

# STRESS

A little book of advice



The Highland  
Council  
Comhairle na  
Càidhealtachd

# STRÉAN

Leabhar beag comhairle

# What is stress?

## Dè a th' ann an strèan?

For most of us, stress is part of our everyday lives. Everyone experiences it in one form or another, although we react to it in different ways.

A certain amount of pressure can be positive as it can keep us lively and enthusiastic, and in some situations it can alert us to certain threats or dangers.

Negative stress arises when more pressures and demands are made on our time and energy than we are able to cope with.

When we find ourselves under pressure, our bodies react automatically to ensure that we are prepared for action and meet the challenge before us. Muscles become tense, our hearts beat faster and we become more alert. These reactions are temporary and go away when the pressure or threat subsides.

However, sometimes the balance tips too far and the pressures we are exposed to are so persistent and intense that we feel totally unable to cope. This can lead to health problems, both of a physical and psychological nature and can interfere with normal daily activities and relationships.

“ Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths.

Etty Hillesum

# Causes of Stress

## Adhbharan Strèin

Today stress and its symptoms are common and can affect people of all ages and from all walks of life. We all may face difficulties with particular aspects of our lives that can cause stress.

These include:

- ▶ Problems with relationships - with a spouse, partner, children, friends or colleagues;
- ▶ Financial difficulties;
- ▶ Bereavement;
- ▶ Serious illness of either yourself, a family member or friend;
- ▶ Divorce/separation;
- ▶ Being abused;
- ▶ Bullying/harassment;
- ▶ Problems at work - changes to the job, excessive workload, job insecurity, anxiety, promotion;
- ▶ Coping with unemployment or redundancy;
- ▶ Moving house.

Some of these things cannot be foreseen and can happen to us very suddenly. Others are unavoidable and we have very little control over them, although we may feel we are in some way to blame. We may also feel as if we should be able to cope, no matter what happens.

As individuals we all have a basic need for both emotional and financial security.

Nowadays many of us live long distances from our families, or even on our own, and many of us experience financial problems. All of these factors can have a significant effect on our security levels.

Technology has had an important effect on working practices. While predominantly very constructive, many of us feel threatened by the pace of change, or we may be faced with increased responsibilities or job insecurity.

As well as demands made on us by other people, each of us makes demands on ourselves. We may aim to achieve certain things at work, at home or in our personal lives. We have expectations of what we should be able to do. If it turns out that we cannot meet the standards we have set ourselves, we may put ourselves under pressure to do better. This in turn can produce an enormous amount of stress. It may be that our expectations are unrealistic, or that things beyond our control prevent us meeting them.

Some people become more vulnerable to stress after a traumatic experience, for example if they have suffered bereavement, been the victim of a serious crime or have financial worries. As time passes they may not be able to get back on top of things but feel continually weighed down.

Sometimes, it can be a gradual build-up from various different sources rather than one obvious trigger.

# Individual indicators of stress

## Cowharran fa leth a thaobh strèan

Everyone has their own characteristic way of reacting to stress. Outlined below are some of the most common symptoms. It's unlikely that you will experience them on a regular basis but you will probably find some that may be true of you.

We should all learn to recognise our own individual warning signs.

Stress can make it difficult to cope with day-to-day demands. Other people may not be able to tolerate your company and even the closest of relationships can become tense.

The whole experience can make you feel as if you are losing control over your life and that there is no way of regaining that control.

### Emotional

Tense, irritable, angry outbursts, feeling a sense of 'pressure', feeling 'trapped', low feelings, emotionally fragile, tearful, needing to be supported, resentful of demands, episodes of anxiety and/or depression, emotional collapse, burn-out syndrome.

### Behavioural

Increased pace, over-committed, changes in eating/drinking, self-sedation, use of drugs, self-neglect, growing inefficiency, withdrawal, sleep disturbances/excess nightmares.

