

buzz

Manchester
Health & Wellbeing
Service



From Distress to De-stress

A guide to managing stress
and its effects on your body



Produced by buzz Manchester Health & Wellbeing Service
in partnership with Manchester Primary Care Mental Health Team.
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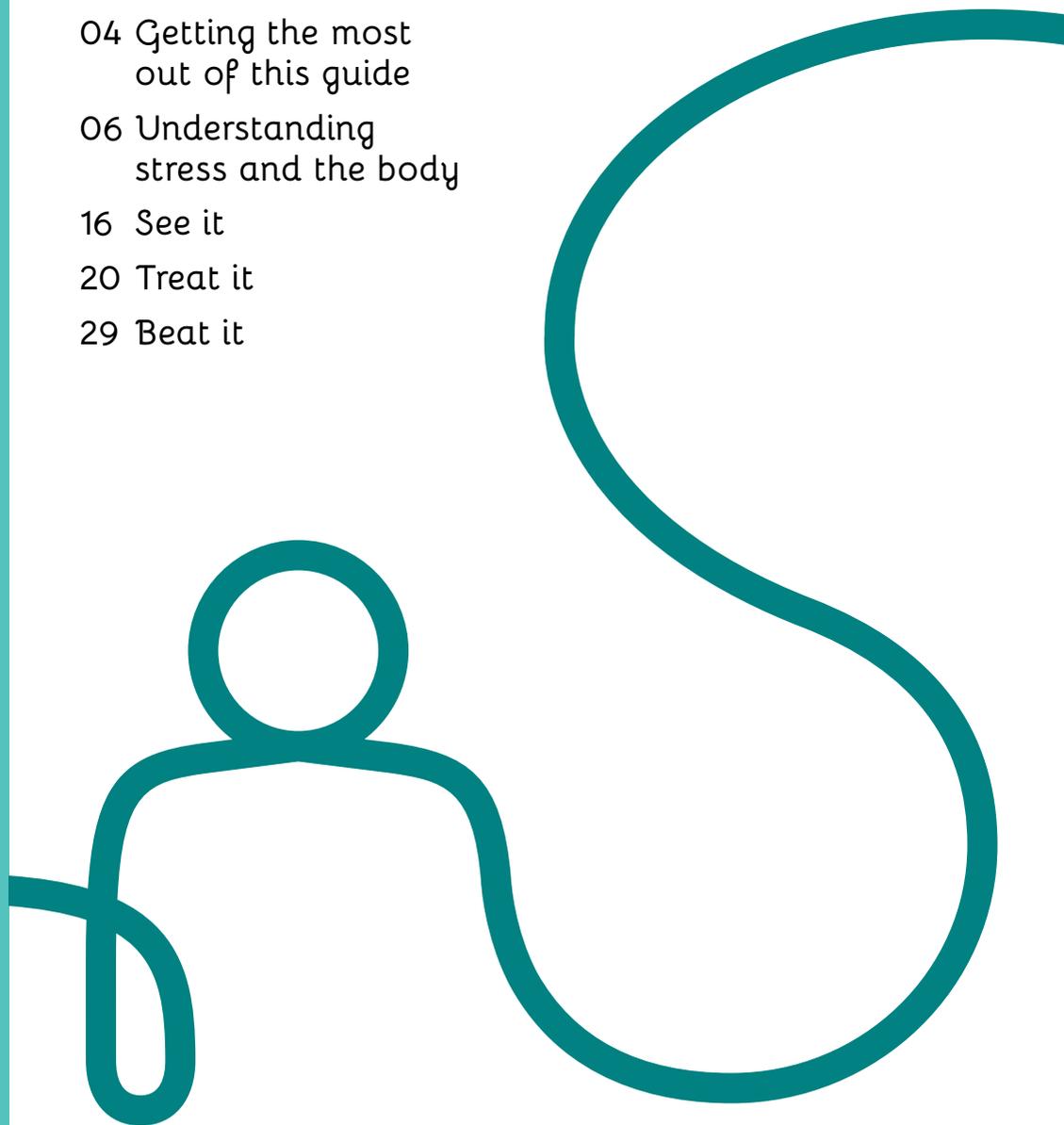
www.buzzmanchester.co.uk

This guide is one of a series about mental health and wellbeing by buzz Manchester Health & Wellbeing Service. You can find more guides at www.mhim.org.uk

‘From Distress to De-stress’ is all about stress and how it affects the body. It’s important to remember that feeling stressed is very common.

