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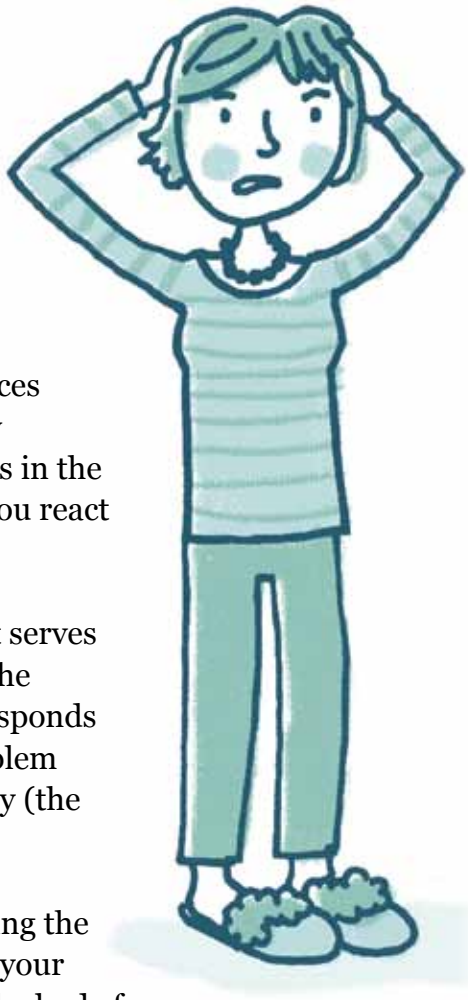
STRESS AND THE CITY

A helpful little guide to surviving modern life...

What is Stress?



Stress is a natural and normal part of everyday life, but at times it can become unmanageable and seriously affect your work, relationships or ability to deal with particular tasks.

This eBook looks at some of the most common sources of stress and the ways you can deal with it – both by addressing the external factors that trigger the stress in the first place, and the internal factors that affect how you react in stressful situations.

Stress is a very natural, biological phenomenon that serves an important purpose and can be seen throughout the animal world. When a creature senses a threat, it responds by preparing its body to deal with the potential problem – typically either by defending itself or running away (the 'fight or flight' response).

Anticipating one of these outcomes involves preparing the body for action. Your breathing becomes faster and your heart rate rises to pump blood and oxygen around the body for your muscles to use, and you start to sweat to cool yourself in the event of physical activity. You may have a nauseous feeling or a cold sensation in the pit of your stomach as your body redirects blood away from the digestive system and towards your muscles. Some people are even physically sick under heavy stress.

These normal, understandable physical responses have evolved over millions of years to keep you safe in the event of a threat. However, they also occur when you are under any kind of perceived stress – at work or at home, physical or emotional. It's a kind of one-size-fits-all response. Because the stresses we typically find ourselves under today – high workloads, long commutes, money worries and relationship problems – didn't exist until comparatively recently (at least, in evolutionary terms), the body instinctively just does the best it can. Unfortunately, these responses can be unhelpful in the modern world.

When does stress become harmful?

A little stress is helpful. It can motivate us to work harder and get things done. It also serves a useful function in warning us that something is wrong – for example, if you are driving and the car in front of you brakes sharply, your stress response enables you to react quickly to avoid an accident.

At other times, stress can be harmful. Stress in the wrong situation can be unpleasant and distracting. When it continues for a long time, it can make you frustrated, tired and unhappy, affect your relationships, disturb your sleep, and lead to anxiety, depression and other longer-term psychological problems. It can contribute to physical ailments including headaches and migraines, back and neck pain, and stomach ulcers. Some medical professionals even believe that prolonged stress can undermine your immune system, leaving you more open to potentially serious conditions including some types of cancer. If you find that stress is affecting you in one or more of these ways, it's fair to say it's probably time to do something about it.

How do I deal with stress?

Different situations will inevitably arise in life that make you stressed – work, relationships of all kinds, and money being a few of the most common. You can find ways of dealing with the situation that has triggered the stress itself (such as changing your working habits), but it's also important to look at the underlying reasons around exactly why you react in the way you do. Addressing these tends to be a longer-term solution than just looking at the trigger. This site looks at ways of fixing both the 'symptoms' and the underlying causes that contribute to unmanageable stress.

