

[www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)



# Steps to deal with stress

A simple guide to stressing less and enjoying life more

# Stress can affect anyone

Stress doesn't just make you feel bad, it can also be bad for your health.

The good news is there are steps you can take to deal with it.

This booklet contains some practical ways for you to start dealing with stress right now, and to stop it building up in future.

Research shows that small steps can make a big difference, so keep on reading...

# CONTENTS

## Recognising stress - *Being aware of your stress*

How are you feeling today?.....	3-4
Why do I feel like this?.....	5
Why ignoring stress doesn't work.....	6
Steps to deal with stress.....	7-8

## Getting ready - *Looking after yourself physically & emotionally*

Eating well .....	10-11
Sleeping well .....	11-12
Being active.....	13-14
Relaxing and having fun.....	15
Unhealthy ways to cope .....	16-18
Change for good!.....	19
Positive thinking .....	20

## Coping better - *Coping with difficult situations*

Dealing with difficult situations .....	21
Working on your problems.....	22
Thinking straight.....	23
Talk about it, write about it.....	24-25
Planning ahead .....	25-26
Relationships .....	26-27
Children and parenting .....	28-29
Anxiety and depression.....	30-32

## Learning from bad experiences

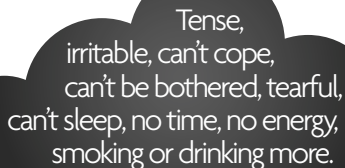
Dealing with the past.....	33-34
----------------------------	-------

## Take action now - *Practical things you can do to deal with stress*

Relaxation exercises .....	37-39
Problem solving .....	40-46
Three good things .....	47-48
Getting involved .....	49
Helping others.....	50-51
Further help.....	51-52

# How are you feeling today?

The first step towards managing stress better is to realise when things are getting on top of us. Recognising a problem is the first step towards doing something about it.



Tense,  
irritable, can't cope,  
can't be bothered, tearful,  
can't sleep, no time, no energy,  
smoking or drinking more.



**VERY STRESSED**

Following the steps to deal with stress in this booklet can help you move along the scale **from here...**

**Problems can pile up.** There's a long list of things that can cause stress: money worries, unemployment, problems at work, family and relationship difficulties, childcare,

physical health problems, the pressure of being a carer, bad experiences in the past, being bullied, harassed or discriminated against...and many more.



**NO STRESS**

**...to here.** And if you already feel like this, keep reading for tips on how to stay stress-free in future!



Relaxed  
Coping well  
In control  
Calm  
Enjoying life  
Happy

# Recognising stress

# Why do I feel like this?

Our bodies usually cope well with short-term pressures, but too much stress for too long can make us unwell.

Most people can find the get-up-and-go they need to deal with a crisis.

But what if the crisis doesn't go away?

We can be so busy dealing with problems that we don't notice we're stressed. Our bodies have to keep on coping in the same way.

## These are some of the signs of long-term stress:

- Being unable to get restful sleep - so that we're tired through the day
- Eating more "comfort foods" which are full of fat and sugar
- Having less energy to take exercise

- Not feeling motivated to see people, or get things done
- Memory and concentration can get worse
- Our immune system weakens, increasing the risk of coughs and colds
- Back pain, headaches and stomach and bowel problems are more common too

**"It spirals out of control and before you know it, you're up the creek without a paddle."**

Jenny

# Why ignoring stress doesn't work

Facing up to problems actually reduces stress and increases our confidence.

Trying to avoid dealing with stress might seem sensible, but it usually just makes things worse.

Common ways of avoiding stress include trying to block out problems by drinking too much alcohol, ignoring bills or spending too much money.

Reading this booklet could be the first step towards facing up to problems. It will help you think about the difficult situations you might have been trying to ignore. Or the unhealthy things you might have been doing to cope with stress.

It will give you some practical, useful steps that lots of other people have used to start dealing with stress.

## Take action now!

Before you read on, why not try some simple relaxation exercises (page 37-39).

And now might be a good time to write down the things that are making you feel stressed. Use the 'My problem list' sheet (page 45-46).

