



Stress



Stress

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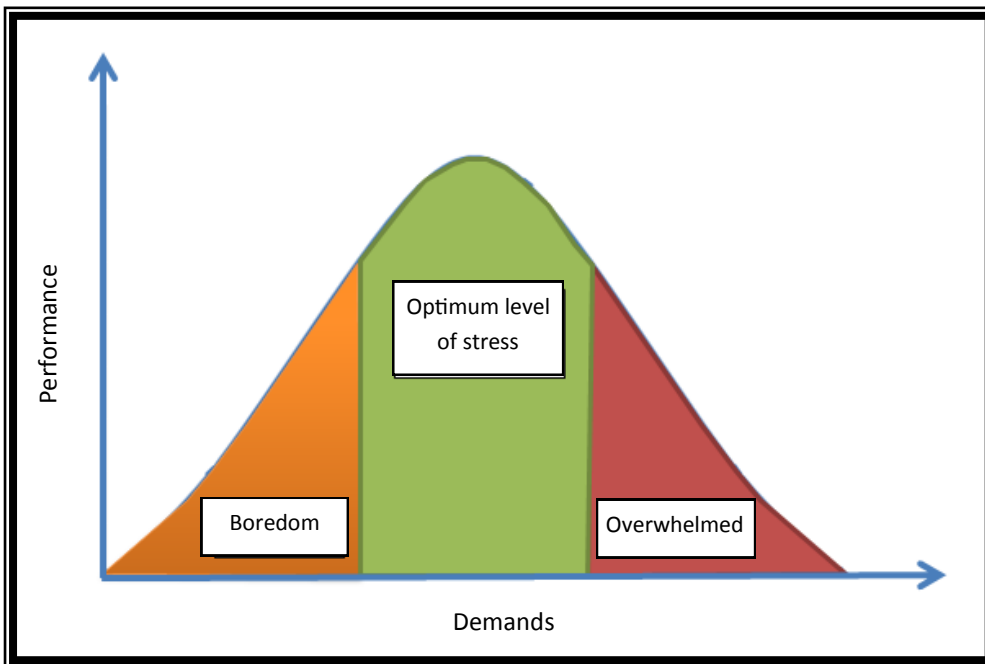
This workbook can be used either alone or with the support of your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner.

TalkPlus has Video modules which have been created to provide you with the help you need with your mental wellbeing at any time or day that suits you. They can help you to understand more about what depression and anxiety are and teach you techniques to manage them, you can access this on our website or by following this link:

www.talkplus.org.uk/talkplus-video-modules

What is stress?

Stress is a normal response that keeps us motivated to meet demands. Too little stress can lead to feeling unmotivated or bored. Too much stress can lead to burn out and anxiety symptoms. We experience unpleasant symptoms of “fight or flight” (explained below) in response to a perceived threat. This can be triggered as a ‘false alarm’ in response to anxious thoughts such as “I can’t cope” or “I don’t have enough time”. This can lead to many unpleasant physical symptoms such as headaches and muscle tension, which



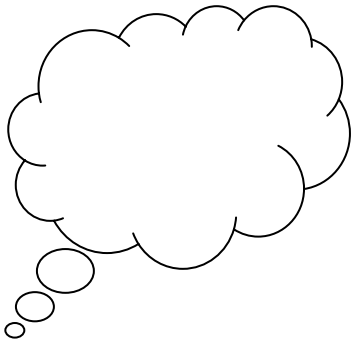
sometimes leads to aches and pains. When we have too many demands and not enough resources to meet them we begin to become overwhelmed as a result of over-exertion and the long term effects of excessive adrenaline in our bodies.

The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take actions to survive, these are to either fight or run away.