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Getting the most out of this guide

This guide aims to:

- Help you understand how stress affects the body
- Help you see how stress affects your life
- Give you ideas to help you manage stress
- Give you ideas to help you overcome stress

There are a number of tools in this guide to help you manage stress more effectively.

A big part of dealing with stress is figuring out what is affecting your stress levels. This guide will help you figure out ways of coping and save you from adopting unhealthy coping methods.

If you find it hard to work through the guide, you might find it useful to talk to someone. This could be a health worker such as your doctor or practice nurse. At the end of the guide there are details about where to get more information, help and treatment.

Understanding stress and the body

This section explores how stress affects the body.

See it

This section will help you see how stress affects your life.

Treat it

This section has a range of tips to help you deal with the way stress affects your body.

Beat it

This section gives you more ideas on how to make progress. It also lists where you can get further support.

As you read this guide, it will ask you to think about what is going on in your life and how you are feeling. There are spaces in the guide for you to write things down. You may find that this helps you think more clearly about how you feel.

What you'll need:

- A pen and maybe a notebook for extra notes
- Time for reading and thinking about how you can help yourself
- Somewhere quiet to read and think
- To keep going and pace yourself by taking one step at a time
- Support from a family member, friend or health professional if needed

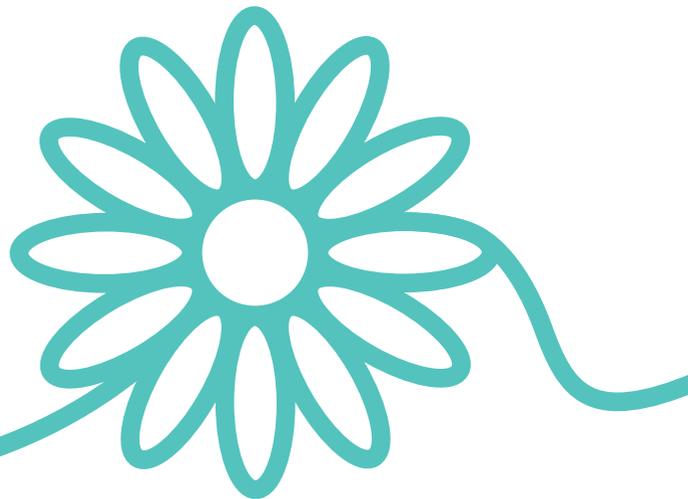
Understanding stress

Stress is the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure. It can affect your thoughts, emotions, behaviour and body.

Stress comes from the pressures we feel in our everyday lives including big events like job interviews and exams. It can be stressful trying something new if you are having problems at work or even dealing with other people. Money and debt issues are also a common cause of stress. This can take its toll on the body and affect the quality of everyday life unless you take the time to de-stress.

A certain amount of pressure can be helpful. It makes us get up in the morning but when you have too much pressure and you feel unable to cope, it turns into stress.

Everyone experiences stress at some point in their life. If it isn't addressed it can cause serious illness so it is important to recognise symptoms of stress early on.



There are many negative changes and effects that happen to the mind and body when under stress.

The most common negative effect is known as anxiety. Anxiety is a feeling of apprehension or fear.

Feelings of anxiety can take many forms, for example:

- Panic: strong, sometimes sudden feelings of panic or fear that are hard to control
- Phobias: fear of something that poses little or no actual danger
- Social phobia: fear or anxiety about being in public or social situations
- Health anxiety: constant worry or fear of getting ill or dying
- Generalised anxiety disorder: constant worry about everyday things
- Obsessive compulsive disorder: unwanted and frequent thoughts and fears that can lead a person to repeat actions again and again to try to settle their anxiety
- Post traumatic stress disorder: long-term anxiety following a traumatic event

You may need to get more in-depth help to deal with these problems. A good place to start is talking to your doctor. There are also other organisations that can help. There is a list at the end of this guide on page 33.