# Recognising stress

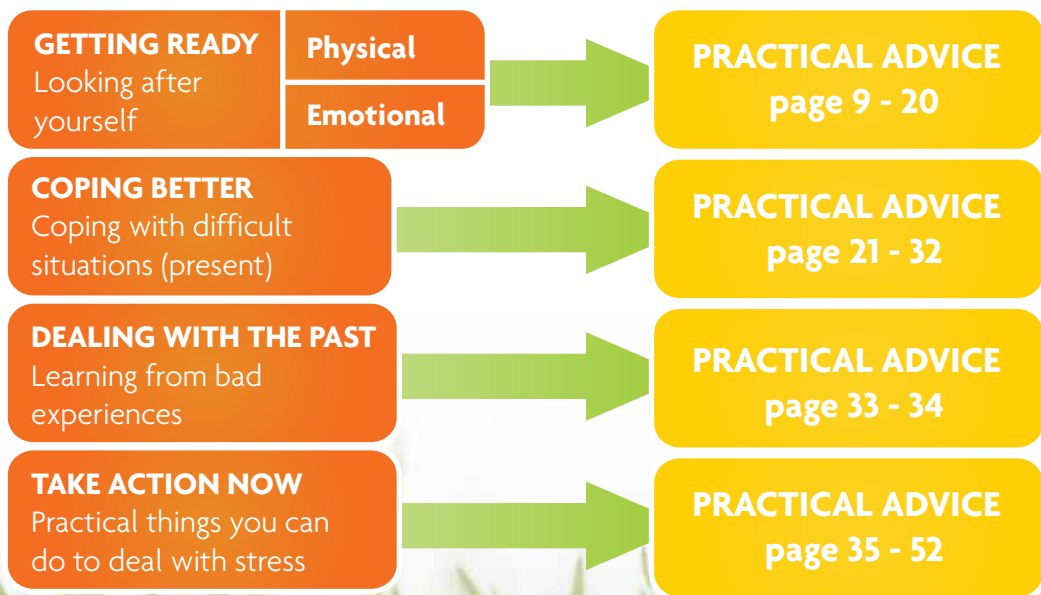
# Steps to deal with stress

This diagram shows the steps you can take to control stress. We'll cover all the steps within this booklet, and we'll also give you sources for further help.





Read the whole booklet through if you like - or just dip into whichever bits are best for your own situation.



# Recognising stress

# Getting ready

Dealing with stress can be hard work. To be able to take stress on, we need to look after ourselves.

- That means eating well, sleeping well, being active and cutting out things that are bad for us
- It also means learning to take time out to relax and have fun, and trying to think positively

So get ready to start dealing with stress by first looking after yourself.

Remember, you **can** change. Focus on the small steps that are most useful to you.

# Eating well

If we're stressed, it's more important than ever to eat well. Otherwise, it's like running a car on empty.

Healthy eating means doing things like:

## Eating breakfast

Your granny was right, breakfast really is the most important meal of the day! Eating breakfast means you'll also be less likely to reach for unhealthy snacks before lunch. Choosing wholemeal toast, cereals or porridge helps to keep your energy levels up through the whole morning.

## Sitting down with other people to eat your meals

Families who eat together are more likely to sort out problems and enjoy each other's company. Whether it's with the kids, your partner or people from work, being sociable at mealtimes can be a good thing.

## Getting your 5-a-day

We all know we're meant to get 5 portions of fruit and veg every day, but it can seem like a lot. Try making some small changes, like chopping a banana into your cereal, or adding some vegetables into your spaghetti bolognese. Even a glass of orange juice is one of your 5-a-day, so it can be easier than you think.

## Learning to cook

Cooking from scratch is a really healthy way to eat, as there will be less salt and more vitamins than in most ready meals and processed food. And learning how to do it can be fun. Watch some cooking programmes, get a recipe book or find a cookery class and give it a go.

# Getting ready

# Eating well continued

Cutting down on tea, coffee and 'energy' drinks

These all contain caffeine - try cutting down if you feel anxious, panicky or sleepy.

For more hints and ideas on eating well, go to [www.choosetolivebetter.com](http://www.choosetolivebetter.com)

# Sleeping well

Good sleep is essential but can be the first thing to go when we're stressed. This can lead to us feeling even more stressed.

Here are some things you can try to get a better night's sleep.

## Your bedroom

- Don't have a TV, computer or games console in your bedroom – try to keep it as a calm place to relax

- Cut out light - blackout blinds or an eye mask are good for this
- Block out noise with earplugs

## During the day

- Try not to take naps
- Try not to think about sleep too much
- Cut down on caffeine
- Be physically active

## Before bed

- Have a regular bedtime routine
- Relax with a warm bath
- Avoid heavy meals for at least two hours
- Avoid alcohol for at least three hours
- Switch the TV off half an hour before you go to bed
- Set an alarm to avoid “have I slept in?” panics. Surprisingly, having a regular wake-up time is more important than a regular bedtime. To avoid clock-watching make sure the clock is facing away from you.

## Can't sleep?

- Go to a different room for a while and do something that's not mentally challenging
- Have a warm, milky, caffeine-free drink
- Try a relaxation exercise (page 37-39)
- Don't lie in or nap to compensate the next day

## Still can't sleep?

Concerns often disrupt our sleep. Try thinking about them, and what you might do about them, during the day. Writing them down before you go to bed can also help you put them out of your head. You could try using the 'Problem solving' steps (page 40-41) and the 'My problem list' (page 45-46).

# Getting ready

# Being active

We all know being active is good for us. But what kind of activity, how much, and where?

Well the good news is you don't have to join a gym. Walking briskly for a total of 30 minutes, 5 days a week will not only reduce stress levels, but will also help reduce your risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

You don't have to do it all at once either. Three lots of 10 minutes works just as well, and makes it easy to fit into everyday life.