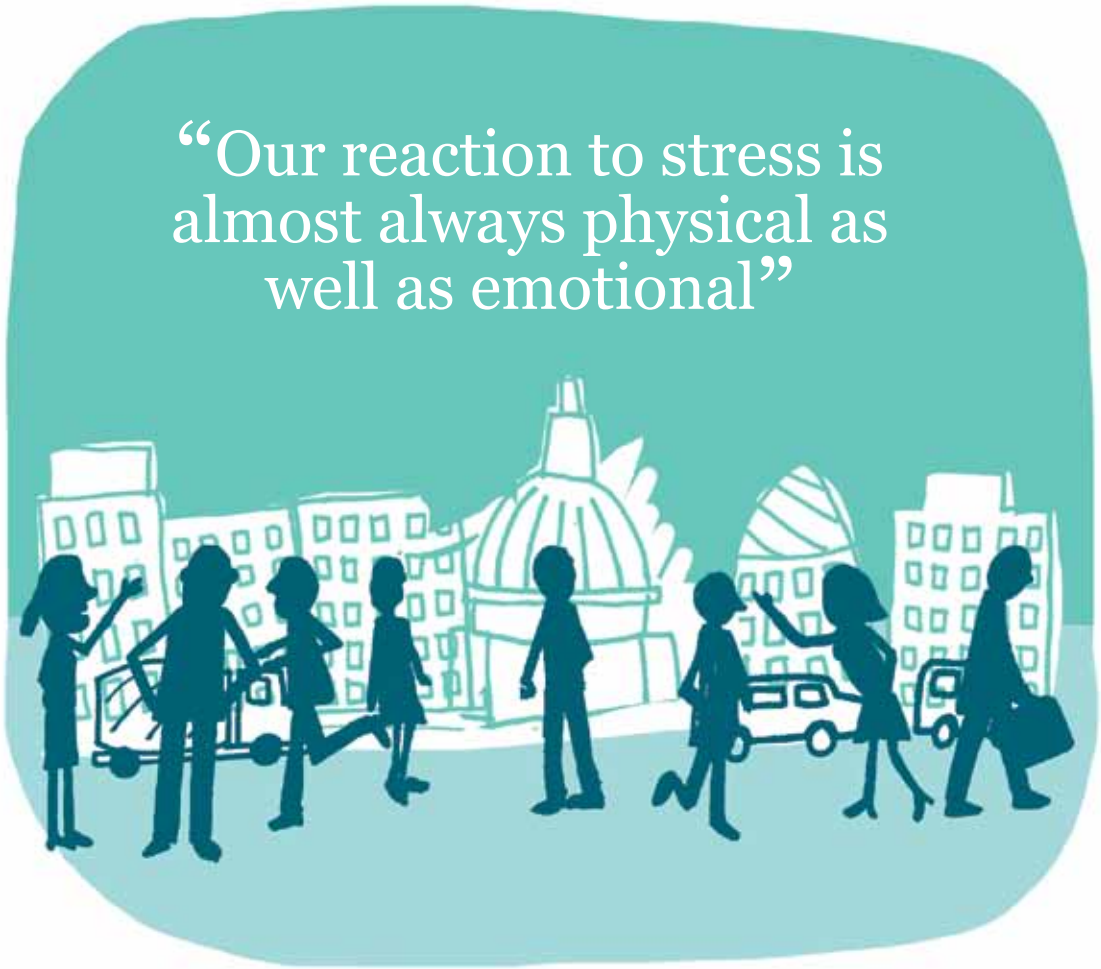
"Stress can make you frustrated, tired and unhappy, leading to anxiety and depression"

Common Signs of Stress

To some, the idea of 'somatising' – of emotional stress affecting you physically – can seem strange. However, our minds and bodies are not separate in the way that many people assume they are. Our reaction to stress is almost always physical as well as emotional. In fact, this is one of the reasons we notice it in the first place.

Back and neck pain are one of the top physical manifestations of stress. This is hardly surprising when one of the most obvious things stress does is tense your body, ready for action. Your shoulder and neck muscles are some of the worst culprits. Because this happens involuntarily and often without you even noticing it, it can continue for a long time, straining muscles and leading to referred pain elsewhere in your body. This is typically made worse by spending long hours at a desk; stress will also tighten your stomach muscles, destroying good posture by hunching you over even more.

Migraines and 'stress headaches' or 'tension headaches' are another common problem – again, often a result of tension in the neck and shoulder muscles, as well as other stress-fuelled factors such as sleep deprivation, eye strain, hunger and dehydration.



Digestion problems – including indigestion, lack of appetite and even ulcers – can result from stress, and it can also exacerbate conditions like Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).

It doesn't help that when we're stressed we don't tend to treat our digestive systems with much respect, eating quickly or unhealthily, and consuming too much caffeine and alcohol. If left unchecked, habits like comfort eating or drinking can lead to obesity and alcohol dependence, bringing further health and emotional impacts.

