceline.

Stressbusting Tips



Understanding Stress

Stress is how the body reacts to external pressures that we perceive to be challenging or uncomfortable. Healthy levels of stress enable us to perform well, for instance we might feel nervous when we give a presentation to an audience or attend an interview. The body reacts by releasing adrenaline into our system that invigorates us and can assist us to focus.

Many actors report that the rush of adrenaline they feel just before going on stage is what enables them to deliver better performances.

Stress becomes problematic when it undermines our ability to cope; when we panic and go blank during a meeting or worry so much that we struggle to fall asleep. Most of us can cope with short periods of stress but if it is prolonged it can develop into chronic stress.

Anybody can be affected by stress and what is perceived as stressful will be different for each individual. A lively heated debate might be thrilling for one person but nerve-wracking for another. Common causes of stress are pressures at work, pressure at home or financial pressure.

The best way to manage stress is to try to live a balanced life, to notice the warning signs when things are becoming too much, and take steps to address them. We will never eliminate stress altogether but if we can develop our resilience and pay attention to our needs we will cope better when times are difficult.

Stressbusting Tips

7/11 Breathing

This is a simple exercise that you can practise just about anywhere when you need some calmness. Breathe in for the count of 7 and then exhale for the count of 11. Making the 'out' breath last longer than the 'in' breath will help the body to relax as it triggers the parasympathetic nervous system. It distracts our minds from our worries and gives us a moment of respite. At first it might seem difficult to breathe out for the count of 11 but don't worry, with time and practise it will become easier. There is no need to force it. You can practise this for one minute or five depending on how much time you have and how you stressed are feeling and how much time you have.

Pause

When we are frantically busy, put on the spot or caught up in a heated exchange it can be difficult to make good decisions or say the right thing. If you find yourself in this situation remember to pause.

Take a moment to inhale and exhale as this will give you time to think. If this is not enough, ask for more time to reflect on what has been said so that you can think it through and come up with the best response. Agree a time to return to the conversation.

Have 'me-time'

Allow time in your week for yourself. Think about what would be really nourishing or enjoyable for you and make time for it. It could mean scheduling time with friends, doing something fun, attending a class, seeing a movie, giving yourself some quiet reading time, gardening or having some pampering. Me-time doesn't have to be expensive. These moments will help to get you through a stressful period.

Disconnect

Thanks to technology and social media, we can make ourselves available to work, friends and acquaintances 24/7. While this has certain advantages if we never remove ourselves electronically it can feel as if we never leave work or get a break. Even if there are times when you need to be

Stressbusting Tips

contactable make sure you designate at least some time that is free from electronic devices. Scheduling in blocks of time will alleviate stress without sacrificing responsibility.

Distinguish what is in your control and what is not. There will always be matters in life that are beyond our control and if we focus on these things we will wind up frustrated and stressed. In most situations there will be something within our control can – a positive action, or adjusting our personal response to it. Working with what we can influence gives us back a sense of control and can be both empowering and invigorating.

Take small steps

As Lao Tzu famously said 'a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' When we work towards goals it can be overwhelming if we focus on the end result. In the worst cases we may give up before we even begin.

Breaking things down into manageable chunks can motivate us to continue through each subsequent stage. As each chunk is finished we experience a sense of satisfaction from the knowledge that we are closer to achieving our ultimate goal. As an example, a report does not have to be written in its entirety; it builds sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, and section-by-section until it is finally completed.

Learn to say no and set boundaries

Many people find it hard to say no. Perhaps we worry that we won't be liked if we don't say yes to people, or as children we were brought up to be nice, obliging and helpful. Yet if we say yes to things we don't agree with, or want, we prevent ourselves from realising our true intentions.

Setting boundaries is about making your needs and wants clear to other people. This involves voicing what you accept and what you do not accept. Saying no doesn't automatically make you a bad or unhelpful person, it allows you to be more assertive and prevents resentment building up. If you find it hard to say no practice saying it in lower stake situations, and build up to saying no in more important matters.