Recognising stress

It is very common to experience stressful situations. However it can become a big problem if stress has been impacting your life for more than two weeks running.

It is important to seek help if you feel:

- You can't cope and it is out of your control
- You are stressed in situations where there is no threat/danger
- It affects how you live your life
- It stops you doing what you want
- Worrying affects your sleep
- Symptoms are severe or unpleasant
- It happens too often and for too long

Here is a list of symptoms caused by stress. Please tick any that you often experience.

You feel...

- Anxious, worried, fearful, nervous
- Tense, on edge, agitated
- Like something terrible is going to happen
- Like things are out of control

Your mind is...

- Forgetful
- Racing or hard to switch off
- Going over things again and again
- Unable to focus, jumps from one thing to another
- Overestimating danger/imagining the worst
- Thinking that you cannot cope
- Underestimating what help there is
- Unable to control or stop worrying
- Focusing on what your body feels like

Your thoughts might be...

- 'I can't cope'
- 'Things are out of control'
- 'I'm going mad'
- 'I'm going to faint/collapse'
- 'I'm going to have a heart attack'
- 'I'm going to make a fool of myself'
- 'I've got to go. Now!'

You might behave by...

- Not being able to sit still and/or finding it hard to relax
- Starting a job before finishing another
- Avoiding places where you get anxious
- Leaving situations that make you feel stressed
- Trying to do things perfectly
- Trying to control everything to help prevent danger
- Eating more or less
- Drinking, smoking and taking drugs

Your body symptoms are...

- Can't sleep
- Dizzy
- Tired
- Tearful
- Headaches
- Blurred vision
- Pupils get bigger
- Ringing in ears
- Dry mouth
- Throat tightening
- Different tastes or smells
- Breathing fast and shallow (hyperventilation)
- Shortness of breath
- Neck and shoulder muscles tense
- Hot and flushed
- Heart palpitations
- Heart racing
- Chest pain
- Feel sick
- Numbness/tingling toes and fingers
- Butterflies in stomach
- Need to go to the toilet
- Sweating
- Leg muscles tense
- Shaky legs/hands
- Depersonalisation (feel like you are not really there)

The stress reaction: 'fight or flight' system

Stress causes a surge of hormones in your body. These stress hormones are released to enable you to deal with pressures or threats. This is known as the 'fight or flight' system.

Imagine a caveman who goes out to hunt. As he walks along, a sabre-toothed tiger jumps out to attack him. He needs to fight it or run away (flight). The body's automatic reaction is to protect itself from danger so it releases adrenaline when it senses a threat. The caveman's heartbeat and breathing get faster, blood is sent to the muscles and brain which makes him more alert and gives him more strength.

When he has run away or fought the tiger, the effects of adrenaline wear off. His body then returns to normal.

Whenever you get stressed out your body has this 'fight or flight' reaction. This could be when you are driving or even when opening your mail. But you do not tend to flee or fight your way out of what has happened.

In these normal everyday situations it means that your adrenaline isn't 'burnt off' enough and your body stays stressed. The way that stress affects your body can feel dangerous but it is normal. It is your body trying to protect you.

Over the page there is a list of symptoms caused by stress and how it affects the body.

“The physical affects of stress can feel dangerous but it is your body's way of protecting you.”



How stress affects the body

The body's automatic reaction is to protect itself from danger and is quite normal. A surge of adrenaline activates a whole range of physical responses to get the body ready for 'fight or flight'. This can feel quite scary and some people often worry that they feel unwell.

It can help to understand what these physical symptoms mean. The table below explains this. A visit to your GP is advised if you are experiencing these physical symptoms to rule out any physical illness and for further advice on how to manage stress.

