

Your Guide to

Managing Stress

Good Stress vs Bad Stress
Causes of Stress



Signs & Symptoms of Stress
Effects of Stress on Health



A collection of proven strategies
and highly practical relaxation
techniques to manage your stress

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2

Good Stress vs Bad Stress
Causes of Stress

3

Signs & Symptoms of Stress

4

Effects of Stress on Health
Managing your Stress

5

1. Physical Strategies
2. Behavioural Strategies

7

3. Cognitive Strategies

9

Relaxation Techniques
a. Deep breathing

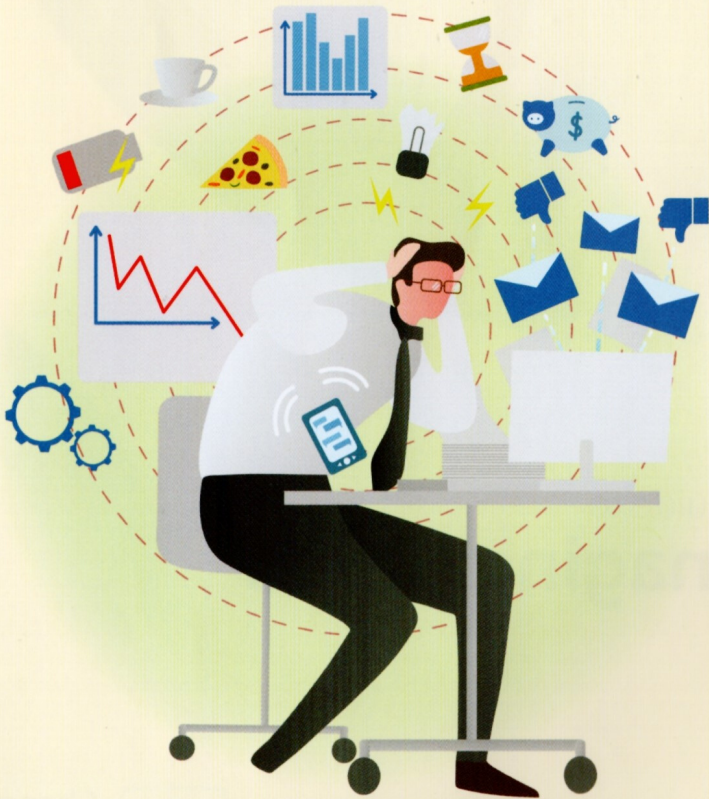
10

b. Progressive muscle relaxation

11

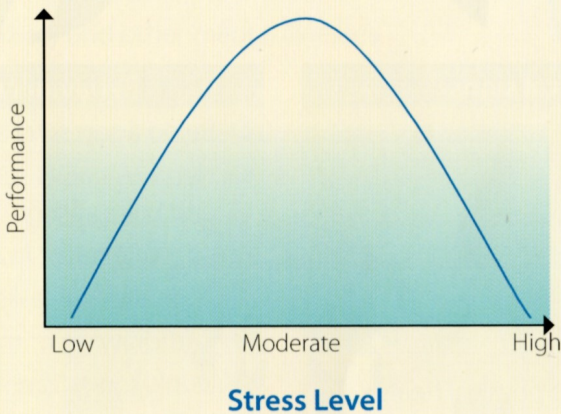
c. Visualisation

Stress is a normal and inevitable part of life. It is our body's response to physical or emotional changes and challenges in life. When you are stressed, the release of a hormone, adrenaline, causes an increase in heart rate, breathing and blood sugar levels. Diversion of blood flow to your muscles also prepares you for "fight-or-flight", causing you to feel more alert.



Good Stress vs Bad Stress

Stress can sometimes bring excitement to your life. A moderate level of stress can challenge and motivate you to bring about optimum performance. However, experiencing high levels of stress or being in a stressful situation for long periods of time can lead to fatigue and burnout. It can reduce the effectiveness of your immune system, affecting your health. Mood disturbances and feelings of irritability that may come with unhealthy stress levels can also lead to conflicts with others and difficulties in relationships.



Causes of Stress

Stress can come from demands of everyday life, including external and internal sources.

