



Mental Health
Ireland

Stress

*A Pocket Guide on
How to Understand
and Manage Stress*

Mental Health Ireland is a national voluntary organisation whose mission is to educate, empower and connect communities.

OUR VISION

Mental Health Ireland's vision is for an Ireland where mental health is understood, valued, and supported as an essential part of everyone's health. Mental Health Ireland will lead the way in creating a culture where everyone is treated with respect and supported, especially when our mental health is challenged.

Many different people's perspectives and voices supported the creation of this booklet through a process of coproduction. Coproduction is a strengths-based process that looks to incorporate the end user as an equal participant from the very beginning and throughout the process, planning, development, delivery and evaluation. We want to thank everyone who participated in this work, and we hope that this booklet provides information, support and guidance.

This is a new coproduced version of our Stress Booklet, some of the information from the original has remained and was sourced from the Mental Health Foundation.

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Welcome to our coproduced guide on stress, part of a series of booklets by Mental Health Ireland. These booklets use simple, easy-to-understand language to support your wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

Stress is a natural response to life events, and it can affect everybody. Stress can sometimes help motivate us to meet deadlines, and it helps us get through adverse events. However, when stress goes on for too long, it can affect our wellbeing.

In this booklet, we aim to help you understand what stress is, what causes it, signs of stress, how it affects your body and behaviour, and offer helpful ways to manage stress more effectively.



What is Stress?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stress as follows:



“Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone experiences stress to some degree. The way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our overall wellbeing.”

(WHO, 2023)

Understanding Stress

Stress can sometimes be helpful. It can be motivational and help us to meet deadlines, focus on the task in front of us, step outside our comfort zone and face our fears.

Short-term stress happens when we deal with situations that require our attention and focus. It can make us feel worried, but **it does not last long**. Examples include driving tests, job interviews, medical appointments, or emergencies.

However, when many stressful situations build up over time, our body and mind can get **overloaded**. This kind of ongoing stress needs to be managed carefully because it can make us feel physically and emotionally exhausted and may lead to burnout.



WHAT IS THE STRESS RESPONSE?

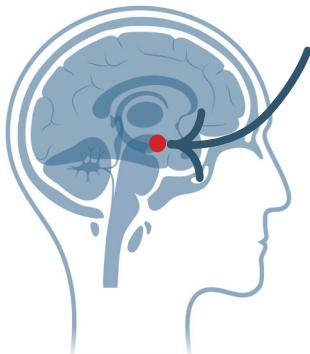
The stress response is also known as the **fight-or-flight response**. It prepares us to deal with physical threats and emergencies by stimulating the release of hormones that prepare the body to either stay and fight or take flight.



The stress response can help us handle short-term challenges and can be useful in a crisis. However, the part of the brain that deals with this does not know the difference between a **real threat** or what our brain **thinks is a threat**. So, when faced with everyday pressures, the stress response can become overactive.

Fight-or-flight Response – What happens in your body

The amygdala, a part of the brain that reacts to danger, sends signals that cause the body to release stress hormones like **adrenaline** and **cortisol**. These hormones make the heart beat faster, raise blood pressure, and speed up breathing. The muscles also tense up as the body gets ready for 'fight-or-flight'.



The amygdala

Other physical changes can include being more aware of sights, smells and sounds, changes in digestion, bowel and bladder movements, racing thoughts, sweating, dry mouth, body tension and hyperfocus. You may experience some or all of these during stressful times. **These symptoms can feel very overwhelming if you do not know what is causing them.**

The stress response can be triggered whether the stressful event is happening right now, has happened in the past or might happen in the future.

Even thinking about a stressful situation can stimulate the stress response!



How Stress Affects the Body

SENSES

- Eyes dilate to see better
- Dry mouth

SKIN

- Blushing
- Sweating

LUNGS

- Fast, shallow breathing

STOMACH

- Nausea
- Indigestion

MUSCLES

- Muscle tension as they contract ready for action

HEAD

- Tension
- Headaches

HEART

- Higher blood pressure
- Fast heartbeat (palpitations) as more blood is pumped around the body carrying oxygen and giving energy

GENERAL

- Immune system weakened
- Libido reduced
- Lack of energy
- Reduced concentration

CAUSES OF STRESS

There can be many different causes of stress, also called stressors. These can be physical, emotional, or related to life events, and they can also be influenced by our environment.



Here are some examples of the most common stressors (this is not a complete list).