What happens	Why
Heart racing Heart palpitations	Your brain and leg and arm muscles need more blood so your heart pumps faster
Breathing fast and shallow Shortness of breath Chest pain Tight chest	Your body needs more oxygen so you breathe faster. Your chest muscles are being used a lot to do this
Headaches	Your brain is working overtime. More blood goes to your brain so it is ready for action
Tense neck and shoulder muscles Tense leg muscles Shaky legs and arms	Your body is getting ready for action. More blood goes to your leg and arm muscles
Butterflies in stomach Feeling sick	Your stomach and intestines are getting less blood
Numb/tingling toes and fingers	Your fingers and toes are getting less blood
Being sick Need to go to the toilet	Your body wants to be lighter so it can escape

What happens	Why
Dry mouth Tight throat	Your body does not want to digest food during 'fight or flight'. It stops making saliva
Sweating Hot and flushed	Your body is getting ready to cool you down. It thinks you will run away or fight
Tired	Your body is alert and ready for action even when you are at rest. This wears the body out
Blurred vision Pupils get bigger	Your pupils get bigger so that you can see what is around you better. Your eyes take longer to focus on things that are close up
Tearful	You can feel awful and out of control. This is upsetting. Crying is a natural response. It also helps to get rid of adrenaline
Can't sleep Forgetful Ringing in ears Can't concentrate Strange tastes and smells Feel like you are not really there	Your nervous system is overloaded. Your brain is trying to deal with a lot, for too long

How stress affects the body

Hyperventilation

Sometimes when people are stressed they tend to over-breathe. This means that they take short, shallow breaths. This is called hyperventilation. It adds to the stress on the body which can create more problems. Listed below are three ways your body reacts when you hyperventilate.

Less blood goes to the brain:

- You can feel dizzy, confused or have a sense of unreality
- Your vision can become blurry
- You can feel breathless or as if you are choking

Less blood goes to other parts of the body:

- You can get numbness or tingling in hands and feet
- Your heart rate can get faster
- Your muscles can become tight

Chest tightness or pains:

- Your chest muscles are doing a lot of work

Hyperventilation is generally not dangerous. The symptoms will subside as you take control of your breathing.

Meet Ahmed. Ahmed is having a stressful time at work. Let's see how he copes with his situation.

Ahmed's situation

Ahmed thinks he can't cope with the pressures of his job. He feels worried and nervous about going to work and finds it hard to sleep. His emotions make his body feel tense and upset his stomach. He also feels quite tired, so he decides to take a day off. He feels a bit better for a while but by the end of the day he starts to feel worse and that he can't cope with going back to work.

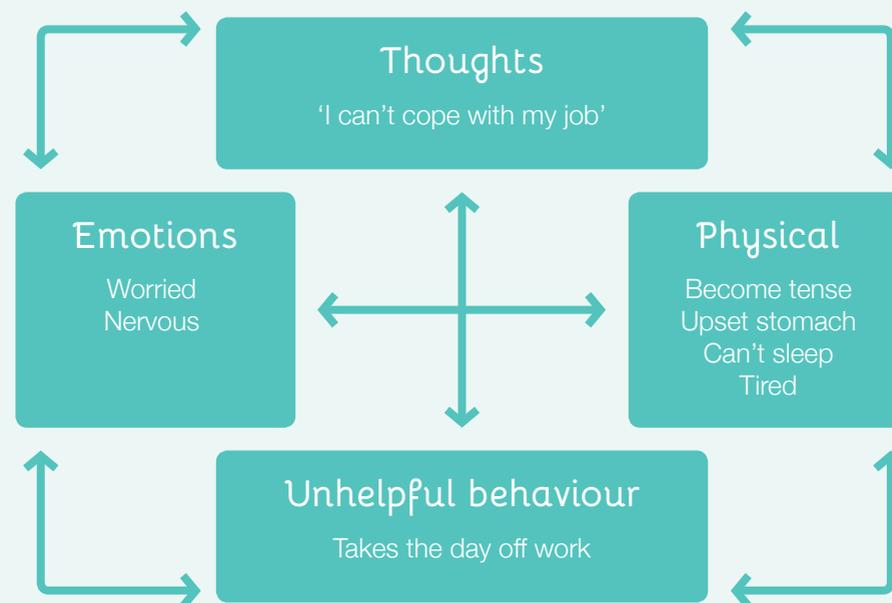
Model of what keeps stress going

Example

Stress can affect the following areas:

- Body (physical)
- Emotions
- Thoughts
- Things you do (behaviour)
- Things in your life (situations)

The arrows on the diagram below show how these areas affect each other.