External sources

- ➔ Work environment
- ➔ School demands
- ➔ Expectations from other people
- ➔ Interpersonal conflicts
- ➔ Major life changes
e.g. death of loved ones, accidents, legal issues, new job, marriage, divorce, unemployment, illness
- ➔ Environmental events
e.g. noise, competition, traffic jams

Internal sources

- ➔ Poor physical health
e.g. existing medical conditions
- ➔ Unhelpful coping skills
- ➔ Negative thinking styles
e.g. catastrophising, personalisation
- ➔ High expectations of self

Signs & Symptoms of Stress

Everyone reacts and copes with changes and situations differently, hence we experience stress in different ways. Here are some of the common signs of stress:



Physical signs

- ➔ Headache
- ➔ Stomachache
- ➔ Muscle tension
- ➔ Sweaty palms
- ➔ Trembling
- ➔ Loss of appetite
- ➔ Poor sleep and physical health



Behavioural signs

- ➔ Being aggressive and impulsive
- ➔ Nervous habits such as nail-biting and hair-pulling
- ➔ Loss of interest in activities
- ➔ Avoidance of tasks
- ➔ Withdrawing from activities
- ➔ Drinking and smoking excessively



Emotional signs

- ➔ Feeling fearful and anxious
- ➔ Feeling angry and irritable
- ➔ Feelings of sadness and inadequacy



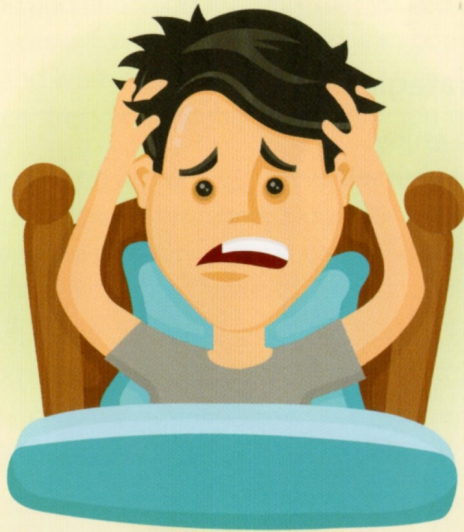
Mental signs

- ➔ Poor concentration
- ➔ Lack of confidence
- ➔ Forgetfulness

Effects of Stress on Health

Long-term exposure to stress may lead to health problems and diseases. Chronic stress can affect almost every system in your body and has been associated with one or more of the following:

- ➔ Inhibition of immune system which increases one's susceptibility to colds and flu
- ➔ High blood pressure which will increase the risk for stroke and heart attacks
- ➔ Digestive problems like constipation or diarrhoea
- ➔ Depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses
- ➔ Increased asthmatic symptoms



Managing your Stress

Some people turn to cigarettes and alcohol when they are stressed. Others may turn to binge-eating, gambling and excessive computer gaming to cope with stress. However, these are unhelpful ways of coping with stress. While these unhelpful coping strategies can help some people relieve stress temporarily, they may cause harm to their physical health and relationships in the long run.

Here are some helpful ways to deal with stress:

1. Physical Strategies

Keep fit and healthy

- ➔ **Exercise regularly** to keep yourself fit and healthy. Exercising releases endorphins which are your body's natural pain and stress fighter. The release of endorphins is associated with feelings of euphoria.
- ➔ Have a **balanced diet** including fruits and vegetables every day. Eating wisely helps to provide nutrients to boost your immune system, protecting you against illnesses.
- ➔ Get **ample sleep** and rest every day. Inadequate sleep is often associated with poor concentration, fatigue and irritability. Practice good sleep hygiene and get at least 6 to 8 hours of sleep every night.



2. Behavioural Strategies

Do something you enjoy

Have some **time for yourself** every day. You can go for a short walk or spend some time catching up with your friends and family. You can also try doing something new. Sign up for a course that can develop your interests, or take up a new hobby.

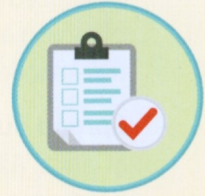


Develop relationships

Set some time aside to **talk to the important people in your life every day**. Family, friends and colleagues can be a good source of support and comfort. If you feel overwhelmed or stressed, try talking to these people about your difficulties. These positive relationships can help to buffer you from the effects from stress.