PHYSICAL

- Acute or chronic pain
- Illness
- Injury or accident
- Disability
- Medical procedure

ENVIRONMENT

- Living conditions
- Climate change
- Social and cultural changes
- Work pressures
- Media or news

PERSONAL LIFE / EMOTIONAL

- Conflicts or arguments
- Financial gain or loss
- Bereavement
- Exams
- Loneliness
- Discrimination
- Illness of a loved one
- Social media
- Family relationship
- Expectations
- Lack of self-esteem / confidence
- Mental health challenge
- Relationship breakdown

LIFE EVENTS

- New experiences
- Travelling
- Retirement
- Moving
- Job promotion / new job / unemployment
- Change affecting your family
- Giving birth

SIGNS OF STRESS

When we experience stress, it can cause a variety of physical and emotional signs, and sometimes our behaviour might change.

PHYSICAL

The hormones that our body produces during the stress response can have many different effects, including:

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in digestive system (diarrhoea, constipation, nausea)
- High blood pressure and/or heart rate
- Difficulty breathing



BEHAVIOURAL

Stress might also cause you to:

- Feel unable to focus
- Find it hard to make decisions
- Worry all the time
- Eat too much or too little
- Use unhelpful coping mechanisms, like smoking, using recreational drugs or drinking more alcohol than usual (check page 19 for signposting information).

EMOTIONAL

If we are stressed, we might feel:

- Overwhelmed
- Unmotivated
- Anxious or nervous
- Worried

Stress can affect self-esteem by reducing our confidence, promoting negative thoughts and feeling unhappy with our appearance. This can make us feel worthless, lead to anxiety and cause us to isolate ourselves.



For a complete list of signs and symptoms, please refer to HSE website or mind.org.uk

Impact of Stress on Mental Health

According to Mental Health Ireland:

“Our capacity to handle stressful situations depends on our level of resilience, which is the ability to cope with difficult life events and bounce back afterwards.

Our resilience can change, and it is influenced by many factors.

For example, when facing a mental health challenge, stress may affect us differently. This is why it is important to develop self-awareness around managing our stress levels.

With the right tools, you can become the expert on yourself!”



HOW CAN I SUPPORT MYSELF?

We can't always change the stressors, but we can change how we manage our stress.

There are ways you can support yourself during stressful times or when you're dealing with a lot of stress and multiple stressors in your life.



In this section we will suggest some strategies and tools that can help manage stress. What works for one person may not work for you, so take your time to try different supports.

Evidence shows that physical activity, meditation and breathwork, spending time with your friends and family and in nature are some of the most effective tools for managing stress.

Support and build your self-worth through positive affirmations, challenge negative thought patterns, focus on self-care, engage in healthy lifestyle habits, and seek support to build resilience and maintain a positive outlook.



If stress is having an impact on your wellbeing or mental health, here are some suggestions to help manage it:

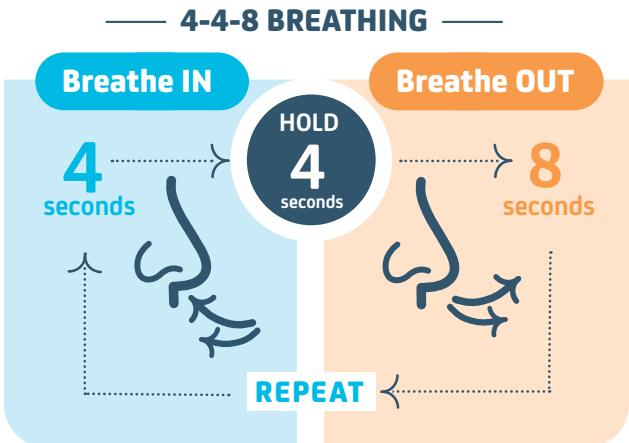


Make an **appointment with your GP** or medical provider to discuss support options.

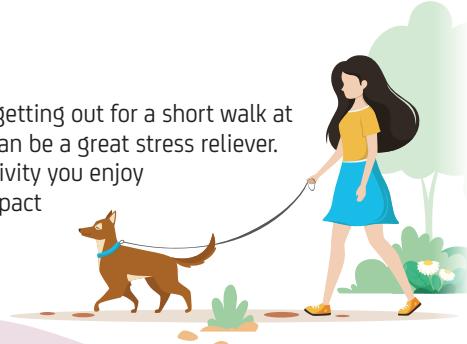
Some **relaxation techniques** can help manage stress, such as yoga, meditation or mindfulness. Some people find deep breathing exercises helpful.