Try these other easy steps:

## Friendly stroll

Going for a walk with a friend is a great way to spend an evening and a lot cheaper than going to the pub. Joining a walking group is fun and sociable too.

## Get out with the kids

Chasing your kids around the garden or having a kick-about in the park is good for you and fun for them.

Swimming is also a great way to get exercise with the kids.

## Leave the car

When you pop out to the local shop for the paper, or you drop your kids off at school, why not walk instead of taking the car?

## Stop the bus

Get off the bus a couple of stops early on your way to work.

## Get out at lunchtime

Why not go to the shops or the park at lunchtime? The walk will also make you feel more awake in the afternoon.

## Take the stairs

Try taking the stairs instead of the lift or the escalator.

## Gardening

Gardening counts as exercise, and it's a great way to make yourself feel better about the weeding. Growing vegetables is great fun for kids.

## Green spaces

Research shows getting out to a green space can boost your mood. It's great for your kids too. So whether it's a walk round your local park or a climb up a hill, go for green!

## Find a class

There are loads of classes that you can join at your local sports or community centre. They're great for relaxation and meeting people too.

## Sign up for a charity run

Either by yourself or with a group of friends. It's a great way to get fit and do something worthwhile into the bargain.

## On your bike!

Kids and grown-ups can all feel the benefit of cycling. If you don't know where to go ask your local bike shop.

## Join a gym

Yes, we know we said you didn't have to. But remember that most council-run gyms offer discounted memberships and leisure cards. And most gyms are full of people like you who are there to do a wee bit of exercise – not train for a marathon!

For more information on being active visit [www.choosetolivebetter.com](http://www.choosetolivebetter.com)

Information about accessible sports and facilities for people with disabilities can be found at [www.dsni.co.uk](http://www.dsni.co.uk)

# Getting ready

# Relaxing and having fun

Taking a break from your hectic life - even a small one – can stop stress building up.

Being stressed can stop us doing the things we usually enjoy. But missing out on those things is also one of the causes of stress.

Are there things you used to love doing, but haven't done recently because of the pressure you're under? Making time to relax and have some fun is an important part of beating stress - even if you don't feel like it to start with.

## Some things others have enjoyed doing are...

- Going for a walk, with the dog if you've got one
- Making time to play with your kids, at home or at the swings
- Baking a cake, and sharing it with someone
- Deciding to learn something new for example, taking an evening class in something you've always wanted to do

## Meditation and deep relaxation

Learning how to clear our minds takes practice, but it's a really good way to relax and de-stress.

Try the relaxation exercises in this booklet (page 37-39).

Also look for meditation classes, books, CDs and DVDs in libraries or search online.



# Unhealthy ways to cope

People often drink, smoke or use drugs to relax.

But instead of helping us cope, these things may make stress worse - and can damage health.

## Alcohol

How much is OK?

- Men and women should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week
- It's important to spread the units throughout the week – you can't 'save up' your units for the weekend or a party
- You should drink more slowly, eat food as you're drinking, and alternate the alcohol with water
- The risk of developing a range of illnesses (eg cancer of the mouth, throat and breast) increases with any drinking on a regular basis
- If you want to cut down on your drinking, try to have several days free of alcohol each week
- If you're pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is to avoid alcohol completely, to minimise the risks to your baby

Drinking more than this can make stress worse because:

- Alcohol disrupts sleep, leaving us tired and irritable
- Hangovers make concentration harder and even simple tasks more difficult
- Alcohol can make feelings of anxiety and depression worse

# Getting ready

# Alcohol continued

- Drinking can result in stressful financial difficulties

- Knowing we're drinking too much can be stressful in itself

## Drugs

### Street and prescription drugs

The effects of street drugs can be unpredictable, as can taking more of a prescription drug than you're meant to.

Using drugs in combination or with alcohol is definitely not a good idea and can lead to overdose.

If you do decide to take drugs, you can reduce the risks by:

- finding out as much as you can about the effects of different drugs;
- never mixing alcohol and drugs, or different types of drugs;
- being careful if buying/accepting drugs from someone you don't know –

you can't be sure what you're getting;

- never driving if you've taken drugs;
- always carry a condom and never risk unprotected sex;
- planning ahead - know where you are going, how much money you need and how you are getting home.

Using drugs robs us of time and energy - things we usually don't have much of when stressed.

The damage they can do to our health, relationships and finances causes further problems and puts us in an even worse position to deal with stress.

**For more help and information on alcohol and drugs,**  
**visit [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) or [www.drugsandalcoholni.info](http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info)**

# Smoking

It's a very widely held misconception that smoking helps you relax. It actually has the opposite effect on your body by speeding up your heart rate. You can test this effect for yourself simply by taking your pulse before and after you light up.

Also, think about how stressed you feel when you're somewhere you can't smoke.

In situations like this try breathing deeply in much the same way you do when you smoke. You might find this helps give you a feeling of calm.

There are more than 600 free stop smoking services available in Northern Ireland. Visit [www.stopsmokingni.info](http://www.stopsmokingni.info) for advice and support, to find your local stop smoking service, or to order a free Quit Kit.



## Better ways to cope

It's OK to be stressed sometimes – it happens to everyone.

What's important is to deal with it in positive ways, not in ways that damage our health, our relationships and our wallets.

If we rely on drugs or alcohol to help us cope, we can find ourselves in real trouble.

Learning to relax, being more active, getting involved with others and talking or writing about how we feel are all better ways to cope.

# Getting ready

# Change for good!

Making lasting changes to your health can be hard.  
Here are some steps that can help.

Choose what *you* want to change. Be **SMART** - set, and write down, goals that are:

## Specific

Rather than 'get fit', a better goal would be 'to take a brisk walk after lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays'.

## Measurable

Set goals that can be measured. 'Get fit' is hard to measure, but it's easy to know if you walked for half an hour on Monday, Wednesday and Friday or not.

## Achievable

Start small and set goals that are within your reach.

## Relevant

Choose changes that make sense for you.

## Timely

Set a target date. Without one, it's easy to put off making the change. And give yourself a (healthy!) treat when you achieve a goal.

**Remember, things won't always go your way, but keep at it and you'll find that you can start to make small changes for the better.**

# Positive thinking

Sometimes we find it easier to tell ourselves we can't do things, even before we've tried them. Becoming more positive can help us deal with stressful situations better.

## Small steps

We often think that in order to change we need to do something radical. However the research shows that when people make small changes there can be a big difference to how they feel.

## Drop the label

Do you give up on things easily, or avoid certain situations because you label yourself as 'unsporty' or 'thick'? Be careful about using labels like these

to describe yourself. They limit what you can and will do.

## Learn to be optimistic

Try not to say or think things like "things always go wrong" or "I never get it right". There are usually lots of reasons why things go wrong. If you are making critical remarks to yourself be as specific as possible. See setbacks or failure as temporary, rather than permanent.

**Positive people are less likely to feel stressed.**

# Getting ready

# Dealing with difficult situations

The next step in dealing with your stress is to deal with difficult situations that are happening to you right now.

- Everyone faces problems or difficult situations in their lives, and those problems can lead to stress
- Sometimes situations are outside our control, and we may have to accept we can't change them
- Stress can sometimes make problems seem worse than they are. This section helps to give you the confidence to cope better

# Working on your problems

Taking steps to deal with your problems will make you feel better able to cope with them.

## Top tips include

- Dividing problems into small bite-sized pieces and dealing with them one at a time
- Trying to deal with problems as they arise so that they don't get worse
- Prioritising what has to be dealt with now and what can wait

## Turn to the following pages for some suggestions on common problems:

- money worries (page 42)
- relationship problems (page 26-27)
- unemployment or the threat of redundancy (page 42-43)

- difficulties with children or parenting (page 28-29)
- problems at work (page 43)
- discrimination or unfair treatment (page 43)
- family problems (page 43)
- the loss of a loved one (page 44)
- illness (page 44)
- caring for someone who's ill or disabled (page 44)
- domestic abuse (page 44)
- crime (page 44)

Now might be a good time to try the practical problem solving exercise (page 40-41).

# Coping better

# Thinking straight

## Stress can make us think irrationally.

If we're worrying about our problems all the time, we might start expecting the worst, and become more pessimistic. And we might blow things out of proportion.

Stress can twist our thoughts so that we can't think straight, and that makes it more difficult to do something positive to deal with problems.

If you think this might be happening to you, think about these questions in light of your own worries:

**What's the worst that could happen?**

**What if someone else I know was in my shoes. What would they do?  
How would they react?**

**Are my thoughts based on real facts? Is there another way to think about things?**

Being optimistic can be hard when you're in the middle of a difficult situation, but trying to sort out fact from fiction in your head might help you think more clearly and cut worries down to size. It sounds daft, but hoping for the best can often mean that the best will happen.

## Take action now

You could also try the 'Three good things' exercise at the back of this booklet (page 47-48). Research shows that focusing on the good things that happen can make us feel more optimistic.



# Talk about it, write about it

You don't have to solve every problem on your own. Sometimes you need help. Talking about your feelings can be the first step towards dealing with things.

Lots of us find it hard to start talking about difficult problems. Sometimes it's embarrassing to talk about feelings and sometimes we don't actually know exactly what's wrong. But sharing a problem can ease stress, even if you can't find an answer straight away.

## Who?

If you have a personal or emotional problem, the right person for you to talk to might be someone who knows you really well. But you have to be able to trust them to take you seriously and to keep your business private.

This might be difficult, especially if friends and family are actually part of the problem. If so, it might be better to speak to a professional person first.

Go to [www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info) to find services in your area. If you are in distress or despair call Lifeline on **0808 808 8000** (Deaf and hard of hearing Textphone **18001 0808 808 8000**) to talk confidentially to a lifeline counsellor. Or speak to your GP for advice.

## What?

Sometimes it's difficult to know what the problem actually is. If your friend or your GP were to ask you "what's wrong?" do you know what you would say? If you can't pin down the facts, you can still talk about feelings. If there's more than one feeling, try to say or list them all. For example, someone might say "I just feel exhausted all the time" and "I feel so angry I could just.....".

# Coping better

# Talk about it, write about it continued

## How?

If you think you'll have trouble saying what's on your mind, write it down on a piece of paper first. Sometimes this is enough to shrink worries down to

size. Try using the 'My problem list' (page 45-46), and show your list and this booklet to the person you want to talk to if you think that will help.

## Planning ahead

**Stressful times are sometimes unavoidable.  
Planning ahead can help us cope better.**

### Learn to say 'no'

It's easy to keep saying 'yes' - especially to friends, family and work colleagues.

You can't do everything and look after yourself. Be realistic about how much spare time and energy you have.

### Hard times ahead

If you know you have a difficult time (like moving house or changes at work) coming up:

- arrange to get help if you can



- see what other responsibilities you can offload or put off
- pay extra attention to sleeping and eating well
- step up fun, physical activity and relaxation to compensate
- take some 'me-time' each day to do things you enjoy, even if it's just for 10 minutes
- have a change of scene

# Relationships

They're a source of support and help keep us happy and well. But when relationships go wrong, they can cause lots of stress.

## Good communication

Strong relationships rely on good communication, whether they're with friends, partners or family members. Set aside a regular time to talk through important issues and let each other know how you're feeling.

## Positive v negative comments

During the conversations you have with your partner, friends or loved ones, think about how many positive and constructive comments you make (such as asking questions, being kind, listening or smiling) compared to the negative and destructive ones (hostility, anger, shouting, mocking).

Coping better

# Relationships continued

People in good relationships make far more positive comments about their partner than they do negative ones. Check out with your partner how they think you respond to them.

People will get more out of their time with you if you can...

- Look them in the eye as you're speaking
- Ask questions about what they're doing or feeling
- Be interested in what they have to say
- Try to be encouraging and positive
- Celebrate their good news and successes

## Arguments

Frequent arguments can damage relationships. Couple counselling from Relate could get you talking more easily again - call [028 9032 3454](tel:02890323454) for details.

## Domestic abuse

You shouldn't ever be afraid of your partner. If they are using violence, threats or intimidation, that's domestic abuse. For advice and support, contact the Domestic & Sexual Abuse helpline on [0808 802 1414](tel:08088021414).

## Splitting up

Keeping on good terms can be especially important if you have children.

Family mediation from Relate could help - call [028 9032 3454](tel:02890323454).



# Children and parenting

Family life can be rewarding but is a common source of stress.

## Babies and infants

Looking after babies and small children can be stressful, but remember, this stage doesn't last long.

- Try and find time for yourself – make sure you look after yourself and stay healthy
- Sleep whenever you can
- Take time to relax – you could do a quick relaxation exercise (page 37-39)

## Postnatal depression

If you feel low, anxious or find yourself crying a lot, tell your doctor. Postnatal depression is common - around 1 in 10 mums get it.

It can be treated and most mums recover well.

Remember that with all the changes and pressures a baby brings, fathers can feel down too.

## Older children

Once they're fed, warm and safe, the best thing you can give them is your time.

Spending time with your kids is also a great way to get your mind off other worries.

## Behavioural problems

If you are worried about your child's behaviour speak to your GP.

# Coping better

# Children and parenting continued

## Bullying

Help is available, you should speak to your child's school. They have a duty to tackle bullying. This includes helping bullies to change their behaviour.

## Looking after yourself

Your child's needs are important, but so are your own. If your stress makes you ill you might not be able to help them at all.

Look after yourself by getting a little 'me-time' each day to relax, have fun and enjoy life.

## Losing your temper

Children often don't understand the pressure you're under - or that they can put you under!

If you find yourself losing your temper a lot, it could be a sign that you need to take steps to control your stress.

**For advice and support on all parenting issues -**

**Call Parentline NI on 0808 8020 400.**

**Email [parentline@ci-ni.org.uk](mailto:parentline@ci-ni.org.uk)**

**or visit [www.familysupportni.gov.uk](http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk)**



# Anxiety and depression

Living with stress all the time greatly increases the chances of becoming ill with depression or anxiety and of experiencing panic attacks.

## Anxiety

A little worry keeps us safe, but constant worrying isn't normal.

Trying the steps to deal with stress in this booklet can help with anxiety, but anxiety is often a deeper issue and you may need extra help. Speak to your GP.

## Panic attack

Pounding heart? Can't breathe?  
Feelings of dread?

You could be having panic attacks. They're common in people with high stress levels.

See your doctor as soon as you can to check out any physical health problems and to get help to deal with panic attacks.

