

WELLBEING GUIDE

to reducing stress



Stress

What is stress?

Stress is normal

Stress is a physiological response to a perceived unmanageable demand or threat. When you sense danger – regardless of whether it is imagined or real – the body responds.

Stress is very common, it can motivate us to change or achieve things, but too much stress can affect us negatively.

Experiencing a lot of stress over a period of time can lead to a feeling of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

Stress

Stress can cause many different symptoms. It might affect how you feel physically, mentally and how you behave:

- ✓ being irritable and snappy
- ✓ sleeping too much or too little
- ✓ eating too much or too little
- ✓ avoiding certain places or people
- ✓ drinking or smoking more
- ✓ difficulty concentrating
- ✓ struggling to make decisions
- ✓ feeling overwhelmed
- ✓ constantly worrying
- ✓ being forgetful
- ✓ headaches or dizziness
- ✓ muscle tension or pain
- ✓ stomach problems
- ✓ chest pain or faster heartbeat
- ✓ sexual problems

Stress acts as an accelerator: it can push you either forward or backward, but you choose which direction.

Signs and symptoms of excessive stress

- ✓ Changes in normal eating patterns: excessive eating or eating less than normal
- ✓ Drinking or smoking more than usual
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Feeling anxious or scared most of the time
- ✓ Having trouble sleeping
- ✓ Feeling tired all the time
- ✓ Unmotivated
- ✓ Low self-confidence
- ✓ Racing heart
- ✓ Difficulty concentrating
- ✓ Withdrawing from social life

Strategies for Managing Stress

- ✓ **SELF-CARE** – eat regularly and healthily, maintain good sleeping habits, say 'no' to things if you need to. Taking care of ourselves reduces our vulnerability to stress.
 - ✓ **BE STUDY WISE** – scheduling in periods of 'rest' time is key to studying effectively and contributes to productivity. Making mistakes is part of learning – learn from them. Perfectionism is a cause of mental distress.
 - ✓ **SOCIAL NETWORK** – talk to family or friends who are good at listening, understanding and help to ease your stress levels. A problem shared is a problem halved.
 - ✓ **JOURNALING** – the process of writing externalises our thoughts and feelings and helps us to make sense of them. This reduces stress and helps us problem-solve things within our control and let go of those that are not.
 - ✓ **RELAXATION TECHNIQUES** – try paced breathing (the 7/11 technique: breathe in for 7 seconds, out for 11 seconds), listening to calming music, visualisation exercises and progressive muscular relaxation. Try the Calm app: [calm.com](https://www.calm.com)
 - ✓ **MINDFULNESS** – this has a big evidence base for reducing stress, anxiety, and depression. Try the Headspace app: [headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)
 - ✓ **DIGITAL DETOX** – take time out from social media – focus on physical social interaction and connect with 'the real world' and where possible go out into nature.
 - ✓ **SPREAD OUT TASKS** – rather than trying to do everything at once
 - ✓ **IF YOU ARE FEELING OVERWHELMED** – take a break. Regular rest is good to help reduce stress.
 - ✓ **TALK TO SOMEONE** – friends, family, Academic Tutor, helplines, or Student Support Services.
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Top tips

- ✓ Split up big tasks into smaller, more manageable tasks
- ✓ Challenge unhelpful thoughts
- ✓ Allow yourself some positivity – make a list of things to feel good about or that you are thankful for
- ✓ Be more active
- ✓ Plan ahead – a to-do list and prioritising correctly can reduce pressure at key times during the year

What are you going to try to reduce unhealthy stress?

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Further help and support

If you try these strategies but find your stress prolonged and your symptoms severe or difficult to control, please seek help.

- **NHS stress control workshop (quote 'stress control' over the phone)**
 - talkingtherapies.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk
 - 0300 365 2000
- **University Medical Practice**
 - readinguniversitymedicalpractice.nhs.uk
 - 0118 987 4551
- **University Counselling and Wellbeing Service**
 - reading.ac.uk/essentials/support-and-wellbeing/counselling-and-wellbeing
 - 0118 378 4216
- **University Student Welfare Service**
 - reading.ac.uk/essentials/support-and-wellbeing/support-arrangements/welfare
 - 0118 378 4777
- **Study Advice**
 - reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice/lib-study-advice.aspx
- **The Samaritans**
 - samaritans.org
 - 116 123
- **Chaplaincy mindfulness course**
 - chaplaincy@reading.ac.uk
 - 0118 378 8797
- **Calm app**
 - calm.com
- **Headspace app**
 - headspace.com
- **Life Tools**
 - reading.ac.uk/life-tools
- **Every Mind Matters**
 - nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters