



# talking about stress



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This booklet reflects many discussions, suggestions and comments made by health professionals, professional bodies, lay and voluntary organisations, people with stress and their friends and family.

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All the quotes in this booklet are from real people.

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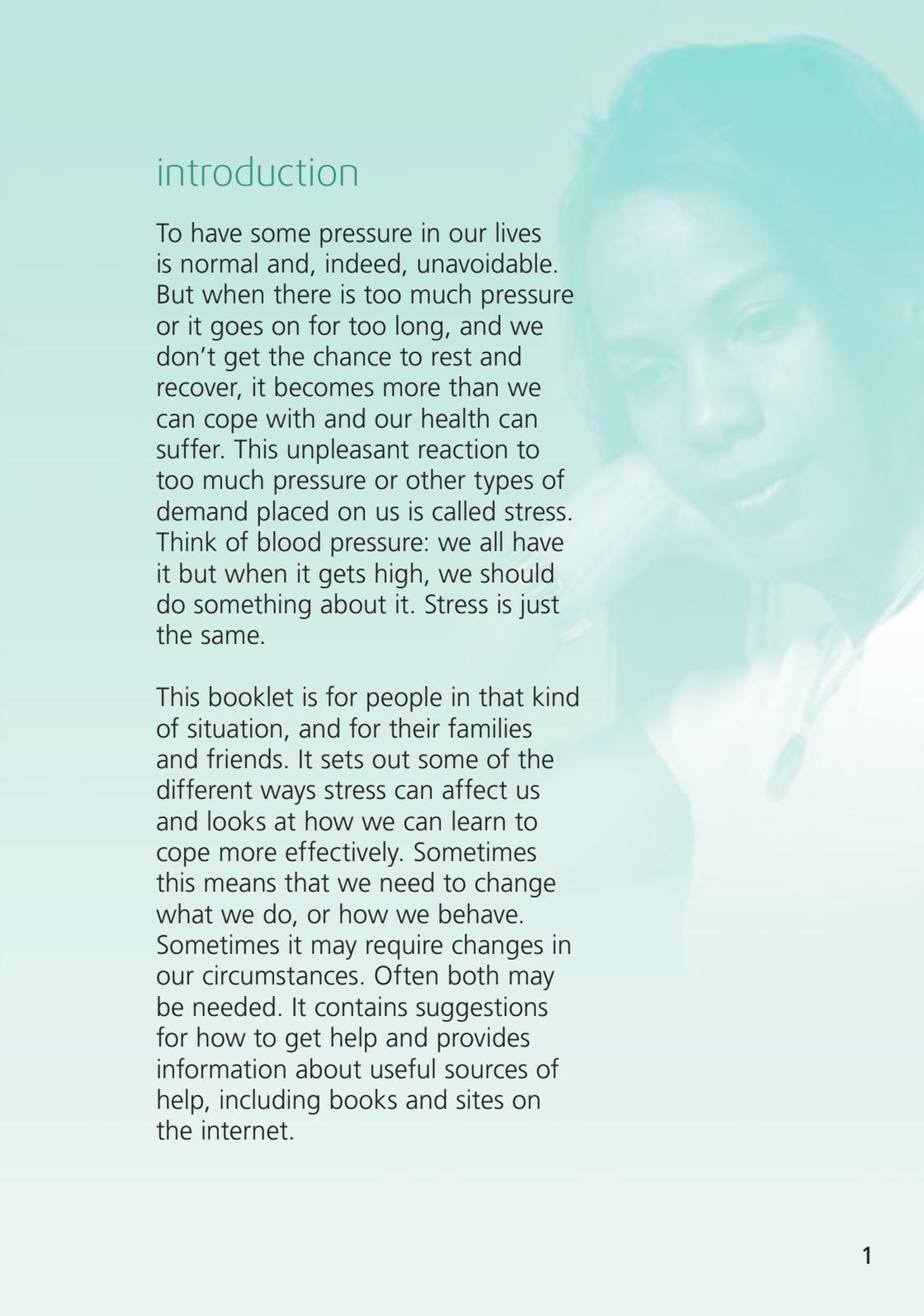
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## introduction

To have some pressure in our lives is normal and, indeed, unavoidable. But when there is too much pressure or it goes on for too long, and we don't get the chance to rest and recover, it becomes more than we can cope with and our health can suffer. This unpleasant reaction to too much pressure or other types of demand placed on us is called stress. Think of blood pressure: we all have it but when it gets high, we should do something about it. Stress is just the same.

This booklet is for people in that kind of situation, and for their families and friends. It sets out some of the different ways stress can affect us and looks at how we can learn to cope more effectively. Sometimes this means that we need to change what we do, or how we behave. Sometimes it may require changes in our circumstances. Often both may be needed. It contains suggestions for how to get help and provides information about useful sources of help, including books and sites on the internet.

## what is stress?

When we find ourselves under some kind of pressure, our bodies respond automatically by releasing adrenaline to ensure we are prepared for action and able to meet the challenge before us:

- our muscles become tense
- our breathing becomes faster and shallower in an effort to get more air into the body, so we may feel breathless
- our heart races, pumping faster
- we feel like we want to run, yet our legs might turn to jelly
- our mind is racing and we may feel dizzy and lightheaded
- we have difficulty swallowing
- we may feel sick or have a lack of appetite
- we shiver or sweat more than usual.

This automatic reaction to a threatening situation is known as the 'fight or flight' response. The body produces hormones, including one called adrenaline, which help prepare our bodies either to run away or to be poised and ready to react. These changes are short-lived and reduce when the pressure or threat stops, but they are useful in helping us achieve our goals. The body's response helps us to cope with pressure by sharpening our mental and physical skills and focusing our attention.

Too much pressure, on the other hand, makes us less productive and often results in health problems. So an acceptable amount of pressure can make us feel good and too much can make us feel vulnerable and out of control.

Stress affects people of all ages and from all walks of life. Three quarters of people surveyed in government campaign research admit to experiencing stress, but only a quarter feel happy talking about it.

We tend to think that stress comes from being too busy and pressured, but it can be just as difficult to cope when we are in a situation where we do not have enough to do. Being unemployed or in an unfulfilling job, for example, can make us feel frustrated and stressed.

Some people learn to live with stress and use it positively, while others find it impossible to switch off and struggle to cope.

Although our bodies react to excessive mental pressure, it is not a physical problem. However, it can make us more prone to illness. It can also affect our immune systems so that we can take longer to recover from illness. However, it is important not to get the physical effects of stress out of perspective. Given all the risk factors for heart attacks, for example, stress is a comparatively minor risk factor. To cope with stress many people eat more fatty foods, drink alcohol and smoke, all of which are linked with an increase in heart disease. People may also use drugs. These may seem helpful in the short term but in the long run further undermine wellbeing.

Prolonged stress can be very debilitating and can make us feel like we are unable to take control of our own lives and make our own choices. We may find it increasingly difficult to cope with even the simplest tasks without getting tense and uptight.

Stress affects us in different ways, including:

- How we think. For example:
  - we worry too much about things that we know do not merit such worry
  - we find it hard to concentrate
  - we have difficulty in making decisions.
- How we feel. For example:
  - we feel worthless, hopeless and depressed at the prospect of never getting on top of things or finishing anything
  - we have difficulty relaxing
  - we constantly expect the worst to happen.
- How we behave. For example:
  - we are constantly tired and on edge, and irritable with those around us
  - minor interruptions, delays or frustrations can make us irritated, distressed or angry, so that we become very emotional at the slightest upset
  - we lose interest in food or overeat
  - we smoke or drink too much, or use drugs.

'I was so much on edge all the time, constantly in a foul mood with the children. It was as if I was angry with the whole world, and I took everything personally.'

- How our body reacts. For example:
  - we have panic attacks
  - our usual sleep patterns become disturbed, so that we find it hard to fall asleep, or need much more sleep
  - we suffer from physical health problems like headaches, indigestion or a sore back
  - we lose our sex drive.

## understanding stress

Stress can turn our lives upside down. It can affect our feelings, our thoughts, our actions and our actual body processes.

We can feel anxious, frightened, sad, depressed, guilty, alienated, dissatisfied and disappointed with ourselves.

We may think about all of the things that might go wrong and consider ourselves to be less lucky than other people. We may also think of ourselves as being failures and have a pessimistic view of life and a low sense of self-worth.

'This one person at work kept picking on me because I was different. At first I was able to shrug it off but it began to wear me down. I was scared to go in each morning knowing what I would face. It ruined my life for a year. I lost all confidence in myself and dreaded talking to other people. Luckily I got help. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't.'

We may avoid places where we think something bad might happen, or get out of other places because they make us tense. We may withdraw from everyday activities because we think it will help protect us. The problem with this is that although it might make us feel better in the short term, in the long term it can make us feel worse as we lose confidence.

Our bodies can be affected too. On some occasions we may feel under the weather and edgy all the time, or we may be lethargic. At other times we may experience heart palpitations or headaches.

If we look at our lives, we may be able to identify particular areas which can cause stress. These may include:

- relationship problems – with a spouse or partner, children, parents, friends, colleagues or neighbours
- money worries
- coping with unemployment or redundancy
- problems at work – changes to the job, an excessive workload, anxiety about a promotion or job security
- worries about personal health or the health of those close to us
- poor housing
- poor education
- feeling isolated or lonely, lacking support
- being abused or harassed

- being discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender, race or ethnic origin
- lacking control over our lives
- environmental factors like pollution, extreme temperatures or noise.

Some of these things we cannot foresee. They happen to us out of the blue. Others are unavoidable events or changes over which we have little control, although we may feel that we are in some way to blame and have brought this on ourselves. We may also fall into the trap of feeling that we should be able to cope, no matter what has happened.

As well as the demands made on us by other people, each of us makes demands on ourselves. We may aim to achieve certain things, whether at work, at home or in our personal lives. We have expectations of what we should be able to do. If we find that we cannot meet the standards we have set ourselves, we may put ourselves under pressure to do better. That can produce an enormous amount of stress, despite the fact that our expectations may have been unrealistic in the first place or that we have been prevented from meeting them by factors beyond our control.

'I was so determined to get a promotion that it took over my life. I worked flat out until I was exhausted, but kept myself going and eventually ended up drinking on the sly. At the end of it all, I didn't get the job. Looking back on it, I'm glad in a way, because I wasn't in a fit state to cope with it. I needed to get a grip of things again.'

Some people become more vulnerable to stress after a traumatic experience. Perhaps they have been bereaved, have been the victim of a serious crime or have suddenly become unemployed. As time passes they may find it difficult to recover, to get back on top of things, and instead feel constantly overwhelmed.

'We had been living in that flat for years. It was damp and there just wasn't enough room as the kids grew bigger. Then, all within a few months, my mother was taken seriously ill and I had my hours at work cut back. It just got all too much. I didn't know which way to turn.'

It is often a gradual build-up of stress from various different sources that can take us to breaking point, rather than one obvious trigger.

There are steps that we can take to help us handle situations differently, so that we are less likely to feel stressed. These are outlined later. It is important to remember, however, that it is not necessarily our fault that we are reacting in this way. We may

find ourselves in intolerable situations, and we may have to make changes in our lives to make them more bearable.

## what you can do

Stress can make it hard for us to cope with day-to-day demands. We become more and more exhausted, tense and irritable. Other people find it hard to be with us, and even the closest relationships can become fraught. The whole experience can make us feel we are losing control over our lives and that there is no way of regaining that control.

We may feel we have to give ourselves a kick to get over the stress we feel, but that kind of self-punishment can be destructive and can cause our self-confidence and self-esteem to diminish. When that happens, we lose confidence in ourselves, start to withdraw and avoid doing things. We become more isolated which leads to depression and further isolation. It becomes a vicious circle.

Instead of creating such a self-destructive spiral, we can learn to accept that there are very real reasons for us to be stressed. It is natural, for example, to be affected by the death of someone close. 'Normal' people are affected by such stressful situations.

So by accepting that there are reasons for our stress, we can then take steps to help us reduce the effects and to learn to cope with it.

What works for each of us may be different, but these are some things that may help:

- Work out what it is that is making you feel stressed and what you can do about it. There may be some things that you cannot change, or not immediately, but there may be others that you can alter. For instance, if you feel overwhelmed by the amount of work that you have to do, then try to address this by seeking advice or help from a colleague or supervisor.

- Relieving stress is about how you handle it. Relaxation is an important factor in releasing tense muscles and clearing and calming the mind. Relaxation of muscles through massage can also be beneficial. Deep breathing exercises can play a part in relieving stress too. You can find out more about relaxation techniques from your doctor or counsellor, or from the organisations listed at the back of this leaflet. Your local library may be able to supply you with books or tapes.
- Allow yourself a breathing space. Treat yourself to something you enjoy.
- Being active can boost your mood, self-esteem and body image, improve sleep and reduce reactions to stress. Exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety and treat depression. If you have any concerns about your health, or any illness or injury, speak to your doctor or practice nurse before becoming more active.
- Try to eat and drink sensibly. Alcohol, drugs and cigarettes are not solutions to stress. We only find ourselves needing more and more to cope.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, not only in coffee and tea but also in fizzy drinks and high-energy drinks. Some cold remedies and headache tablets have a lot of caffeine in them, which can add up when taken throughout the day.
- Try to make sure that you get a good night's sleep. Have a regular bedtime routine and try to get up at the same time every day. Avoid heavy meals in the few hours before you go to bed and don't drink a lot of alcohol – it may help you fall asleep, but you may

wake up during the night. Make sure that your bed and bedroom are comfortable – not too hot, not too cold, not too noisy.

- Find someone you can talk to and use their support to talk through your feelings. Not everyone finds this easy. But it may be a surprise to discover that others are feeling the same way as you.
- If you're not the sort of person that finds it easy to talk about your feelings, try taking up a sport or a hobby along with other people. It can prove to be a good form of relaxation and distraction.
- Try to pace yourself and tackle one thing at a time. Be realistic about what you expect of yourself. Learn to say 'no' to other people, some of the time at least. Set aside time for yourself to do what you enjoy.
- Some people find spiritual practice helps either in the context of organised religion, or in something less structured, such as meditation. In a group setting, it can provide the additional benefit of social support.

'It was a real effort at first to put that time aside each week, and get out of the house for an hour. But I soon came to look on it as a life saver. That was my space and I guarded it fiercely!'

## self help

A self-help approach can be an important part of treating stress, and self-help books can help us find out important information about it, and how it affects us. They can also help us learn new skills to help us challenge worrying thoughts, and to help us learn ways of building confidence and facing up to fears.

'It's been a lifesaver for me coming here. The others gave me lots of reassurance. They were very patient. I felt better just because I was able to talk about things openly.'

It can also be very helpful to learn some relaxation techniques. There are relaxation tapes available, we can learn skills through a self-help organisation, or we can download or listen to relaxation resources on the internet. In addition, many people find it helpful to attend a self-help group, which can provide mutual support and important information.

Self-help groups can provide a lot of moral support and encouragement. They may also offer advice and training in relaxation and information on complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, acupuncture and homeopathy.

## getting help from others

We may find that what we can do on our own is not enough, but sometimes it can be difficult to accept help too. It can be hard for us to be open about our fears and anxieties, but it can also be an enormous relief to stop putting on a brave face and to find that other people can help us overcome our problems.

A lot can be gained from meeting other people with similar experiences. It can be valuable to find out we are not alone and to learn how others cope or have coped with similar sorts of difficulties. The encouragement and support from other people who understand what we are going through can be helpful.

There are different sources of support available, each offering a different kind of help. It is worth contacting one of the organisations listed on pages 22 to 24 to find out what is available locally.

In many cases, there are social factors behind stress and we may find that the local social work department or housing office might be useful in helping with stress. But life can be difficult, whatever the social circumstances. People without work problems or financial difficulties can be just as susceptible to stress as everyone else.

'I learned a lot by coming to the group sessions, but the most powerful thing was that I realised that it wasn't just me who felt this way. Here was a bunch of other people who were in the same boat, but who were also finding ways of getting to grips with things again.'

## counselling and psychotherapy

It can be valuable to have an opportunity to talk things over with someone outside your immediate circle of family and friends. Counselling and psychotherapy give people the chance to talk through their problems. Both focus on present day feelings and difficulties, which may be current or rooted in the past, and enable us to take more control of our life and to cope in the longer term. Waiting lists can be long, which is a sign of how many people are seeking help, but it is worth being patient.

There are many types of treatments that are termed 'therapy' and it is important to make a distinction between them. There are relaxing therapies like aromatherapy and reflexology, which help cope with the problem without actually addressing the causes. There are also psychotherapies that support people and help them address the causes themselves, and provide a long-term solution. Apart from finding which approach suits us best, we also need to find a counsellor or therapist we feel that we can trust.

Some employers provide employee assistance schemes, where staff can have access to the services of a trained counsellor. This counselling should be entirely confidential and independent from the employer.

## medical treatment

A large proportion of visits to the doctor are stress-related, but many more people do not seek medical help and struggle to deal with it on their own. It may be that they do not realise they have a problem. Some people are embarrassed to admit they are experiencing stress. Others may not be ready to ask for help, or may not believe that the doctor or health practitioner will understand or even know how to deal with the problem.

Some people will turn to their doctor when they experience the first signs of stress. It is important to have a check-up to rule out the possibility of physical illness.

You may also want to talk about alternatives to drug treatment, such as counselling, psychotherapy or self-help. Your doctor or practice nurse may be able to put you in touch with these other sources of help, including stress management groups in the area.

A prescription of anti-anxiety medication may be made (for example benzodiazepines, which are tranquillisers). They can offer some relief and can be helpful in the short term to get through a crisis. Regular use of these drugs may lead to dependence and is likely to result in the return of fear or panic symptoms when discontinued. As a result, they are generally only prescribed for a short period of time. Tranquillisers are now rarely used and few are recommended for more than one month.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, your doctor may also prescribe sleeping tablets, again for a short time.

A number of medications originally approved for treating depression are thought to be effective at reducing worry and panic and you may therefore be prescribed these. Most antidepressants take two to four weeks before they have any effect on our mood, so it is important not to give up too quickly if we do not feel better straight away.

Antidepressants should be taken as prescribed. Some patients experience mild symptoms when stopping, reducing or missing the dose. These can include dizziness, nausea, anxiety and headaches. The drugs, however, are not associated with tolerance and craving. Antidepressants should be taken for at least six months after symptoms have disappeared, because this greatly reduces the risk of the symptoms coming back. It is important to then go back to your doctor to find out if you need to continue with treatment. Some people may be advised to continue treatment for longer than six months.

It is important that you get your doctor to explain the treatment offered. You will also receive an information sheet with the tablets prescribed from your pharmacist.

## working with others

In some situations, we may not be the only ones affected by stress. Others may be exposed to the same sets of pressures and it may be helpful to act together to begin to get things improved. It is worth speaking about our concerns with other people around us to see if they feel the same.

For example, we can agree to act together with work colleagues, perhaps through a trade union, to bring pressing concerns at work to the attention of the management. For legal reasons, employers must make their workforce aware of the signs, symptoms and dangers of stress, as well as actions and techniques for combating and minimising it.

In the case of a housing problem that is causing stress, we might be able to get together as a residents' group or tenants' group to push for necessary changes or improvements. Acting together like this means we are more likely to succeed than if we act by ourselves.

Whether we are seeking help on an individual basis or as part of a group, there are various sources of information and advice which can help.

These include:

- the Citizens Advice Bureau, which gives advice on a range of practical and legal matters
- credit unions, which can help with financial affairs
- the Consumer Credit Counselling Service, which can help sort out credit problems
- tenants' associations or community associations, which can help with housing problems
- trade unions or professional associations, which can help with work-related issues.

## looking ahead

It is not easy to overcome the effects of stress when it is persistent or intense. Our confidence may be seriously shaken and may take time to rebuild. It may not be possible

'I do still find myself on the verge of getting really stressed from time to time. The difference now is that I have a much better idea of how to handle it. To me that is the key, otherwise I'd simply have to spend a lot of life hiding away from things.'

to remove or overcome completely whatever has caused the stress, but there are various steps we can take to get help from others and to equip ourselves better to cope.

By thinking about the situations you find stressful, you may be able to deal with them better in future. Learning techniques to help you to relax can be beneficial in avoiding the build-up of tension.

There may be times when you hit setbacks, perhaps if something unexpected or more difficult crops up. It needs patience to carry on and not be discouraged but, if you do, you will gradually feel more confident.

A key element of change is challenging your fears and tackling any avoidance that may cause stress. Facing up to stress is really important. It takes courage, but with a clear plan and a step-by-step approach, you can succeed.

## the role of partners, family and friends

We can help by being patient and understanding, by listening to the person and encouraging them to talk about what is making them feel stressed, and by asking what we can do to support that person.

Stress can put an enormous strain on even the strongest relationships. It affects how someone behaves and how he or she gets on with other people. As far as possible, try to accept that their anxiety is a real problem and look for ways to show how much you still care and are there for them when they need you. This can be very reassuring at a time when they feel frightened of being unable to meet the demands made of them.

Instead of trying hard not to think about their worries, those with feelings of anxiety should be encouraged to try to learn new ways of challenging and re-balancing their worrying thoughts. For instance, a new job interview can be seen either as a test of your worth as a human being, or an opportunity to learn more about the job and to acquire interview skills. If you can help someone to see their life more as a learning experience than as success or failure, this can help them to deal with stress. Failure can be a state of mind, not a reality. Stressed people tend to think in black and white, and you can help them to see things differently. Providing practical support and encouragement is important.

Encourage the person to talk about how they feel and ask what you can do to support them. Let them set the pace but encourage them to make more changes at a realistic rate. They may need you to help in practical ways with everyday chores, but it is important that you don't take over. As your partner, friend or relative gets their confidence back and becomes less anxious, they can gradually pick up their responsibilities again, and it is important that you do not act to overly protect them by taking over all their responsibilities.

Someone who is stressed may need some prompting and support to seek help. You can assist by finding out about local support groups or relaxation classes. The organisations listed on pages 22 to 24 can help with this. You could also go with your friend or relative to a group or to a doctor's appointment. One thing to watch out for is offering too much reassurance and support.

It is not easy being close to someone who is stressed and tense a lot of the time. It can be upsetting to see them in such a state and feel you are helpless to change things. It can also be exhausting and draining. You may feel guilty that you are in some way contributing to their situation. You may feel angry at the impact their moods and behaviour have on your own life.

It is important that you look after yourself and consider your own needs too – make time to do the things you enjoy. Find an outlet for your feelings, so that you have someone to talk to about your concerns. After all, if you can take care of yourself, you will have more patience and energy to help your partner, friend or relative.

If you are doing a lot to help out practically, you may feel resentful and become increasingly worn out by the burden of it. If you are concerned about your own mental health, please discuss this with your doctor or healthcare practitioner who can advise you how best to seek help.

Find an outlet for your feelings, someone you can talk to about your concerns. It might be your doctor, a close friend or another member of a support group for people in situations like your own. After all, if you take care of yourself, you will feel more confident in helping your friend or relative.