Get organised

Plan your time by listing the things you have to do. Estimate and allocate the amount of time needed for each task. Then **prioritise** the important activities and do them first. Allow some time and flexibility for impromptu demands so you do not feel overwhelmed by them.



Set goals

Place your attention and efforts on the work that you can or have to do. **Set realistic goals** for yourself. When you are faced with complex tasks, break them into smaller goals and work them through step-by-step. Try setting S.M.A.R.T. goals to help reduce stress and combat procrastination when faced with difficult tasks:

- S**pecific - A specific goal is one that is detailed and clear. Consider 'what', 'how', 'who', 'where', 'when' as you establish a specific goal.
- M**easurable - Define the criteria for your goal so you can measure progress and know when you have accomplished your goal.
- A**chievable - Set a goal that can challenge you but is not beyond what you can manage.
- R**elevant - A relevant goal is one that is important to you and in line with your short- and long-term plans.
- T**ime-limited - Set a time frame for your goal. Have a start date and a deadline that is close enough to motivate you, but not so close that you may be discouraged by it.

For example, rather than setting a goal to 'be healthy', consider a S.M.A.R.T. goal which may be 'Eat 2 pieces of fruit after lunch at work every day next week' or 'Go for a 30-minute jog at East Coast Park every Saturday for the next month'.

Know your limits

Keep check on the things that require your attention and how much you can handle. If you find that you are having too many tasks to deal with, learn to be assertive and say “no” to taking on more things to do. Get help from others to help you deal with tasks at hand.

- ➔ **Prepare** what you need to do for each task. Writing lists can help you get organized and be clear about what you need to do. For example, if you find planning a vacation stressful, write down what you need for the trip (e.g. travel documents, medication).
- ➔ **Spread out** your demands. You do not always have to finish all your jobs at once. Allow yourself some time to adjust and give yourself a short break before moving on to do the next thing.
- ➔ If you are a carer for someone at home, such as an elderly parent or a young child, recognize that you have responsibilities that can make you feel quite stressed. If you feel overwhelmed by the caregiving demands, talk to a family member and **request for help** to share the responsibility. Alternatively, look for a childcare or daycare that suits your caregiving needs.

Spread out major changes in your life

Transitions can be a source of stress for many people. Try to avoid making changes such as changing jobs, houses or flats and buying a car at the same time. Allow yourself some time to adjust when you make a major change in your life.

3. Cognitive Strategies

Let go of unproductive worries

Productive worries produce a healthy level of stress that can challenge you to think of solutions for some problems. Unproductive worries create high stress level and make you feel anxious. Try to distinguish between productive and unproductive worries. If you can, solve the problems that are within your control and accept or let go of things that you cannot change.



Engage in problem solving

Problems can seem overwhelming when you feel stressed and tired. The following steps may help you develop new ways of dealing with these problems:

- Step 1:** Identify the problems that are causing you stress. Write them down. It may help to focus on solving one problem at a time.
- Step 2:** Think about the options available to deal with the problem and write them down.
- Step 3:** List the main advantages and disadvantages of each option, taking into account what resources are available to you.
- Step 4:** Identify the best option(s) to deal with the problem.
- Step 5:** List the steps required for this option to be carried out.
- Step 6:** Carry out these steps and then check the effectiveness of this option.

Challenge negative thoughts

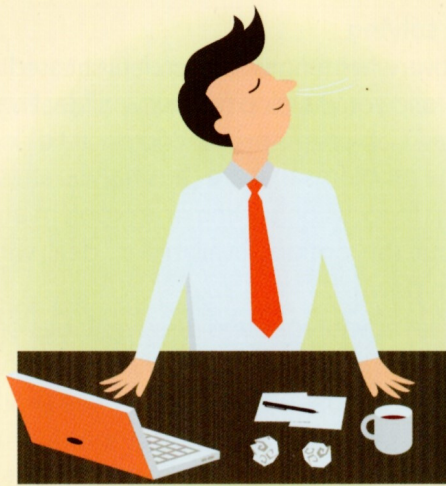
Your thoughts affect the way you feel. Certain negative thinking styles can cause and maintain feelings of stress and sadness. Some unhelpful and negative thinking styles include:

- ➔ **Catastrophising:** Thinking that the situation is worse and more dreadful than it actually is
- ➔ **Personalisation:** Blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong
- ➔ **'Should's and 'Must's':** Creating unrealistic expectations and stress for yourself by believing "I should..." or "I must..."