Physical Symptoms of the **fight or flight** response include:

- **Rapid heart beat and rapid breathing** - When your body is preparing itself for action, it makes sure there is enough oxygen being circulated to your major muscles and essential organs.
- **Nausea and stomach upset or butterflies** - When faced with perceived danger, the body shuts down digestion as it is not needed for survival; that way it can direct energy to functions that are critical for survival, this can lead to feeling sick or needing the loo more often.
- **Sweating or blushing**—Increased flow of blood into the blood vessels just under the skin.
- **Feeling dizzy or lightheaded** - Because our blood and oxygen goes to the major muscle groups, it means we will breathe much faster to move oxygen towards those muscles.
- **Tight or painful chest** - Your muscles tense as your body prepares for danger. Your chest may feel tight when you take in large breaths as those chest muscles are tense.
- **Numbness and tingling sensations in toes or fingers** - Caused by hyperventilation (over-breathing)
- **Shaking legs**- As the legs prepare for action, increased muscle tension, as well as increased blood flow to those muscles, can cause the sensation of shaky legs.

Symptoms of Stress



Common changes to our thoughts:

- Racing thoughts
- Expecting the worst case scenario
- Thinking negatively
- Poor concentration
- Poor memory
- Thinking critically of ourselves and others
- Inability to problem solve

Common Physical Symptoms:

- Headaches
- Muscle Tension/Aches and pains
- Racing heart
- Feeling tired
- Nausea/Butterflies in the stomach
- Bowel or bladder problems
- Changes in breathing
- Dry mouth

Common emotions:

- Angry/Irritated
- Guilty
- Overwhelmed
- Frustrated
- Anxious/Worried
- Low mood
- Fearful

Common changes in our Behaviour:

- Becoming snappy and irritable
- Withdrawing from enjoyable activities
- Problems with sleeping
- Making unusual mistakes
- Procrastinating
- Eating too much or too little
- Skipping lunch breaks
- Answering work emails at home
- Unable to relax

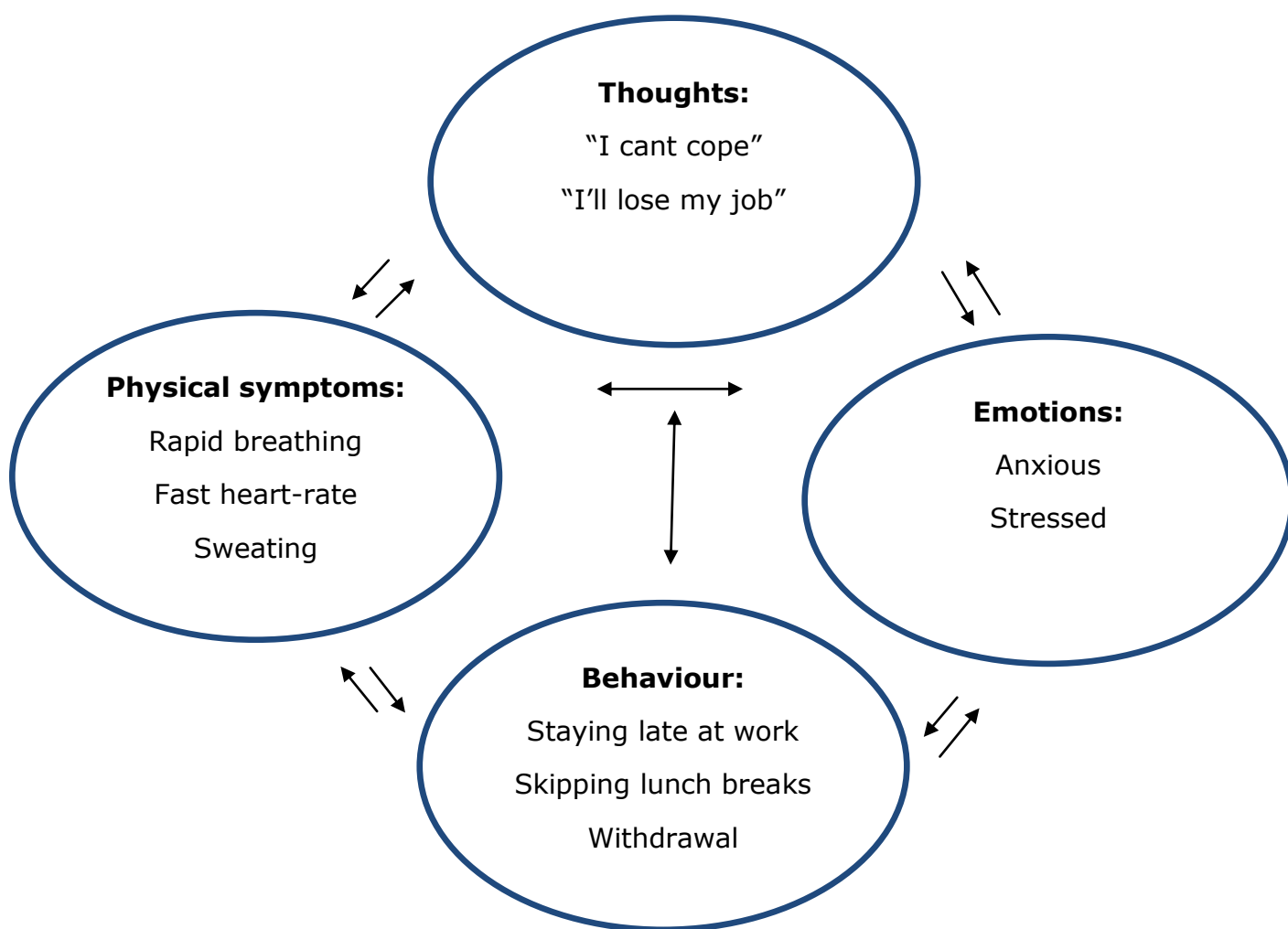
Write down any other symptoms you experience:

The Vicious Cycle of Stress

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) we look at the relationships that exist between our thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical symptoms. We know that all these areas can influence and impact on each other, and that over time, we can become stuck in a vicious cycle which can perpetuate the negative way we are feeling.

The example below is a CBT model demonstrating the interaction between our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and our behaviours.



In this booklet we will explore evidence based CBT informed techniques to help break the cycle of stress by changing our behaviours, challenging our thoughts and managing our physical symptoms through relaxation and exercise.

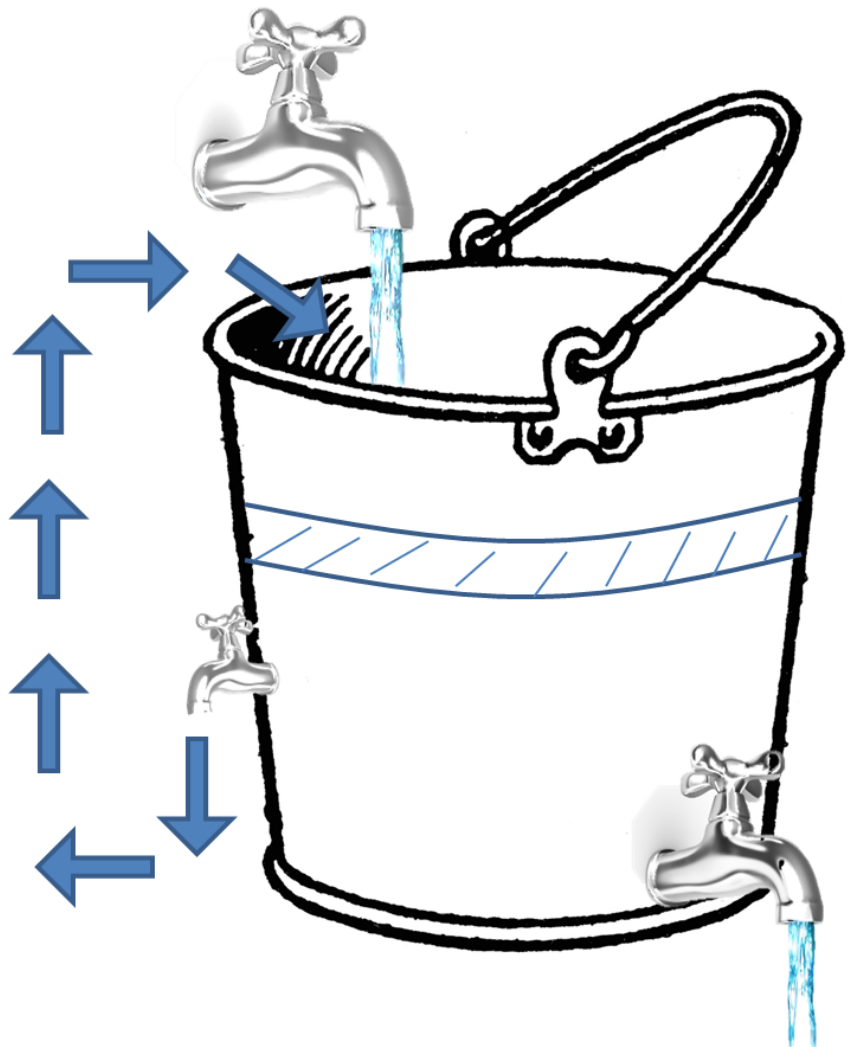
The Stress Bucket

If we think about the way in which we manage stress as being a bit like a bucket that is placed under a tap of flowing water. The water that is slowly filling the bucket is our stress levels. To ensure that the bucket doesn't overflow we need to manage the flow of water by; adjusting the top tap to let less water in, identifying unhelpful coping strategies that are recycling the stress back in to the bucket and opening the bottom tap to let water out.

Below is a description of what each tap represents:

The **top tap** represents our stressors. For example, these can be work/academic, interpersonal (interaction with other people) or environmental stress. Sometimes we have little control of our stressors, however sometimes we can use problem solving to find ways to adjust this tap and reduce the volume of water entering the bucket.