What Ahmed is experiencing is a 'vicious cycle'. His thoughts are going round and round and it is hard to find a way out and deal with the cause of the stress.

He is avoiding the problem. It is best to tackle things one small step at a time. In Ahmed's situation he could do this by talking to his boss about his problems to relieve some of his stress.

See it

In this section you will start to have a look at how stress might be affecting you in your life.

It is important to evaluate the sources of stress before you can begin to make any changes.



Your situation

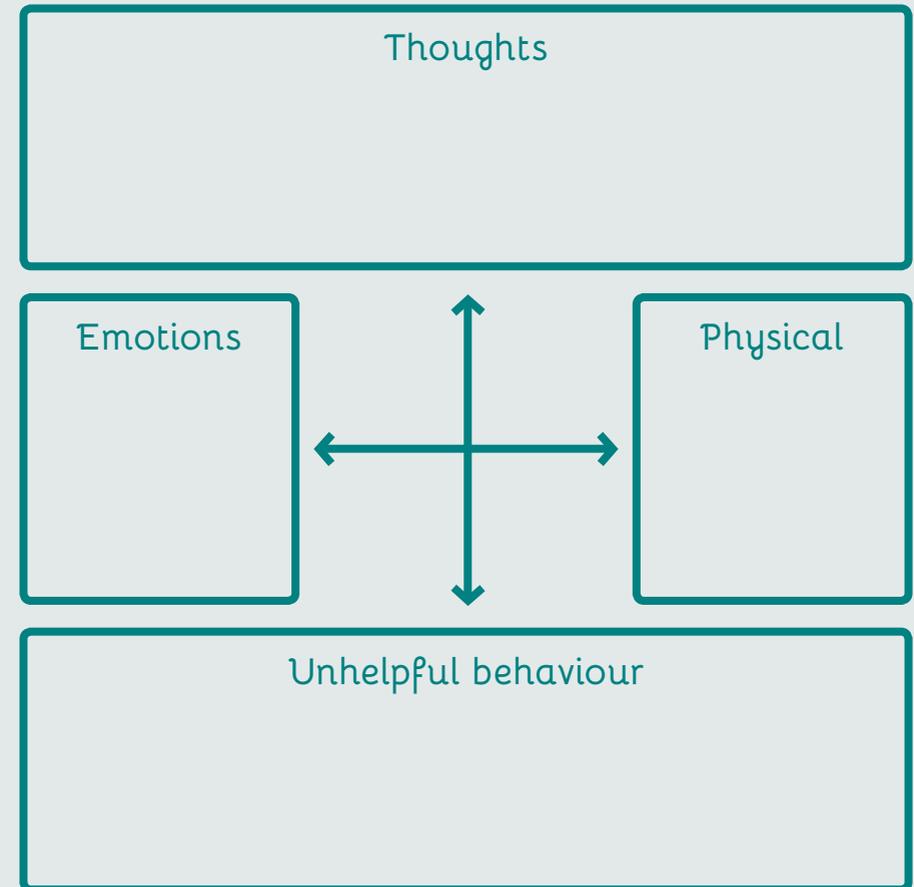


Things in your life that make you feel stressed

Have a go at drawing your own cycle on the diagram below.

Use the symptoms check list from pages 8 and 9, or think about the last time you felt stressed.

You can refer to Ahmed's situation on page 14 and 15.



“Stress could easily become a vicious cycle that feels hard to break but you can do something about it.”



Treat it

Going from distress to de-stress

So now you know how stress affects your body. The good news is that you can do something about it.

