

# **Stress management**

**Information for patients  
on the Cardiovascular  
Rehabilitation Programme**

## What is stress?

Stress is the way we feel when we are put under pressure. It happens when we feel we are unable to cope with the demands made upon us. It affects everyone and can change the way we feel, behave and perform.

Stress is a normal part of everyday life. Sometimes it is essential, to keep us stimulated and alert. At other times, it is not appropriate e.g. in traffic jams, noisy neighbours, daily hassles. We feel we can no longer cope with our stress. Too much can make us feel exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

Everyone reacts differently to stress. Situations that might cause one person stress may be seen as a positive challenge by another. The way we react to situations or problems may also differ at different times in our lives.

In order to help keep us feeling 'in control' of our stress, and to help find our individual optimum point, we need to be able to:

- recognise its signs and symptoms (our behaviour, thoughts, energy levels)
- work out what triggers it (work, money problems, relationships, major life events, time pressure, loneliness or isolation)
- find ways of dealing with it (can you change how you respond? Can you make lifestyle changes to help buffer the stress effect?).

## How does stress affect us?

When we are faced with danger or a challenge or we become angry or upset about something, our body automatically starts the 'Fight or Flight' response (that you have learnt about on the programme). It doesn't last long but is designed to help us cope with the stressful situation. During this time, the following changes occur in our bodies:

- we make a chemical called adrenalin
- our blood pressure goes up
- our digestion slows down
- our blood gets ready to clot more easily
- our mouth feels dry
- our pupils get bigger
- our heart rate increases
- we sweat more
- our muscles become more tense
- we breathe more quickly
- our liver releases extra fats and sugars
- our bowel and bladder muscles may become loose.

These changes may have an effect on cardiovascular risk factors.

## Your personal stress management plan

It is often useful to make a personal plan to help you deal with the stress in your life.

- First, keep a diary for a few days to help identify the triggers/causes. Note down how you felt, how you coped, what helped you to cope.
- Consider if there is anything you can do about it.
- Enlist some help.
- Can you say “no” or be more assertive?

Do not try to change too many things all at once. You are much more likely to be successful if you take it step-by-step. Note down any other ideas you have for future attention.

## If the cause of stress does not go away...

...or we are immediately faced with one challenge after another, we may begin to experience other changes over time.

**Thoughts** “I can’t do this”, “I can’t cope”, “This is all pointless”.

**Mood** increased anxiety, depression, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, irritability, nervousness, anger, tearfulness.

**Behaviour** feeling fidgety, eating more (or less), consuming more alcohol and/or coffee and cigarettes, habits (biting nails, tapping feet), withdrawal from social activities.

**Health** muscle aches and pains (especially headaches), stomach upsets, breathing problems, angina, sexual problems, sleep disturbance, raised blood pressure, fatigue, low energy.

Ill health, particularly heart problems, can be a source of stress, which may be made worse by the challenge of trying to make and maintain lifestyle changes, such as a healthier diet and increasing exercise.

Deep relaxation can help undo the harmful effects of long-term stress and has the opposite effect to the 'Fight or Flight' response. This type of relaxation is a skill that needs to be practised regularly. If it is used in this way it can help to:

- lower your blood pressure
- decrease your heart rate
- decrease your blood cholesterol
- widen your blood vessels
- reduce the amount of pain you feel
- improve your sleep
- reduce your feelings of tiredness
- improve your self-confidence
- improve your performance and personal relationships
- reduce anxiety and help you to manage stress
- improve energy levels
- decrease muscle tension
- decrease oxygen consumption.

## What can I do about stress?

Don't worry or panic if you think that you are suffering from stress. There are many ways you can prevent stress becoming a major burden on your health:

**Think positively.** Congratulate yourself on what you do well and don't dwell on the negative. Ask for help when you need it. Try to think 'I can cope' rather than 'this is awful'. Keep smiling.

**Relax.** Use the 'Emergency Stop' technique taught in the Cardiovascular Rehabilitation Programme as a quick fix solution. Find time as often as you can to incorporate a 15–20 minute session using a technique which suits you personally (a CD, some form of visualisation, deep breathing, muscle relaxation etc). Consider taking up yoga, having a massage, or using meditation or mindfulness techniques.

**Exercise** regularly to help you feel better faster. It allows you to 'let off steam' and get rid of stress symptoms from your body. It can lift your mood, help you sleep better, and give you more energy.

**Plan.** Sort out problems one at a time and place in order of importance. Take control and set yourself achievable realistic goals. Prioritise your activities.

**Talk about your difficulties** with friends and family. If more appropriate, talk to a professional counsellor (ask your cardiovascular rehab team for more details). Don't isolate yourself. Become involved with others who can support you, such as your local Cardiac Support Group.

**Create ‘stress buffer’ activities** you enjoy doing which help take your mind off your worries (listening to music, having a relaxing bath, hobbies). Eat healthily.

### **How will this help?**

- You can protect yourself from health problems linked with stress.
- You can become more efficient at getting things done.
- You’ll have time to do things you enjoy.
- You’ll have improved relationships with family and friends etc.
- You will feel better physically and emotionally.

## **YOU ARE BACK IN CONTROL**

### **Contact us**

If you have any questions about stress management, please contact **Occupational Therapy**,

**t: 020 7188 4180** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am-4.30pm)

or the **Cardiovascular Rehabilitation Team**,

**t: 020 7188 0946** (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit

**w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## **Pharmacy Medicines Helpline**

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

## **Your comments and concerns**

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS)      **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

**e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

## **Language and accessible support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.

**t:** 020 7188 8815      **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

## **NHS 111**

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

## **NHS website**

Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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