The small **middle tap** represents unhelpful coping mechanisms. These help to relieve symptoms of stress in the short term, but they are recycled back into the bucket and add to the volume of stress long term. Some examples of this could be drinking alcohol to cope, putting off the task or ignoring the problem or being passive or aggressive in your communication style.

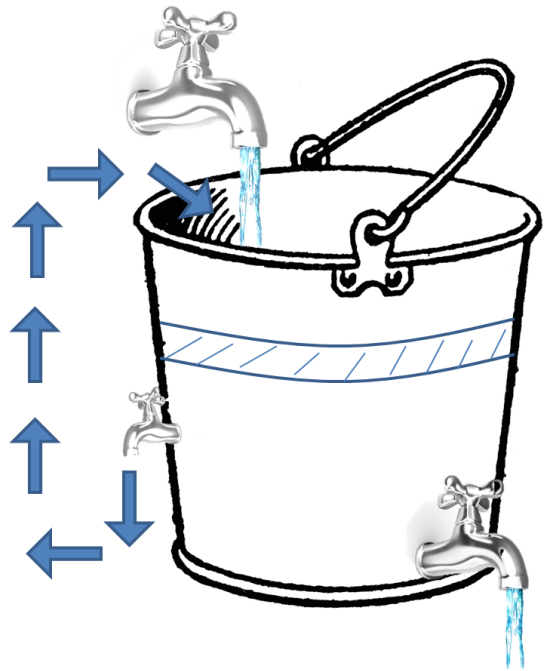


The **bottom tap** represents helpful coping strategies. If this tap is letting out less water than the volume of water going in, at some point the bucket will overflow. We can learn to increase the flow of water escaping the tap, by developing problem focused coping strategies such as problem solving and overcoming procrastination and emotion focused coping strategies such as relaxation and resilience building by increasing our engagement in pleasurable activities.

Your Stress Bucket

What are my stressors?

What are my unhelpful coping strategies?



What are my helpful coping strategies?

Helpful Behaviours

Achieving a balance of activities

To improve our resilience to stress we need to ensure we have a balance of the following three categories of activities:

Routine activities: The things we do day to day. eg. Showering or washing up

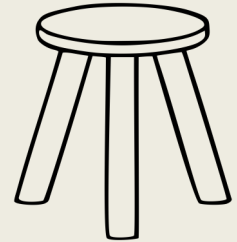
Necessary Activities: The things we do to avoid negative consequences. eg. Booking an MOT

Pleasurable Activities: The things we enjoy doing. eg. Cooking or going to the cinema.