The **4-4-8 breathing exercise** (below) encourages a deeper relaxation. This is when you inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds. Ideally, this should be repeated for a few times. This becomes easier with practice.



Physical exercise: getting out for a short walk at a pace that suits you can be a great stress reliever. Doing any physical activity you enjoy will have a positive impact on your stress levels.



Spending time with **friends and family.**



Maintaining a **healthy diet** using a tool like the food pyramid.



Sleep: There are many things you can put in place to improve your sleep, including having a good sleep routine and reducing screen time.



If your stress is affecting your sleep, breathing exercises and relaxation techniques may help.

Therapy or professional help – accessing a counselling service or talking to your medical provider can offer insight and support for your stress.

For example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or CBT is an evidence-based tool that can support and manage stress by helping to identify the link between how we feel, think and behave which can help change negative thought patterns.



At page 19 you will find organisation names and resources that can provide support.

Listening to music that helps you feel better can have a positive impact on mood, stress and anxiety.



Spending time in nature

is a great way to destress. Just going for a walk in your local park, green area, forest or even a garden can be helpful. Also, in recent times, forest bathing has been identified as having a positive effect on mood and wellbeing.



Forest Bathing is the art of taking time to connect with the forest, absorbing all it has to offer through all the senses - sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.

Journalling is an effective way to manage stress. Writing down thoughts and worries can help with identifying stressors and increase self-awareness.



See what works in helping understand and manage your stress. Take your time, practice, and remember that you are the expert on yourself.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND RESOURCES



Mental Health Ireland Resources Library

Check out the Mental Health Ireland webpage for tools and support.



Scan with your mobile to bring you to the Mental Health Ireland Resources Library.

We provide community and workplace training workshops. For more information visit:

www.mentalhealthireland.ie/training

Local Mental Health Support

GP

If you don't have a GP you can find one in your area here: www2.hse.ie/services/find-a-gp

Mental health services can be accessed through your GP. For an understanding of what these are please check out: www2.hse.ie/mental-health/services-support

Mental Health Support Organisations

Counsellors and Therapists

For a list of registered counsellors in your area, visit:

www.iacp.ie/therapists

Counselling services on mymind.org

Low-cost counselling in-person and online, and in a range of different languages: www.mymind.org

Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy (IAHIP)

IAHIP offers a directory of Accredited Psychotherapists, helping people find high-quality psychotherapy locally or online.

www.iahip.org/Psychotherapist-Directory

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

A list of accredited CBT Therapists can be located here:

www.cbt.ie/find-a-therapist

Samaritans

Samaritans is a free listening service. Call **116 123**.

www.samaritans.org/ireland/samaritans-ireland

Grow

Grow is a peer support service with local groups and offices. Call **1890 474 474** or visit: www.grow.ie

Aware

Aware offers local support groups.

Call **1800 804 848** or visit: www.aware.ie

Community Resources

Finance

Money Advice Bureau – check online for your local office:

www.mabs.ie

CitizensInformation.ie

Check online for your local office: www.citizensinformation.ie

Substance Abuse support, including alcohol

www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/addiction/drugshivhelpline

Stop Smoking help

HSE.ie helpline: **1800 201 203**

Online Resources

Balancing Stress Workshop

www2.hse.ie/mental-health/self-help/balancing-stress

Stress Reduction Programme

www.aware.ie/programmes/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-programme

YourMentalHealth.ie

YourMentalHealth.ie is an online information portal about mental health.

Text About It by spunout

An anonymous text support service offering mental health support. Text **HELLO** to **50808**

'I can Control' worksheet

'I Can Control' is a simple tool to help you focus on the things you can control and let go of the things you can't. Scan the QR code to get the worksheet.



Guided Meditation with Dermot Whelan

Scan the QR code to access it.



Stress Tracker

Tracking your stress will help you identify patterns in your stress and what might be causing you to be stressed.



Scan the QR code to download an A4 version of our Stress Tracker or visit: <https://bit.ly/stress-tracker>

Use the Stress Ruler below and the information in this booklet to guide you.

Stress Ruler



Date / time	Stress level?	What was the situation?	How did it make me feel physically?	How did it make me feel emotionally?	How could I support myself?



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