The opposite of the 'fight or flight' system is the 'rest and digest' system. They are like two sides of a seesaw. The 'fight or flight' system is at one end. The 'rest and digest' system is at the other end. When stress is high, relaxation is low. When relaxation is high, stress is low.

The body cannot be stressed and relaxed at the same time.

How to de-stress using relaxation

Often when you focus on your stress, it can make you feel even worse. This is because it sets off your 'fight or flight' system. What you need to do is set off your 'rest and digest' system. This will help your body get rid of the adrenaline. It will de-stress your body. You will be able to deal with things more easily and with a clearer head.

Why does relaxation work?

When you relax it allows your 'rest and digest' system to take over. Your body can then de-stress itself. This will reduce the effect stress has on your body.

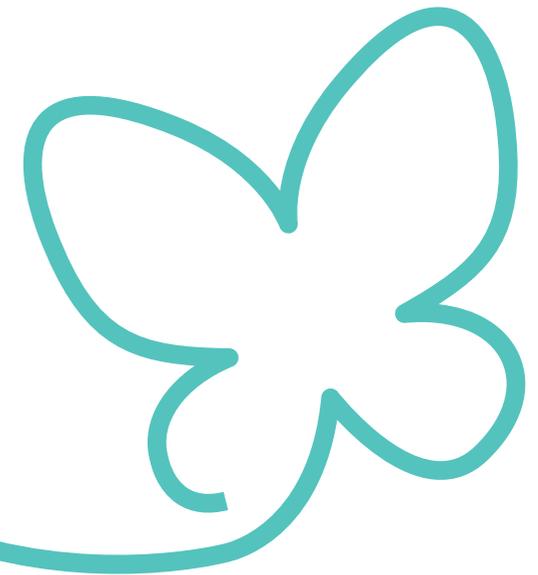
You can use relaxation skills to help your body deal with stress. They can reduce the amount of adrenaline in your blood so your 'fight or flight' reaction subsides and the physical symptoms of stress disappear. This means it will take more to stress you out than it did before!

Relaxation is also good for you in the long-term. It can improve your physical health. One example is that it can lower blood pressure.

The relaxation skills covered in this guide are:

- Controlled breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Getting a good night's sleep

The next part of the guide will show you how to use them.



Controlled breathing



Breathing is a simple way to take back control over your body.

There are two parts to controlled breathing. You can download some free relaxation audios from www.mhim.org.uk

Begin by lying down comfortably with your eyes closed. Let your arms, legs and feet flop out to the sides and let your mouth fall open if it feels comfortable.

When you are ready follow the steps on page 23. Start with 'Part one' and then move onto 'Part two'.

Part one

1. Start by breathing out (exhale). This empties your lungs
2. Then breathe in (inhale) and count how long it takes you to fill your lungs
3. Now exhale and take longer than it took you to breathe in. For example, if you breathe in to the count of three, breathe out to the count of five
4. You could also hold your breath for a couple of seconds at the end of your inhale. Only do this if it feels comfortable for you
5. Do this for each breath. You can then try to extend your exhale even more. Keep doing this for at least five minutes

Part two

1. Take your hands and place them on your stomach, at the level of your belly button
2. Pull your stomach in as much as possible to exhale
3. Next push your belly out to inhale. Don't worry about moving your chest. You should feel your hands rise up as your stomach goes out. Breathe in as deeply as feels comfortable
4. Continue to breathe like this. As you exhale, feel your stomach fall. Try and breathe out as slowly as possible. Repeat for at least five minutes

Top tips for controlled breathing

Practising is the Key

You may find that it feels weird and uncomfortable when you first start breathing this way. This is because it is different from how you have been breathing for years.

You may need to remind yourself to use your belly to breathe while you are getting used to it. But after a while it will become a habit. You will breathe with your belly without having to think about it. It will just happen!

Talk to your doctor if you are worried about doing this type of breathing and if you have any physical health conditions that may be affected.

1. Practice as much as possible, try at least two to three times a day
2. Get comfortable so that your body feels 'just right':
 - Not too hot, not too cold
 - Not too hungry, not too full
 - Nothing is too tight: loosen any tight clothes and take off your shoes, watch, glasses etc. if you want to
3. Find a quiet location with nothing to distract you
4. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with
5. Make a decision not to worry about anything
6. Try to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. (Don't get too worried about this as it is better to breathe than not!)