Challenge negative thinking

In difficult situations it is easy to think negatively, to predict the worst or tell yourself that things are hopeless. Finding

alternative ways of viewing the situation can help to prevent you from spiralling into negativity and inertia. Most of us have what Cognitive Behaviouralists refer to as Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs). These are habitual negative ways of perceiving what is going on and are based on belief systems rather than reality. Here are some examples of NATs; think about what NATs you have and see how you can challenge or reframe them.

Bad things always happen to me
It's always my fault
If something isn't perfect it is wrong

Allow yourself to make mistakes

As humans we all make mistakes. Despite knowing this many of us set high or perfectionist standards that we cannot possibly maintain. If we expect too much of ourselves the fear of making mistakes, or the emotional fallout from doing so, can have a damaging effect on our lives and create unnecessary stress.

Aiming for high standards is not the same as being a perfectionist. Author Brene Brown writes that perfectionism can be a path to depression and life paralysis, making us too afraid to put anything in the world that isn't perfect. We miss opportunities and take a harsh stance against ourselves and our perceived 'failings'. She argues that the way to overcome perfectionism is to be more compassionate and understanding towards ourselves.

Mistakes are a natural part of learning and allow us to improve and build on what we know. Allowing ourselves to make mistakes gives us the freedom to try new avenues and adopt a more experimental attitude, rather than approaching things rigidly and narrowly.

Express feelings

Everyone has feelings but if we fail to pay attention to them they can build up and become overwhelming, or we can wind up acting against our true intentions. Think of feelings as important information about what is right for you; if you are happy things are good, if you are angry something is not right and may need changing, if you are upset you may need to acknowledge the loss of something precious. Paying attention

Stressbusting Tips

and expressing our feelings helps us to navigate our way in the world, and improve our relationships. Particularly in difficult times sharing our feelings with a trusted friend can help us to feel supported and cared for.

Strengthen relationships

Quality relationships are vital to our mental wellbeing. Humans are social beings and having good connections with others enables us to feel happier, more secure and gives us a sense of belonging. Without these we experience loneliness and isolation.

Try to ensure you build stronger and closer relationships through family, friendships or colleagues. If you are lacking valued people in your life you can try broadening your circle by interacting with other members in the community. This could be through group activities or hobbies you enjoy, volunteering or sports.

Be Active

Exercise is a great stress reliever as it releases feel good hormones such as endorphins. It keeps us in better physical condition and provides a break from daily activities. People often report that they come up with their best ideas whilst running, walking or other form of exercise. Without the usual focus on getting things done our mind is free to wander and come up with more creative solutions.

Eat a nutritious diet

A balanced diet provides the bedrock for our wellbeing. When we eat well we are more likely to feel well and have energy for the activities we enjoy.

Eliminate unhealthy coping aids

Reaching for a glass of wine, eating junk food or zoning out online when we feel stressed may make us feel better in the short term but if these become habits and continue long term they will create greater problems. Ultimately our health suffers and problems remain unresolved. We can rely on these habits as a way of escaping from uncomfortable feelings, instead of facing up to them. Although facing up to difficult feelings isn't easy it can help us to deal with the truth of what is going in our lives and, in so doing, allows us to make choices and take

control over how to move forward.

Be grateful

Being grateful makes you feel good and can provide a similar reaction to taking anti-depressants. Recent developments in neuroscience have shown that when we take the time to ask ourselves what we are grateful for certain neural circuits are activated. This stimulates production of dopamine and serotonin and these neurotransmitters then travel to the 'bliss' centre of the brain.

Each day think of 3 things that you are grateful for. Even if you struggle to think of them the very act of trying will have beneficial effects.

Spend time in nature

Research shows that spending time in natural surroundings can be beneficial for our mood, and a stroll in nature can boost performance on tasks calling for sustained focus. If you can't easily find a natural setting studies show that even looking at pleasing images of nature has some benefit.

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