If we imagine a three legged stool, we require all three legs to be on equal height to maintain stability.

We also require that stability to maintain our wellbeing.

Often when we are feeling stressed we can notice an imbalance of these activities and it can maintain the vicious cycle of stress



Activities I have withdrawn from:

Routine:

Necessary:

Pleasurable:

The next step is to schedule our week in advance, to ensure we are getting a balance of activities. This also helps develop time management skills by pacing your week and identifying and problem solving "pinch points". It can be helpful to set aside a time to plan the week, ensuring you are able to incorporate a balance of activities.

Overcoming Barriers

Top tips for tackling procrastination

Often, when a task seems too big or too daunting we might cope by putting it off and reason that we are waiting for a time when we feel more motivated. Have you noticed that motivation tends to build once you have started an activity? Often it is starting the task that is the most challenging. Luckily there are some top tips to help overcome procrastination.

One step at a time

- ◇ Plan to do 5 minutes of the task at a time. Sometimes after we have started a task, we can become motivated to complete it. If not, you have still managed to achieve completing 5 minutes of the task.
- ◇ Set mini deadlines, helping to break the task up into manageable chunks. Instead of focusing on the entire task and how arduous it might feel, allow yourself to only focus on one stage at a time.

Consider how your thinking style might be impacting

- ◇ Focus on how good it will feel when you've completed the task. Challenge thoughts that aren't helping. Remember, sometimes adequate is okay, it doesn't always need to be done perfectly.

Plan incentives

- ◇ Plan a reward for when you have completed the task
- ◇ Make the task more pleasurable. If the task doesn't require lots of concentration, listen to music or a podcast. (eg. put some headphones in to listen to music whilst hoovering)

List the pros and cons (advantages and disadvantages) of doing the task

- ◇ This will help you decide whether the task is worth your time. It can be helpful to put pen to paper and see this laid out visually, as sometimes we can focus on the disadvantages of completing a task, ignoring the advantages.

Make a plan

- ◇ Use a to do list
- ◇ Schedule in time to complete the task



Problem Solving

Due to the increase in stress hormones when feeling low or stressed, our natural problem solving ability is reduced. Problem solving can help to get it back up and running, to think outside the box.

Step 1: Identify one problem

Often there may be multiple problems causing us stress. Selecting just one problem allows us to focus our efforts. Be clear about exactly what aspect of the situation makes it a problem.

Step 2: List all possible solutions

Without thinking about practicalities, or how likely a solution is to work, try to come up with as many solutions to your problem as you can, no matter how wacky they might be. Perhaps ask friends or family to help you think up solutions. It is important at this stage not to judge these solutions at all.

Step 3: List the pros and cons for each solution

Now is the time to think about the advantages or disadvantages of each solution from step 2. Consider the likelihood of success, what resources you might need, or whether you'd require other people to help, when thinking of pros and cons.

Step 4: Select one solution

Once you have reviewed the pros and cons of each solution select one solution to move forward with. If one solution doesn't stand out as the best one consider the time or resources which would be required for each.

Step 5: Develop an action plan

Before going into the solution it is good to plan a step by step action plan of how the solution will be carried out. Ask; what is the first step I need to take? Who might be involved? Where will I be? When will I carry it out? What do I need to prepare beforehand? Be specific about each step.

Step 6: Carry out the action plan

Carry out the plan as you devised it in step five.

Step 7: Review the outcome

Once the plan has been carried out evaluate how effective the solution was. Think about what went well, or what you might do differently in the future. If the solution did not fully fix the problem then consider whether the action plan needs to be revised in some way. You can always return to step four and select a different solution to try.

The Role of Unhelpful Thinking

It is vital that we are aware of the role of our thoughts when managing stress. Our internal voice can serve to maintain the symptoms. Negative thoughts can maintain the cycle of stress and often leads to unhelpful behaviours such as withdrawal, procrastination and avoidance.