Panic attacks are frightening and can make living a normal life very difficult, but they can be sorted.

## Depression

Ongoing stress can lead to depression which affects our energy and concentration, making life even harder and more stressful.

An aerial photograph of a lush green landscape, likely a rural area. It shows rolling hills, fields, and clusters of trees. The lighting is soft, suggesting a hazy or overcast day. The overall tone is peaceful and natural.

Coping better



# Anxiety and depression continued

## Help for anxiety, panic and depression

- Try to get more physical activity
- Talk through your problems with someone you trust
- Write about your problems
- Speak to your doctor about how you're feeling

“It’s a horrible feeling... as if a black cloud is over you really... and you can’t seem to progress or deal with things the way you want to.”

Saif

Visit [www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info) for information on mental health issues.





# Thinking about suicide?

- If you are feeling suicidal you can contact Lifeline on 0808 808 8000 (Deaf and hard of hearing Textphone 18001 0808 808 8000) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- For confidential emotional support 24 hours a day contact the Samaritans on 116 123
- If you think you need an emergency ambulance you should dial 999



Coping better

# Dealing with the past

Stress is often about the problems we face day to day.

But some people's problems have a lot to do with what happened in the past.

For example...

- someone who was hit as a child might find themselves stuck in violent relationships as an adult
- children who were sexually abused might have problems trusting people when they grow up
- someone who was bullied at school might be bullied at work

Sometimes it's obvious how bad experiences in the past can make life difficult right now. But that connection isn't always easy for us to see ourselves.

These contacts may help:

[www.nexusni.org](http://www.nexusni.org) for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, or telephone

028 9032 6803

Victim Support NI is a national charity that helps people affected by crime. Visit: [www.victimsupportni.com](http://www.victimsupportni.com) or use these contact details:

Belfast: 028 9024 3133 or email [belfast@victimsupportni.org.uk](mailto:belfast@victimsupportni.org.uk)

Foyle: 028 7137 0086 or email [foyle@victimsupportni.org.uk](mailto:foyle@victimsupportni.org.uk)

It can be helpful to talk to a professional therapist who can help to work out the answers to questions like...

- “why does this same situation happen to me again and again?”
- “why can’t I stop it, when this is so bad for me?”
- “why do I sometimes burst into tears for no reason?”
- “years later, I still can’t cope with this bereavement”
- “if I don’t keep a lid on my feelings, I feel like I might explode”

If your problem seems a bit like this, try to talk about it with someone you trust (including your GP). Even if the best you can say is “I know I shouldn’t feel like this, but I can’t work out why,” that can be a useful first step.

# Learning from bad experiences

# Take action now

There are lots of practical, positive steps we can take to deal with stress.

- Doing relaxation exercises
- Working through problems
- Talking to someone
- Getting involved in the community
- Helping others

All of these can help, but starting with a relaxation exercise will put you in the right frame of mind to start dealing with your stress.



Paying attention to our breathing can be a good way to relax and focus our thoughts.

The two simple exercises to follow ease some of the immediate effects

of stress - tense muscles, irregular breathing and poor concentration.

Try them every day for a couple of weeks and any time you feel stressed to see if you notice a difference.



Take action now

# Relaxation exercise 1

## Simple breathing exercise - comfortable stomach breathing

Sitting comfortably, breathe gently, slowly and evenly.

Count in your mind, letting each count last about a second. Use a clock if you like:

1. Rest your hand on your belly button. Take a normal breath in and hold it as you count to 5.
2. Breathe out slowly, relaxing your shoulders, face and body, as you count to 4.
3. Breathe in slowly, letting your hand move outwards with your stomach, as you count to 4.
4. Breathe out slowly and let your hand and stomach move inwards, as you count to 4.
5. Breathe like this for 5 more breaths, focusing on your hand and stomach as they rise and fall, relaxing more with each breath.
6. Hold your breath like you did at the beginning and repeat the whole exercise again.

Notice the stretching sensation as you breathe in. As you breathe out notice the relaxation that follows. With practice, you may find you can breathe more slowly.

**Practice this exercise regularly so it's easy to use any time you feel anxious. You can also use it in bed to help you sleep.**

# Relaxation exercise 2

## Simple muscle relaxation exercise

When stressed, we carry tension in our muscles without noticing it. This exercise makes you aware of that tension so you can let it go.

Sit or lie down and make yourself comfortable.

As you do this exercise, use the comfortable stomach breathing from exercise 1.

1. Breathe in, clench your right hand, notice the tension in your hand and arm.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

2. Breathe in, clench your left hand, notice the tension.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

Notice how comfortably heavy your hands and arms feel when you let them relax.

3. Breathe in, clench your thighs and buttocks, notice the tension.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

4. Breathe in, bend your feet up, notice the tension in your legs and feet.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

5. Breathe in and point your toes, notice the tension in your legs and feet.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

Allow the relaxation to deepen. Notice the pleasurable sensation of heaviness in your legs and arms as you relax them.