Other physical symptoms include constant tiredness and sleep problems, lower sex drive, minor infections and eye problems like blurred vision.

> "It has been estimated that 13 million working days are lost each year in the UK due to stress"

Long-term effects

In the longer term, stress can have a cumulative and wide-ranging effect on your health. Stress increases the blood pressure, and the hormones released during stress – designed to allow your body to prioritise more immediate functions – can ultimately compromise the immune system, leaving you more vulnerable to infections like colds, coughs and 'flu.

Thanks to these and other factors, it has been estimated that 13 million working days are lost each year in the UK due to stress.

More seriously, increased rates of heart disease, cancer and lung disease have all been linked to stress. Stress affects memory and concentration, leading to a greater risk of accidents.

Lifestyle factors that tend to go with stressful living also contribute to other killers like cirrhosis. Finally, unsurprisingly, rates of suicide are higher amongst those who are severely stressed.

Stress in Everyday Life

Commuter Stress

A daily commute can be a nightmare. If you have to fight your way through busy traffic or onto a packed bus or train, constantly worrying about whether you will get to work on time and always staying vigilant for signs of anything untoward around you, stress can really take its toll.

The average commute in the UK is almost an hour a day, and even longer in the US. 'Rush hour' – in reality, more likely to be an extended two or three-hour period of intense congestion at the beginning and end of the day – is particularly unpleasant.

Strangely, it's not the time it takes that people worry about the most when it comes to commuting – despite the fact that hour or two could be spent far better sleeping, reading the papers or enjoying time with friends and family. What really tends to cause problems is the unpredictability of the daily commute. We can adjust more easily to a situation if we know how bad it's going to be, or if we

know we have some degree of control over it. The problem with commuting is that we can't predict when there will be an accident, when a road or train line will be closed, when there will be a traffic jam or, in the short term, when someone will pull out in front of us or a connection will be late. Add to that the fact that we travel at the beginning and end of the working day, when we are at our most tired, and it can be a recipe for extreme stress.

Dealing with a stressful commute

We typically feel stressed when we are not in control of a situation, and a daily commute can be a classic example of this. The first thing to do is look at ways of gaining some control. If your company allows flexible working practices, you could change your hours to avoid peak travel times – or even work from home one or more days a week. If you are fed up with driving every day, you could research alternatives including bus and train, but also car-sharing if you don't like the cattle-truck feel of public transport in the rush hour.

There are plenty of such networks around, as a quick web search will show, and if you work somewhere busy there will almost certainly be people in the same position as you.

If that's not possible, then a different route might be the answer – even a longer one. The stressful component of commuting is its unpredictability; if you take a different route that is longer but more consistently quiet, you may well find it easier on the nerves. In addition, a longer commute need not be considered wasted time. Plenty of people work productively on the train or bus on the way to work (many of which are now equipped with Wi-Fi connections).

Finally, if your commute is so stressful that it's causing you serious health problems, maybe it's time to consider a change of job.

What if there's no choice?

In some cases, none of these solutions will help. Your work hours may be fixed, and taking the train just as miserable a prospect as driving. If that's the case, then it's worth dealing with the stress as it arises. Simple relaxation exercises will help you to become aware of how the stress of a difficult drive or train journey is affecting you, and to mitigate some of its effects.

Relaxation CDs are available, as are more involved exercises designed to help calm you more deeply (though for obvious reasons, these are not suitable if you are driving). Sometimes, distraction – perhaps in the form of a good book (again, best on a train journey), or some favourite music – will work wonders.

Workload Stress

Stress at work is nothing unusual – in fact, high workloads and the long hours they bring have become the norm in Britain and the States. The UK has the longest working week in the EU, and the US has the same demanding culture.

There may be a number of things you can do to address your immediate circumstances – perhaps in terms of organising your workload and hours – but equally important, if not more so, are the underlying attitudes you have about work that prompt you to take the approach you do. Addressing both is important if you want to reduce your workload stress.

When treading water feels like drowning

Imagine a typical day. You probably have a number of tasks you need to complete, perhaps people to meet and almost certainly emails to write and answer. You're confident you've got it under control, you can get through it all, finish what you need to and get home on time.

But then things change. More tasks hit your in-tray. Meetings that were supposed to last for ten minutes go on for half an hour. New emails start to pile up. Before long, you're starting to panic, working as hard as you can just to stay in the same place, let alone reduce that backlog. Even taking a break to come up for air seems like a bad idea, since it will be even worse when you get back.