People can feel a bit dizzy when they first start doing controlled breathing. This is because the brain gets more oxygen than it is used to. So, for the first few weeks it is good idea to sit or lie down.

“Relaxation helps you stay healthy.”

Progressive muscle relaxation



The progressive muscle relaxation technique teaches you how to relax your muscles.

The idea is to tense a group of muscles as tight as possible and hold the tension for a few seconds before releasing. As you release the tension, your muscles should feel more relaxed than before.

First, find a comfortable position in a similar way as you would for the controlled breathing exercise. Follow the instructions on page 23. There are some breathing tips on page 24 too if you are unsure.

Once you are comfortable, close your eyes and focus on your breathing (breathe in when you tense your muscles and breathe out when you relax). Start from your feet and move upwards to your face.

Tense each muscle group in turn. Hold for five to ten seconds. Then let go and allow the muscles to relax.

Check your body for any tension left in your muscles. If an area is still tight, tense and relax those muscles a few more times.

With practice you should start to recognise the difference between a tensed muscle and a relaxed muscle. This will enable you to see the first signs of tension that might appear when you are under stress.

You can download a free progressive muscle relaxation audio from www.mhim.org.uk

Talk to your doctor if you have a history of serious injuries or muscle problems and are worried about practising this technique.

Toes

Clench your toes

Feet

Point your feet away from you

Calves

Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes up

Thighs

Squeeze your thighs together

Buttocks

Squeeze your buttocks together

Stomach

Suck your stomach in

Chest

Take a deep breath

Hands

Clench your fists

Arms

Move your wrists up to your shoulders and squeeze each arm together

Shoulders

Raise your shoulders up to touch your ears

Mouth

Open your mouth wide to stretch your jaw. Then stick out your tongue

Eyes

Close your eyes tightly

Forehead

Raise your eyebrows

Getting a good night's sleep

Without a good night's sleep everything can feel like hard work.

Sleeping well can be hard at times. It is even harder if you are stressed about something.

You will now be able to use the skills you have learnt in this guide such as the controlled breathing and progressive muscle relaxation exercises to help you get to sleep at night.

When you are lying in bed at night, try using the breathing skills. They help you to switch off and help your body to relax. They also give your mind something to do. The muscle relaxation exercise also relaxes your body. It can help to do this if you are restless in bed at night.

The 'Sleep Well' guide contains lots of information and tips to help you get a better night's sleep. The audio tracks that go with this guide also include one about sleep. You can download them from www.mhim.org.uk

Remember to be patient, and just keep practising.



Beat it

Improve your physical health

Eat well

Your brain uses up more than 50% of the energy in the food you eat. That is why it is important to eat starchy food. This includes rice, pasta, bread and potatoes. When you do not eat well, your brain cannot work properly.

Eating your five-a-day helps improve physical and mental health. It includes fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit and vegetables.

It is also important to eat protein. This includes meat, fish, beans, tofu and quorn. Omega 3 oils found in oily fish and dark green vegetables are also needed for a healthy brain.

You also need to have enough liquid each day. This includes what you drink. It also includes the liquid found in your food. Read the guide 'Food and Mood' for more information. You can download it free from www.mhim.org.uk

Get active

Physical activity is great for releasing stress. It can make you feel fitter and more confident. Choose something that you enjoy and can fit into your lifestyle. It could be walking while you listen to an audio book. The guide 'Physical Activity and Mood' has tips about getting started. You can download it free from www.mhim.org.uk

Listen to music

Music can help you to relax or give you energy.

Get to know your body

Try to see how stress affects your body. Use relaxation skills to reduce them as soon as they start.

Take time out to play

Having fun is a great way to reduce stress.

Change your behaviour

Connect

Build bonds with people. It can help you feel supported. It can also allow you to feel closer to others. We have always lived together in groups. Having a good set of friends and family can improve your wellbeing.