## Take action now

# Relaxation exercise 2 continued

6. Breathe in and 'shrug' your shoulders to your ears, notice the tension in your shoulders and neck.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

7. Breathe in and lift your eyebrows, wrinkling your forehead, notice the tension.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

8. Breathe in and squeeze your eyes closed, notice the tension around your eyes.

*Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.*

9. Breathe in and tense your jaw, notice the tension in your mouth and jaw.

*Breathe out, notice how comfortable your whole face feels as you allow it to relax.*

10. Continue to relax, breathing calmly, using comfortable stomach breathing.

**Practice this exercise regularly to make it easier to let go of tensions when you're under pressure.**





# Problem solving

Facing up to problems actually reduces stress and increases our confidence.

Find 10 minutes - and a pen - and let's have a go...

## 1. Get ready!

Do a relaxation exercise (page 37-39) to help focus your mind, or go for a walk before you start. Even relaxing just a little bit is worth it.

## 2. Take a reality check.

Are your worries and fears realistic? Take a look at 'Thinking straight' (page 23). Problems still there? Move on to step 3.

## 3. Be clear what the problem is.

Write down everything that's bothering you on the 'My problem list' (page 45).

## 4. Well done! Now choose just one problem to work on.

Write it in the first problem space on the 'Steps I can take' list (page 45).

## 5. Break it down.

Think of small, specific steps to start sorting the problem. Write them under 'Steps I can take'. Look for sources of help and support to assist you (page 42-44) as a starting point. Give each step a time when you'll do it by. Check off each step when you've done it.



# Take action now

# Problem solving continued

## 6. Be realistic

Take one step at a time - steady effort is needed for lasting change. Congratulate yourself - look at the steps you've already taken. Be patient - give your steps time to work.

## 7. Keep at it

Fixed that first problem? Well done! Give yourself a reward and tick it off the list.

If your steps haven't worked...

- Work on another problem - come back to this one later
- Sleeping on it or talking to someone may help
- Some solutions need ongoing effort - see "Change for good!" (page 19) for more ideas

Sometimes learning new things can be frustrating. Keep going and it will make you stronger. And learn from setbacks and mistakes – don't dwell on them. This is the best way to improve. Remember, you **can** change.



# When you are deciding what to do about your problems, some of these suggestions might be helpful:

## Money worries

- Talk to your bank or building society about how they can help you manage your money
- If you face going into the red, warn your bank. An authorised overdraft is much cheaper than an unauthorised one
- If you're having to choose which debts to pay off, you'll find advice at: [www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/dealing-debt-problems](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/dealing-debt-problems)

- Look for cheaper gas & electricity deals, and get help with energy and water savings by visiting [www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)
- For advice on benefits, housing, finance and legal issues, contact Advice NI at [www.adviceni.net](http://www.adviceni.net) or visit [www.citizensadvice.co.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.co.uk)

For confidential and impartial advice on all debt problems call Step Change Debt Charity free on 0800 138 1111 or visit [www.stepchange.org](http://www.stepchange.org)

## Unemployment or the threat of redundancy

Read your contract of employment to understand your rights to redundancy pay. The statutory legal minimum currently stands at one week for every complete year worked, up to a maximum of 12 weeks.

If you aren't able to line up another job straight away but are actively looking for work, you should be able to claim jobseeker's allowance. You may also be entitled to claim other benefits.

# Take action now

# Problem solving continued

Visit your local job centre for advice or go online at [www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/jobs-and-benefits-offices](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/jobs-and-benefits-offices)

Check whether you have any payment protection insurance (PPI) for your mortgage, personal loans or credit cards. PPI covers your monthly repayments if you suffer an accident, sickness or unemployment (it's sometimes called ASU cover).

If you're struggling with your mortgage repayments, let your lender know as soon as possible. They may agree a reduced payment plan, or let you repay the interest only until you have another job.

Problems at work, discrimination or unfair treatment

Talk to your manager about reducing your workload, or getting extra training or help.

Speak to your union if you're a member. You could also contact the Human Rights Commission on **028 9024 3987** or [www.nihrc.org](http://www.nihrc.org), the Labour Relations Agency on **03300 555 300** or [www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk), or the Equality Commission on **028 9050 0600** or [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)

Relationship problems

Read page 26-27 of this booklet for more information.

Call Relate who deal with couple counselling, family mediation and family support on **028 9032 3454**.

## Difficulties with children and parenting

- Read page 28-29 of this booklet
- Call Parentline NI free on 0808 8020 400 for confidential advice on any parenting issue.