The first thing to do is relax – easier said than done, but stress and anxiety are not going to help you deal with the workload calmly. A brief relaxation exercise will pay dividends here, counter-intuitive though it may feel to take the time to do it. Remember that, when all's said and done, this is just a busy day: you've had them before and you'll have them again. A few minutes is unlikely to make the difference between sinking and swimming.

In terms of the workload, take a few minutes to prioritise what really needs doing now, what probably needs doing at some point today, and what can be left until later. Emails can be particularly stress-inducing; the instant-communication nature of the internet means that a new email can scream for a response straight away. In reality, most probably don't need one. Remember, the person who sent it won't know when you've even read it.

Delegate any tasks you can. There can be a temptation to do everything yourself, often for fear that it otherwise won't be done properly. However, that's an attitude that will add to your workload and stress levels. Again, prioritise the tasks you absolutely have to do yourself; anything else, pass on. In a similar vein, learn how to say 'no'. It's possible that you are doing work that others could be or should be doing, and they're getting away with it simply because you're letting them. Finally, if it gets too bad, talk to management – stressed employees who realistically can't complete their workload aren't going to do anyone any favours.

Looking under the surface

These are some of the obvious quick fixes you can make if work is getting on top of you. But it's also worth looking at the attitudes that motivate you, because these will help you understand why you react the way you do when your to-do list suddenly multiplies.

Sometimes failing to complete a heavy workload might genuinely have serious consequences, such as losing your job. (If that's the case, make sure you know your legal rights.) However, this is rare. More likely is that you are making unhelpful and possibly inaccurate assumptions about those consequences. Ask yourself what would actually happen if you didn't complete this or that piece of work. There may be many different reasons, some realistic, some vague fears, but focus on the personal and emotional ones. The workload itself is just the trigger or precipitating factor. What does it actually mean to you – where is the anxiety really coming from?

One very common answer to this question is that you assume your perceived 'failure' to cope with your work might incur disapproval or loss of respect from a boss, colleagues, or even a loved one. You may doubt your ability to carry out the work at all, rather than recognising that you are perfectly capable, just pushed for time. What appears on the surface to be a problem with your workload actually turns out to be more about confidence and self-esteem: a very different issue, and one that requires a different solution to organising and delegating. There are many ways to approach that problem, but for now, it's enough to identify the underlying fear and recognise that the ultimate reason for stress is not the workload itself. Understanding that can help defuse a stressful situation by parking the negative emotions you associate with it, allowing you to deal with it on its own terms – in this case, simply as a busy day rather than an attack on your confidence and self-esteem.

Colleague Stress

Having a problem colleague at work can be one of the most stressful things to deal with, especially when it comes combined with a stressful workload. Whether it is someone who causes you difficulties by their own lack of competence at work, meaning you have to pick up the slack, or someone who actively seems to have it in for you, handling the situation day after day can drain your emotional reserves and leave you stressed, exhausted and frustrated. Worst of all, if it's your boss, it can seem like there's no good solution to the problem, which consequently feels like an endless source of worry.

Knowing your rights

If you're experiencing the worst kind of workplace bullying, then it's important to know what your rights are and to draw firm boundaries. If you're being bullied, harassed or exploited in a way that breaks the law, then there will be clear methods of redress: this is something that no employee should have to put up with. Check employment law, which is now quite comprehensive around this area, and seek legal advice if you have to. Usually, it should not get this far and there should be internal grievance procedures to go through first. If you're in doubt about these, talk to a trusted colleague or friend first to gain another opinion and a sense of whether this is the way you want and need to go.

The overbearing colleague

Far more common that these more extreme cases of breaking employment law is the colleague who is overbearing, manipulative or otherwise hard to deal with. It may be hard to put your finger on exactly what it is about them, or it may simply be that they are used to getting their own way and not being refused. In many ways this is more tricky than overt bullying, since there isn't a clear-cut way in which they are overstepping the mark. Nevertheless, you should not have to put up with this kind of demanding behaviour or attitude either, and neither should your employer. Generally speaking, overstressed employees are unproductive employees.

Start by identifying what it is about that person you find so stressful. This may take some thought, but something in their behaviour will be touching a nerve – perhaps it's their implicit assumption that their time is more valuable than yours, or that you should be working harder, or taking on undesirable tasks that aren't your remit. If you can't confront them head-on about that tendency, then don't buy into that way of thinking; it can be very easy to get sucked into an argument or discussion on someone else's terms. Humour can be a useful way of deflecting unwanted attention. However, try to remain professional and calm at all times (often easier said than done) because you do not want to give them any ammunition against you.