Reduce what you have to do

Be realistic and honest with how much you can manage on your own and don't be afraid to ask for help at times to make sure you don't take on too much.

Take one thing at a time

Things can sometimes feel overwhelming. Decide what is most important. Then tackle the most essential job first.

Treat yourself

Take time out. Enjoy being yourself and do something just for you.

Distract yourself

Having something else to focus on helps to lessen stress. So you could try out a new hobby!

Take notice

Notice the world around you. It can put things in perspective and brighten your day. Often we can go around in autopilot and miss the little things that could improve our mood. Keep an eye out for rainbows, architecture and nature!

Avoid self-medication

Using drugs or alcohol can often become an extra problem.

Ask for help if you need it

Don't be ashamed to ask for emotional or practical help and support when you need it. We all need help sometimes. Seeking help early can prevent problems getting worse. It's a sign of strength, not weakness.

Change your thoughts

Challenge your thoughts

Just because you think it, doesn't make it true. The 'Unwind Your Mind' guide can help you to do this. You can download it free from www.mhim.org.uk

Be creative

Express yourself in some way. You could try painting, writing or dancing.

Give

This is about doing something nice for others. Helping others can make you feel good about yourself. It will make them feel good too. It could be as simple as smiling at a stranger or holding a door open for someone. You could help a neighbour or friend. You could even do random acts of kindness. It can feel great to volunteer at a local community group or charity. You could meet new people, learn new skills and gain valuable experience.

Talk to someone you really trust

Just talking about what is stressing you out can make you feel better. You could use one of the telephone help lines on page 33.

Keep learning

Your brain needs exercise too. You could learn or rediscover skills. It builds confidence and esteem. You will feel more able to cope with life. There are a number of life skills courses available across Manchester. One of these courses is called BOOST. You can find out more information about this course at www.mhim.org.uk

There are also free computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy courses online:

- www.lltff.com
- moodgym.anu.edu.au
- ecouch.anu.edu.au

Practice, practice, practice...

Things are not going to change overnight. It can be a challenge to change the way you have been doing things for so long. With practice it will become easier and easier. In the end, the changes will feel like second nature as you get used to them.

Do not expect too much too soon. It may take some time for you to change the way you think and feel. It is a bit like learning to walk as a toddler. We all fall over at first. You might even bang your head or graze your knee. You keep going despite these setbacks. Eventually you learn to walk. It doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and practice. It is the same for overcoming stress. It is not going to happen straight away. But, it will be worth it in the end.

Coping with setbacks

Everyone has setbacks. Life is like that! The trick is to find ways to cope with them. When they do occur, remember that it happens to everyone. It doesn't mean that you have failed. It is important not to give yourself a hard time.

When you have a setback, try to remember that you are not back to square one. It can be easy to forget about all the progress you have already made. Try to learn from it. We often learn more from things when they don't go quite right compared to when they go smoothly. Take some time to reflect on what has happened. Try to understand why it has happened and what you can learn from it. You may be able to find a pattern to what is going on.

Finally – don't give up! Dealing with stress can take time and practice. It may take a while to notice an improvement. Remember to take some time each month to look at the progress you have made.

Things to do in a crisis or emergency

Talking treatments or therapies

You may want to access a service that can help you improve your mental health. Your doctor can suggest services that can help. In Manchester you can also ask to see a therapist yourself. More information about the range of these services can be found at www.mhim.org.uk

When you attend a service they will listen to how you are feeling. They will help you to see what impacts on your mental health. They will support you to make changes to improve your mental health. Some therapies may be quite brief while others can continue for longer periods of time where you might return for more sessions.

If you need help and support urgently:

- Contact your GP
- Go to the nearest accident and emergency hospital department
- Call 999 and ask for an ambulance

If you need to talk to someone contact:

- **The Sanctuary**
Helpline: 0300 003 7029
(24 hour crisis support line, Manchester only)
- **The Samaritans**
Helpline: 116 123 (open 24/7)
- **Saneline**
Helpline: 0300 304 7000
(6pm to 11pm daily)