STOP Technique

Initially it may be difficult to capture our thoughts as it is not something we do in our day to day lives. By using the technique below we can begin to capture the thoughts that are causing us to feel low or anxious. When you notice you are feeling low or anxious;

Stop

Stop what you are doing and take a moment.

Time to breathe

Pay attention to your breathing.



Overview

Ask yourself some questions to get an overview of what is happening:

"What am I telling myself right now?"

"What is making me feel this way?"

"What bad thing am I predicting will happen?"

Perspective

Record the thoughts going through your mind to get a better perspective.

Some useful questions to help identify your unhelpful thoughts are;

"What is the bigger picture here?"

"How important is this? How important will it be in 6 months time?"

"Is there another way of looking at this situation?"

"What advice would I give a friend?"

"Is this a fact or an opinion?"

Distorted Thinking

Sometimes the way that we process information and evaluate situations can become distorted overtime. This can lead to unhelpful thinking habits or “thinking traps” resulting in negative thinking. To help us reframe the way we are thinking it can be helpful to learn to identify the common “thinking traps”. It is important to remember that our **thoughts are not facts**, they are constructed by our perception of the situation.

See below a list of some of the common “Thinking traps”:

CATASTROPHISING

Jumping to the worst case scenario and believing the worst possible thing will happen

Ask yourself: How likely is it that will happen? What tools do you have to cope if it does? Is it helpful to imagine the worst case scenario? Have you imagined this before to find it doesn't actually happen?



ALL-OR-NOTHING

Seeing things as black and white, without any grey area, such as seeing things as good or bad with nothing in between

Ask yourself: Is it possible for there to be a spectrum. Instead of 0 and 10, whereabouts are you in between? “Im bad at my job” might become “I’m not the worst or the best at my job, there are areas I need to improve”.



CRITICAL SELF

Placing too much blame on yourself when things go wrong and believing you are responsible for things you may not be entirely responsible for.

Ask yourself: Are you entirely to blame? Is it helpful to be self-critical? If we make a mistake is it more helpful to bully ourselves or to learn from the mistake and encourage ourselves to try another approach. What would you say to a friend?



Distorted Thinking

“Thinking traps” continued:

SHOULD AND MUST STATEMENTS

‘Should and must’ thinking places unrealistic expectations on ourselves and others. “I should be able to do this” or “I must do the laundry today” can lead to feeling frustrated and pressured.

Ask yourself: Am I placing too much pressure on myself or others? What would be more realistic?



MIND-READING

Assuming we know what other people are thinking. For example, if two people were whispering and looking in your direction, you might automatically assume they are saying something bad about you.

Ask yourself: Is it ever possible to know what others are thinking? Could I be making an assumption?



MENTAL FILTER

Having a mental filter involves only seeing what fits with our perspective. For example if we think “People don’t like me” and a large number of people demonstrate evidence that they do like you, however one person frowns at you. You only take in that negative evidence as it fits your theory.

Ask yourself: Am I wearing “gloomy specs”? Is there any other evidence to the contrary? What would be a more realistic thought?



PREDICTING THE FUTURE

This refers to believing we know what will happen in the future. Often we might start to behave as though this has already happened or we know that it will definitely happen in the future.

Ask yourself: Do I know for certain what will happen in the future? Am I thinking and behaving as though something that has not happened, has happened? If so, is that helpful? Am I predicting the future?

Unhelpful Thinking

Sometimes our thoughts are facts. Sometimes people make errors in judgement or mistakes. Reflection on our errors can be helpful, when we are asking ourselves how the mistake occurred and how we might avoid a reoccurrence. However, being overly critical on yourself and taking too much responsibility for your role in the error can feed back in to the vicious cycle of stress.



Critical self-talk analogy:

If we think of the example of "Little Johnny" who scores an own goal at his football match.

Coach A berates Johnny in front of his team, shouting and telling him he's useless and has cost them the game.