Finally, make sure you're aware of how the situation is affecting you. Having overbearing and stressful colleagues can seriously undermine your confidence. Unfortunately, such colleagues will probably see your low self-esteem and exploit it, recognising you as an easy mark. Addressing your self-esteem first, allowing you to become calmer, more confident and more assertive, is likely to be an important step in dealing with them.

Relationship Stress

Almost every relationship runs into difficulties from time to time. Conflict isn't necessarily a bad thing; it's a reflection of the fact that we're all different and, as such, we don't always see eye to eye. Those differences – even if they are quite pronounced – don't necessarily mean that the relationship is doomed to failure. What's important, though, is how we deal with them. Typically, problems in a relationship signal differences that are not being dealt with in a healthy way, leading to tensions and arguments that can seem out of all proportion to the apparent trigger.

Communicating well

Good communication is absolutely fundamental to any relationship. There are rare occasions where couples seem to get along despite – or even due to – a complete indifference to the other's point of view, but they're few and far between and definitely not a model to aspire to. For most of us, taking time to understand our partner – what they are really thinking and feeling – is an indispensable part of getting on and building a life together. And this generally does mean taking time: it has been said that 'time is the currency of relationships', and short-changing each other isn't going to do either of you any favours.

This may also mean some uncomfortable conversations; if your relationship is running into difficulties, though, you're unlikely to help the situation in the long run by brushing things under the carpet and pretending that all is well. Find a time to talk when you're not under pressure to do anything else and try to discuss things honestly. It helps to use language that expresses the problem from your point of

view ('I feel that...') rather than your partner's ('you always...') which can sound like an accusation and make them feel defensive. If you're saying something you think might be particularly hard to hear, try to show your partner that you still care about them by the way you act – hold their hand or give them a hug at the same time, rather than setting the tone for the conversation by adopting a confrontational attitude yourself.

What's really going on?

A large number of arguments are ostensibly about minor things but build into something more. If there's something that really upsets you, try to understand why. For example, if you're annoyed when your partner leaves the table without clearing away his plate or doesn't tidy the bathroom after her, ask yourself what the underlying issue is from your point of view. (In these cases, it may be that you feel taken for granted and unimportant because your contribution to the housework goes unappreciated – a much bigger deal than the apparently trivial matter of a messy bathroom.) These events can be triggers for previous events on a similar theme that haven't been dealt with, but often a gentle but honest conversation can clear it up.

Where things are more serious, it's worth being ruthlessly honest – with yourself, to begin with. Many relationships drag on because one or other party doesn't want to hurt the other by breaking up, despite the fact they have long since decided that there is no future to it. Couple relationship education and couples counselling can be a good way to talk through your concerns in a neutral space and deciding whether you really have a future together. If you decide you don't, and the relationship is genuinely not salvageable, then separating is a prerequisite for you both moving on with your lives and finding happiness in the future.

Parenting Stress

Being or becoming a parent comes with a multitude of different stresses. Having children is one of the biggest changes that can happen to you, and change is almost always stressful. Suddenly, your time is not your own in the way that it was before, and there are new sets of demands on you. In the early stages, you may experience sleep problems, and money worries often accompany parenthood as expenses rise and income drops. As your children grow up, the demands on you change, meaning that almost as soon as you get used to one source of stress it is replaced by another.

Getting ready

If you're about to become a parent, then you will probably already be anticipating the changes that will imminently occur. It's quite possible that you'll have seen them in some of your friends as they have children. Taking care of a new baby

can seem like an overwhelming prospect: this tiny new person relies on you for literally everything. If you are a single parent, the responsibility becomes even greater.

The first thing to remember is that you're not the first to experience this anxiety. Although it can feel overwhelming, the reality is that people do get through it all the time – the proof is all around you. It can be tough at times, but don't expect to be perfect: that's not possible. All that matters is that you're good enough. To help with the practicalities, you may find some kind of antenatal classes useful. These are run locally and teach you everything from what to expect at the birth through to feeding, changing, bathing and putting your baby to sleep. If you've never had to do these before, antenatal classes can be worth their weight in gold. They will also put you in touch with a group of parents at a similar stage to you, a community which can be enormously beneficial in terms of practical and emotional support.

Growing up

Fortunately, or unfortunately, children grow up, meaning that the unique challenges of becoming a parent are replaced by the ongoing challenges of parenting a toddler, young child and then adolescent. All of these stages can have difficulties of their own.