## useful addresses

The national organisations listed below can put you in touch with local sources of help in your area.

### **The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)**

Tel: 08457 38 37 36  
National helpline: 08457 47 47 47  
(Mon–Fri: 8 am–8 pm,  
Sat: 9 am–1 pm)  
[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

ACAS provides confidential help on all employment matters. For courses relating to stress in the workplace write to the address above.

### **Breathing Space**

Tel: 0800 83 85 87  
(Mon–Thu: 6 pm–2 am,  
Fri 6 pm–Mon 6 am)  
[www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk](http://www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk)

Breathing Space is a free, confidential phonenumber you can call when you are feeling down. Advisors will listen, and try to help prevent problems getting worse, offer advice and suggest local people who can help with specific problems.

### **The International Stress Management Association UK**

PO Box 108  
Caldicot  
Monmouthshire NP26 9AP  
Tel: 0845 680 7083  
[www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk)

ISMA is a charity that promotes wellbeing and stress prevention.

### **Mental Health Foundation**

For general information on mental health as well as specific information on stress at work.  
[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

### **NHS24**

Headquarters  
Caledonia House  
Fifty Pitches Road  
Cardonald Park  
Glasgow G51 4ED  
Tel: 08454 24 24 24  
[www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com)

NHS 24 is a 24-hour health service for Scotland.

### **The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives**

This Centre provides the tools – information, advice and other services – to help create healthier and more productive workplaces.  
Tel: 0800 019 2211  
[www.healthyworkinglives.com](http://www.healthyworkinglives.com)

## **Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)**

Brunswick House  
51 Wilson Street  
Glasgow G1 1UZ  
Tel: 0141 530 1000  
Email: [info@samh.org.uk](mailto:info@samh.org.uk)  
[www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)

The Scottish Association for Mental Health provides community-based services for people with mental health problems as well as a mental health information service.

## useful websites

### **[www.cccs.co.uk](http://www.cccs.co.uk)**

Consumer Credit Counselling Service (CCCS) is a charity dedicated to providing confidential, free counselling and debt advice to financially distressed families and individuals.

### **[www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)**

STEPS – the NHS primary care mental health team in South East Glasgow.

### **[www.stepsforstress.org](http://www.stepsforstress.org)**

This website covers practical ways to deal with stress.

### **[www.livinglifetothefull.com](http://www.livinglifetothefull.com)**

Living Life to the Full is an online self-help life skills course.

## suggestions for reading

There are many publications about stress and your doctor or local library will be able to suggest some to you. Here are a few that might help.

### **The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress**

by Jeff Davidson

Published by Alpha Books, 1999.

### **How to Cope with Stress**

by Peter Tyrer

Published by Sheldon Press, 2003.

### **How to Cope Successfully with Stress**

by Anna Rushton.

Published by Wellhouse Publishing Ltd, 2004.

### **The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook**

by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay.

Published by New Harbinger Publications, 2000.

**The Stress Workbook  
(Overcoming Common  
Problems)**

by Joanna Gutmann.  
Published by Sheldon  
Press, 1998.

**Understanding Stress**

by Greg Wilkinson  
Published by Family Doctor  
Publications, 2000.

Other topics covered by the *Talking about...* series are:

- Anxiety disorders
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Bereavement
- Bipolar affective disorder
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Panic attacks
- Personality disorders
- Phobias
- Postnatal depression
- Schizophrenia
- Self harm

These publications are available online at [www.healthscotland.com/publications](http://www.healthscotland.com/publications) or telephone 0131 536 5500 with any queries.

**Disclaimer**

Every effort has been made to ensure that this publication is as up-to-date and accurate as possible. However, new research can sometimes mean that information and recommendations change very quickly. Changes and alterations will be made at the next reprint to reflect any new information.

While the booklet represents the consensus of good practice, please remember that different circumstances and clinical judgement may mean that you have slightly different experiences.

If you have any doubts, worries or fears, then do not hesitate to contact your doctor for reassurance and further explanations.





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