When you can identify these thinking styles, challenge these negative thoughts. Try to ask yourself if there is an alternative positive way to see the event instead.

Think about the positive things

Try doing the Three-Good-Things exercise. Each night before you go to sleep, think about three things that went well that day and write them down. It does not have to be anything big or important. It can be about something mundane such as seeing a beautiful sunset or having nice food for dinner. Spend some time reflecting on each of the good things. This exercise can help you direct your attention to the positive things in your day and away from the negative events.



Relaxation Techniques

Here are some relaxation techniques you may find helpful in dealing with stress. Try out these activities and practice them once a day.

Deep breathing

Improper breathing techniques may lead to an imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in your body, contributing to anxiety, panic attacks, depression, fatigue and muscle tension. Try these deep breathing techniques once a day for 15 minutes:

- Step 1:** Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Step 2:** Close your eyes and place one hand on your stomach.
- Step 3:** Take a deep breath through your nose and feel your stomach rise up slowly.
- Step 4:** Let yourself pause for about 3 seconds.
- Step 5:** Slowly breathe out gently through your mouth, making a quiet whooshing sound like the wind.
- Step 6:** Focus on your breathing and feel the air moving in and out of your body.
- Step 7:** Repeat this several times until you feel relaxed.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress and anxiety. Progressive muscle relaxation can help you recognize the difference between tension and relaxation in each of the major muscle groups, and help to bring your muscles to a deeper state of relaxation.



Step 1: Sit on a comfortable chair with both feet flat on the ground.

Step 2: Gently close your eyes.

Step 3: Breathe in slowly, steadily and deeply.

Step 4: With the rest of your body relaxed, clench your fists and bend them back at the wrist. Feel the tension in your **forearms** for a few seconds, and then relax. Notice the looseness in your forearms and how different it feels compared to the tension.

Step 5: Repeat this step with the other muscle groups in the following sequence. At each step, continue to breath slowly and deeply, and notice how different your body feels every time you let go of the tension.

- a. **Upper arms:** Bring your forearms up to your shoulder to “make a muscle”.
- b. **Forehead:** Raise your eyebrows as high as they can go.
- c. **Eyes:** Squeeze your eyes closed tightly.
- d. **Mouth and jaw:** Open your mouth wide.
- e. **Tongue:** Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth.
- f. **Lips:** Purse your lips into an “O”.
- g. **Neck:** Be careful when you tense these sensitive muscles. Pull your head back slowly.
- h. **Shoulders:** Bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
- i. **Back:** Be careful when you tense these muscles. Push your shoulder blades back and lightly arch your back.
- j. **Stomach:** Tighten your stomach muscles and take a deep breath in.
- k. **Buttocks and thighs:** Squeeze your buttock muscles.
- l. **Legs:** Straighten your legs and curl your toes downward.

Visualisation

Negative thoughts can bring about negative feelings, such as frustration and sadness. You can train your body to relax and ignore these thoughts by doing a visualisation exercise. Visualisation requires you to create and focus on positive and calming images involving all your senses of sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste.

1. Find a comfortable position and gently close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths, slowly and steadily.
2. Allow your mind to imagine a pleasant scene or place. For example, you can imagine you are walking down a pathway leading to a pond. There is grass under your feet and the canopy of trees above you providing shade.
3. Feel the cool fresh air in this shady spot. Take a deep breath in slowly and exhale.
4. Notice what you see, smell, hear and feel in this peaceful and quiet place. Imagine the smell of trees and flowers, birds chirping and the cool air under this shade. Take a deep breath in and out.
5. Continue with this visualisation until you feel relaxed.