The saying goes that parenting comes naturally: we do what we learned from our own parents unless we take the time to question it. That can mean we repeat both

successes and mistakes down the generations. It's worth making the effort to think what kind of a parent you want to be and giving yourself some ground rules as the different challenges arise. Because parenting is stressful, it can be hard to think clearly in the heat of the moment, so it's worth deciding those boundaries – for yourself and your child – away from any conflict. Talk to your partner and establish between you what they will be: it's important that you are in agreement because children need consistency and stability (plus they are good at playing one of you off against the other if you give them a chance).

There are plenty of good books around about parenting. Perhaps one of most important things to understand is that children (and people in general) tend to respond better to praise than criticism. If you need to discipline your child, try to explain why what they did was wrong in a way they can understand, and give a positive alternative which you can reward them for.

Sleep Stress (insomnia)

Insomnia can be soul destroying. Lying awake in the small hours of the morning, watching the glowing red numbers of an alarm clock counting down the time until you have to get up and knowing that each passing minute is another minute you won't sleep, can fill you with dread when you contemplate the exhaustion-filled day ahead of you. The worst of it is that the more you worry about not sleeping, the less likely you are to drop off. It's an unpleasant vicious cycle that can strike without warning and that can be tricky to break. As with most stress problems, there are two strands to approaching insomnia: dealing with the immediate problem of not being able to sleep, and dealing with the underlying reasons of why you find yourself awake at night.

Good sleep habits

If you find yourself lying awake at night, worrying about the sleep-deprived morning ahead of you, the best thing to do can be to get up. You need your bedroom to be associated with calm and sleep, not the anxiety of insomnia. (For that reason, it's also a good idea to avoid working or watching TV in the bedroom.) Try making yourself a hot drink – nothing caffeinated – and occupying yourself for a while with some relaxing music or a book you've read before. Again, TV or anything else stimulating should be avoided – and definitely resist the urge to work. You're looking to break the cycle of stress and sleeplessness, not to fuel it with further unhelpful associations.

A relaxation exercise or CD might be useful too. When you're feeling calmer and sleepier, head back to bed. If you still can't get to sleep after a while, try something different – just make sure that the bedroom itself does not become a place of anxiety.

More broadly, try to make sure that you are eating healthily, getting enough exercise and not working late into the night: ensure that you have enough of a break between work and sleep to allow you to relax and your mind to slow down. Also be careful not to use alcohol to help you sleep – apart from building up a dangerous dependency if this is the only way you feel you can beat insomnia, alcohol actually makes you sleep worse in the long run, even if it helps you drop off to begin with.

Getting to the root of it

If you can't sleep, chances are there's a good reason why. Daytime stresses – concerns about work, money or relationships, perhaps – may be weighing on your mind at night. If this is the case, then try to identify exactly what it is you are worried about, so you can address that rather than letting it continue and dealing with the insomnia and probably other collateral damage. Sometimes, this is easier said than done, in which case you might find counselling useful to help you look at things from a fresh perspective and find new ways of approaching the problem. If you're in any doubt or feel that insomnia is seriously affecting your health, talk to your doctor, who should be able to advise you further.

In the meantime, although insomnia can be extremely unpleasant, it's rarely as serious as it can seem at the time. Remember that this has happened to you before, and the chances are you have managed ok. Perhaps the day ahead won't be much fun, but you know that you can and will get through it. That's important to remember at three in the morning when it feels like you'll never sleep again.

Money Stress

Worrying about money is an extremely common cause of personal stress. It's also worth noting that money worries are the largest source of relationship stress, and one of the biggest reasons couples break up. Money worries may be triggered by circumstances beyond your control, such as losing your job, or bills rising unexpectedly, or by debts mounting up before you realise how bad things have become. Either way, taking control of the situation is the only way you will start to feel better

about it. Many people leave it longer than necessary out of fear for what they will find when they do investigate their finances. Needless to say, this just makes things worse in the long run.

Know exactly what you are spending

The first step is to understand exactly where the money is going by creating a budget. Most people have a fairly good idea of what is coming in on a monthly basis; the problem is the outgoings. Start by listing the biggest items – typically rent or mortgage, energy bills and utilities, council tax or other charges, transport/fuel, and so on, and work down to the smallest expenses. These might include the odd cup of coffee or sandwich, parking, a cinema ticket, and so on. If you are not used to doing this, it can be quite a daunting task.

However, it all adds up – you'll be surprised how much you spend on those odd bits and pieces – and when you have it all in front of you, you'll probably see where you can make savings immediately. Debt repayment can also account for quite a large slice of your monthly outgoings, so don't forget to include any credit card bills, unsecured and other loans.