Coach B takes Johnny to one side later on and reassures him that everyone makes mistakes, he discusses it with Johnny to find where the error occurred and helps Johnny to improve by putting in some extra practise with him.

Which coach do you think was more helpful? Which coach are you to yourself?



Can you think of any examples of a time that you were like coach A?

Was that helpful? _____

Did that help to resolve the problem? _____

What did you learn from that? _____

What could you have said to yourself instead that may have been more helpful?

Relaxation

Relaxation can be defined as a state free from tension and anxiety and often involves resting our minds and our bodies. Structured relaxation exercises target the systems in our body which cause our physiological stress reaction.

How does relaxation work?

Stress is a state of physiological arousal governed by our bodies' inbuilt survival mechanism, our "fight or flight" response. Being stressed over a long period of time can take a toll on our bodies. Our central nervous system controls the stress response, releasing stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, when activated. These hormones increase our heartrate and breathing, sending blood into our muscles and heart, tenses our muscles ready for action, and slows down digestion.

In a threatening situation these changes allow us to be ready to run or fight. More often than not our stress response is triggered outside of a threatening situation, perhaps due to day to day stressors or worry.

How to relax

What we find relaxing can differ from person to person, some relaxing activities might include reading, meditation, going for a walk, talking to a friend or playing games. Relaxation can also be practiced through relaxation exercises. Structured relaxation exercises can help to turn off our stress response, reducing our heart and breathing rates or relaxing tense muscles. It is important to find a type of structured relaxation that fits for you. We offer free structured relaxation exercises accessible on our website at:

www.talkplus.org.uk/mp3downloads

It is important not to just use relaxation when we are stressed but to practice being able to relax, much like you would with an instrument or sport. Practicing structured relaxation techniques frequently allows us to learn to relax ourselves in times of stress. Often setting aside time every other day for practicing relaxation can help us develop a useful skill.

Exercise

Exercise can be very helpful in relieving stress and improving our sleep. The NHS recommended weekly amount of activity for adults aged 19– 64 includes at least:

- 150 minutes moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes vigorous aerobic activity or a mix of moderate and vigorous aerobic activity per week.

Types of Exercise

Light exercise: normal walking, housework, light gardening

Moderate exercise: brisk walking, gentle swimming, gentle cycling, mowing the lawn

Vigorous exercise: fast walking, running, cycling, high intensity interval training , competitive sport, circuit weight training

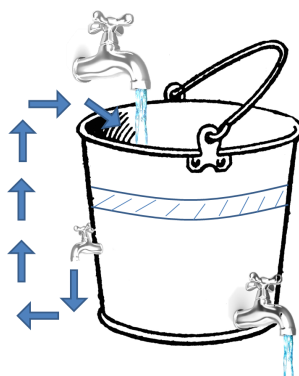
Exercise Top Tips

- Prepare the day before e.g. getting sport clothing and equipment ready or booking a class the evening before
 - Follow the 5 minute rule: set yourself 5 minutes of engaging in activity to start with. Often we find once we start we will continue longer than expected!
 - Set yourself a goal: This can help with getting that sense of achievement! SMART goals (specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and within a time limit) can be really helpful.
 - Make time for exercise– even if it’s a 5 minute walk down the street!
 - Planning: if we schedule things in, we can make sure to find the time and will be more likely to carry out these plans
 - Join a group/club or ask a friend to train with you
 - Problem solve difficulties/barriers to getting active
 - Make it a habit– e.g. the same time every week
 - Tell others your plans
- Ask yourself:
- What do I want to achieve?
 - What goals could I set myself?
 - What could help encourage me to exercise?
 - Is there anyone who could join me?
 - How do I need to prepare?

The NHS website have video modules on Aerobic exercise, strength and resistance, Pilates and yoga and various other fitness plans. These are free to access and can be found at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/?tabname=strength-and-resistance>

Relapse Prevention

Maintaining progress



Thinking back to the stress bucket described in the beginning of this booklet, does this look different now?

What are the tools you have to cope with stress?

What helped?

What are your future goals?

How will you achieve these?