## Domestic abuse

- Don't suffer any longer. Call the 24 hour Domestic & Sexual Abuse Helpline on 0808 802 1414 or email [help@dsahelpline.org](mailto:help@dsahelpline.org)
- Or Women's Aid on 028 9066 6049 or email [support@belfastwomensaid.org.uk](mailto:support@belfastwomensaid.org.uk)
- Or the Men's Advisory Project on 028 9024 1929 (Belfast) 028 7116 0001 (Foyle)

## The loss of a loved one

- Try calling Cruse Bereavement Care on 0808 808 1677

## Illness

- Talk to your GP on any health issue.
- If you have a long-term illness, your GP will put you in touch with support services and groups

## Caring for someone who is ill or disabled

- Is there anyone else who can help and give you a break?
- Call Carers Northern Ireland - support for anyone caring for a relative or loved one on 028 9043 9843

## Crime

- Call the PSNI on 101 to get connected to your local police station, or call Victim Support NI on 028 9024 3133 (Belfast) or 028 7137 0086 (Foyle).

“Still there's problems and there's always more but it's better now I'm chipping away at them.”

Dineo

Take action now

# My problem list

Writing down your problems is a good place to start. Once you have written them down move on to the next page to work out what steps you can take to start to solve them. For some ideas see page 42.

Problem	Steps I can take	When?	Progress

# My problem list

Problem	Steps I can take	When?	Progress

Take action now

# Three good things

Research shows that writing about three things that went well, and thinking about why each good thing happened can improve our mood and help us to feel more optimistic. Try doing this once a week before you go to bed and see if it makes you feel better.

Use this sheet to get you started:

WEEK 1	
Three things that went well	Why did they happen?
1.	
2.	
3.	



## WEEK 2

Three things that went well

1.

2.

3.

Why did they happen?

## WEEK 3

Three things that went well

1.

2.

3.

Why did they happen?

# Getting involved

A sense of belonging, having people to talk to and sharing experiences helps us stay happy and well.

Getting involved in the community helps us cope better when times are hard.

## Belonging matters

It's human nature to feel better when we're involved with others, especially if we are working towards something that's bigger than ourselves. This could be following your team, or volunteering to help others.

If there are problems where you live that need to be fixed, let your councillor, MLA or MP know about it. See [www.niassembly.gov.uk](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk) and local authority websites for contact details.

## What can I do

There's lots going on in your community. Check community centre and library notice boards and the local press to find out about groups and activities you can get involved with.

Even saying hello to your neighbours can be a good start.

# Helping others

Helping others can make us feel better about ourselves and better connected to those around us.

## Helping friends and family members in need

This can be as simple as getting them to talk about what's happening and listening to their problems and worries.

- Try not to interrupt them
- Don't feel you have to give advice or try to solve their problems
- Friendly silences give people time to think

Encourage them to seek help if they need it. They might find this guide useful - why not get them a copy?

## Volunteering

Voluntary work is work for a not-for-profit organisation, or work for someone who is not a family member, where only reasonable expenses are paid. Volunteering helps others and can improve our own situation.

There are thousands of things you can do in Northern Ireland, such as

- helping out at playgroups
- visiting elderly people or hospital patients
- clearing canals or planting trees
- working in a charity shop



## Take action now

# Helping others continued

You can:

- get the satisfaction of feeling useful
- brush up on your skills and learn new ones
- get out and meet new people

Volunteers often go on to find paid work in the same kind of role.

Volunteering shouldn't affect your right to benefits, but always check with your personal benefits adviser before you start. Go to [www.volunteernow.co.uk](http://www.volunteernow.co.uk) or [www.tcv.org.uk/northernireland](http://www.tcv.org.uk/northernireland) for more information on conservation volunteers.

## Further help

### Self-help

Self-help books, websites and leaflets can help you take control. Ask at your local library and search online.

### Stress management classes

Ask your doctor or at your local community centre.

### See your doctor about stress and mood problems

The more information you give, the better they'll be able to help you:

- Be clear you think you're having problems with stress and mood
- Say how you feel and how it's affecting your day-to-day life, work and relationships

- Tell them about any physical symptoms - aches, pains, stomach upsets, difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Tell them about any troubling thoughts, especially if you've been thinking about death or taking your own life
- Tell them about any difficult situations - it's helpful if your doctor understands what's going on in your life

Making a list of what you want to say is useful - or tell a trusted friend and take them with you.

### Talking treatments

Talking treatments, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), help people work through and change the way they think and react. CBT is an effective treatment for mild to moderate depression, anxiety and panic attacks.

### Counselling

Counselling helps people work through their thoughts, feelings and reactions.

Ask your doctor about counselling or CBT or visit [www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info) for further information.

### Need to talk?

Call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000 (Deaf and hard of hearing Textphone 18001 0808 808 8000) if you are in distress or despair, or contact Samaritans on 116 123 and at [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)



# Take action now

# Notes


# Notes


Take action now

# Stressing less and enjoying life more

*find out how inside...*

For more information and advice on dealing with stress, visit:

**[www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)**

March 2022

With grateful thanks to everyone who took part in the research and testing of this booklet.

Kindly reproduced with permission from the Scottish Government.



**Public Health  
Agency**

Public Health Agency, 12–22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)