When you've done this, you should be able to see how far you're falling short every month, and therefore how much you need to cut from your outgoings. There are two strands to this: finding cheaper ways to pay for the things you have to have, and economising on the luxuries. Start with your biggest outgoings, again – mortgage payments (if you have one), energy bills and so on, and consider whether you can save money by switching providers. Unless you have recently chosen the best tariff, it's possible that you could save hundreds of pounds a year on utilities and potentially thousands by remortgaging. Check around for the best deals by using comparison websites.

In terms of any debts, start by prioritising the most expensive. That typically means credit card debt, which can often run at around 20 percent. If you're only paying off the minimum amount every month, the high interest payments mean that you could end up spending three times more than you need to. The sooner you get rid of that debt, the more money you'll have for other things. If matters are really bad, then talk to your credit card company – the sooner the better – and try to work out a payment plan. It's not in either of your interests for you to default on the debt.

Beyond the big spending fixes

If you're still falling short when you've made the major savings, then look at those smaller, day-to-day outgoings. Much of the time, it's actually not the big bills that make the difference. It's the minor purchases, a few quid here and there, which can add up to hundreds of pounds over the course of a month. Coffee on the way to work, five times a week? That's £40 or £50 per month – or a staggering £600

a year. Buying instead of making a sandwich every lunchtime? Another £60 a month. A couple of nights out at the pub, a trip to the cinema, a new top, the odd treat... it all adds up, more than you think at the time. It's not that you should avoid any of those things altogether. Just be aware of what they're costing you, and make adjustments if you need to. Forgoing that second daily latte is a small price to pay if it means you can get the credit card company off your back early.

Beyond that, it's worth looking at the psychological side of spending. Many people spend money to make themselves feel better – hardly surprising, when a large strand of consumer culture relies on fostering dissatisfaction in potential buyers with clever advertising, with the aim of getting them to purchase a product they likely don't really need. If you find yourself shopping to cheer yourself up or to try to raise your self esteem, the chances are there's something else wrong that you're masking.

Life Events Stress

We tend to think of stress in terms of adversity – an unwanted situation that challenges us negatively in some way. It could be money worries, a bad illness, a horrible commute, or a colleague who is making your life impossible at work. However, events that should be pleasant can also be tough. Life throws all kinds of things at us, good and bad, and any major change has the potential to prove stressful.

Loss

Changes can take many forms, but a common theme running through them is loss. A bereavement is the most obvious form of loss, and the death of a loved one can be devastating. However, this is by no means the only type of loss we are likely to experience in the course of our lives. Divorce and separation are another kind of loss which, perhaps surprisingly, can often prove more difficult to deal with than a bereavement, especially if you part on bad terms. Losing a job is another, which may come with a loss of income and identity, especially if it means being unemployed for a while. A serious illness is another kind of loss – in this case, the loss of autonomy and independence.

It's important to remember that grief does serve a purpose. Grieving is a process that takes time to work through, whether it is a bereavement or the loss of a job or relationship. The length of time it takes is usually a reflection of the level of emotional investment you had in it to begin with. Trying to speed up the process is counter-productive, because it underestimates the impact it has had on you. (This does not apply for cases of chronic or complex grief, which can go on for years and does not seem to progress; in these cases, counselling may help you to work through the 'stuck' feeling.) At this point, practical help and support from friends and family are probably what you need most.

Positive changes

Any change – even positive changes like getting married, having a baby, or starting a new job – involves a kind of loss. This sounds strange, especially if you have been looking forward to the event. However, the fact remains that you are still moving away from old, established and above all familiar patterns, and into something new. Getting used to the new situation may well be stressful since it involves the unfamiliar – new relationships, new habits, new challenges, often very suddenly and all at once. It's no coincidence that getting married has been found to be almost as stressful as losing your job.

In these circumstances, it's worth making life easy for yourself, inasmuch as you can. Try not to take on too many other new things until you've got used to the major change – sometimes it's tempting to make lots of changes at once to get them over with, but putting yourself under unnecessary pressure is likely to make matters worse. Beyond that, find other ways of being kind to yourself – take some time out regularly to relax and recharge your batteries and take part in activities you enjoy. Introducing more stress at this point isn't going to help you to enjoy or engage with the new situation any better.

How NOT to Cope

Stress can go hand-in-hand with a number of other conditions, both physical and psychological. On the psychological side, there are a few very common ones to watch out for, which are discussed in this section. Depression, anxiety and low self-esteem are themes that come up again and again, and can all be caused, triggered or made worse by long term stress.

Other than that, there are various ways in which people tend to cope with stress, again on the immediate physical and emotional levels. Although these can sometimes be useful short-term solutions, in the long run they can often be destructive, because they are really just ways of papering over deeper problems.

Physical coping mechanisms

If you find yourself highly stressed, then it's only natural that you'll look for ways to relax. Often, however, these are just short-cuts which trick the body into briefly feeling less worried and on-edge. As time goes on, it's easy to go back to these tried and tested 'solutions' again and again, without recognising the impact they may be having on your health.

Alcohol is a common example. Whilst there's nothing wrong with having a drink – or even having a drink to help you relax, from time to time – if you find you are relying on it to de-stress yourself on a regular basis, then it's probably time to consider alternatives.

This is one that often creeps up on people before they realise how bad it has become; even Tony Blair admitted that he was concerned with the amount he was regularly drinking to relax at the end of a day. Prescription or recreational drugs are another example; it's easy to start to rely on these to reduce your stress levels, quickly building up a dependency.

If you're wondering whether stress is leading to a drug or alcohol habit, there's an easy way to find out: try going without for a period of time, and see how easy you find coping with the stress.

There are plenty of other examples. Comfort eating or binge eating is another – a throwback to our evolutionary past, when stress tended to be a response to a limited number of circumstances, one of which was the threat of starvation. The desire to eat more than we immediately need to is a reflection of the fact we didn't always know where the next meal was coming from.

Today, of course, there is little real risk of starvation, and obesity and diet-related health issues are far bigger threats. At the more benign end of the scale, exercise can be a great was to de-stress. Even this, however, can become obsessive, something you feel you must do at the expense of all else.

Emotional coping mechanisms

Our emotional reactions to stress vary widely. The ultimate function of our body's stress reaction is to prepare us for action of one kind or another, usually either fight or flight. As a result, anger or increased irritability is very common.

You might find yourself being more confrontational, snappy or short-tempered than normal, and things that would not usually bother us can seem much more annoying. This does mean that your temper can be a useful barometer of how stressed you are.

The other common emotional response is withdrawal – a reluctance to engage with other people or situations, as we focus on our own problems. You might find that it's harder to make the effort to deal with people, or that going out and socialising is more daunting than it used to be.

Relationships, especially with partners, can become strained as you put emotional distance between the two of you. Escapism – finding ways to distract yourself from the stress you are experiencing – can put additional pressure on a relationship.

This might take the form of excess drinking (see above), or other activities like watching a lot of TV, playing computer games or surfing the internet for hours. Again, none of these are bad in moderation, but the danger is that they can start to compete with the time you once spent with friends and loved ones.

The thing to remember is that all of these coping mechanisms, whether emotional or physical, are quick-and-dirty fixes to stress. As occasional ways of dealing with a bad day, they may not be too harmful. But it's also the case that they don't actually solve the underlying problem – they just mask it for a while.

As an ongoing pattern, it's likely that they will start to cause long-term damage to your health and relationships.

Stress Triggers and Emotions

Fixing the trigger

- Take control in whatever ways you can, no matter how minor: stress is a reaction to a loss of control.
- Be aware that stress can alter the way you think – it's better not to make long-term decisions under pressure if you can avoid it. If possible, wait until you are out of the immediate situation.
- Discuss your options and thoughts about the situation with a trusted third party.
- Recognise that you may need to have an uncomfortable conversation or make a difficult decision before things improve.

Understanding your emotional reaction

- If the emotional reaction seems disproportionate to the problem, it probably is! Try to identify what you find so difficult about the person or situation – what about it is really upsetting you?
- Quantify your anxieties, rather than leave them vague and uncertain: ask yourself, 'What's the worst that will realistically happen?' and 'What are the odds of that actually happening?'
- Remember that the fear of something is very often far worse, and lasts far longer, than the thing itself.
- Identify any emotional needs that are leading to other problems. (For example, is your desire to please people leading you to take on too much work? Are money worries caused by spending to boost your self-esteem?) Try to find other, less harmful ways of meeting these needs.

Stress Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Look after yourself – life is difficult enough already!
- Try to get enough sleep, at regular times.
- Eat healthily – the highs and lows of hunger and sugar spikes can seriously affect your mood.
- Exercise regularly – it provides a natural and effective outlet for the stress-induced processes to your body.

Don't

- Drink too much caffeine – its effects on the body are very similar to stress and anxiety.
- Drink excess alcohol to unwind after a stressful day, since it is also an addictive mood-altering drug.
- Pretend the problem will go away if you ignore it or crash on regardless – stress is a symptom of lack of control of one kind or another.
- Rely on coping mechanisms that don't address the cause of the problem, just mask it.

For more information, tips and self-help techniques on stress, depression, anxiety and self-esteem visit **StressingOut.org**