### Physical

Muscular tension, 'wound up' feeling, on the go/can't relax, headaches, fatigue prone, energy loss, increase in minor illnesses, sense of physical strain, indigestion, weight loss,/weight gain, skin conditions e.g. eczema, sexual difficulties, menstrual abnormalities, raised blood pressure, coronary heart disease, gastric ulcer, reduced immune competence.

### Cognitive

Concentration fragmented, distractible, inflexible thinking (no way out), threat laden thought, perception of hopelessness or injustice.

### Relationships

Less able to cope with people's needs, problems at home, impatient, intolerant, inclined to row, wanting to be left alone, over controlling towards others, need to 'lean' on others.

# Do you cause yourself stress

## A bheil thu ag adhbharachadh strèan dhut fhèin?

As individuals, we can often cause ourselves a great deal of negative stress.

Review how you might cause yourself stress through such things as unrealistic expectations, bad time management and unhealthy eating habits.

If you answer yes to any of the questions below this indicates areas of change where you can make a positive contribution to reducing factors that may cause personal stress.

### Do you for example:

	Yes	No
• Set yourself unrealistic objectives and find there simply isn't enough time to get everything done?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have an unrealistic expectation of what you can achieve in the time available?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Always have high expectations of yourself and others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Tend to be negative or pessimistic?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Continually eat late at night and often very quickly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Try to achieve unrealistic goals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Regularly skip eating lunch?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Learning to cope with stress

### A' làimhseachadh strèan

There is a lot we can do to reduce the negative effects that stress can have on our overall health. It is worth remembering the ABC of handling stress.

### Awareness

What causes stress?  
How do you react?

### Balance

There is often a fine line between what is considered positive stress and negative stress.

### Control

What can you do to help yourself?

# Your responsibilities

## Do dhleastanasan

We all have a responsibility for managing our own stress and for behaving in a way that does not cause stress for others. You should therefore take steps to minimise stress whenever possible.

The following measures and actions are likely to have a positive effect on stress levels. You are encouraged to seek further advice where appropriate.

### **Speak to your supervisor or manager regularly**

Don't hesitate to approach your line manager about a problem - an important part of their job is to provide you with support. However, if they are not aware of your problems then they cannot help you. If you bottle things up matters will probably get worse. If you feel unable to discuss the matter with your line manager and there is no alternative person within your service, Human Resources will discuss any problem you have in confidence.

### **Speak to other people**

If you feel stresses, don't suffer in silence. Compare notes with others. Partners, family and friends, colleagues or trade union representatives may also be able to provide useful advice or support.

Keep events at work in perspective. Try to step back from events - do not let a minor criticism or mistake cause anger or resentment

to build-up. Think of all the positive events that have occurred - little things or a single mistake should be seen for what they are.

### **Physical exercise/other activities**

Medical opinion suggests that physical exercise - anything from regular walking to active sports - is beneficial in reducing stress.

You may wish to seek your doctor's advice if you have a medical condition that will be affected by physical activity or if you have not exercised for some time.

Ensure physical exercise is part of your life! It is an excellent way of allowing your body the necessary release it requires when it is experiencing negative stress.

### **Exercise**

The benefits of exercise include:

- ▶ using up the excess energy released by the "fight or flight" reaction;
- ▶ improving blood circulation;
- ▶ lowering blood pressure;
- ▶ helping clear the mind of worrying thoughts (even if only temporary);
- ▶ improving self-image, making you feel better about yourself;
- ▶ increasing your social contact;

If in doubt about the state of your fitness and/or which exercise is best for you, please consult your doctor or a trained fitness instructor.



## Assertion

Do you find it difficult to say no? Do you find yourself saying “I wish I had done this” or “I wish I had not done that”?

Perhaps you are not assertive enough.

Some people find that although they can be assertive at home, it is often much more difficult at work. Often colleagues are also very pressurised and, in many cases, may be aggressive or demanding.

Two major reasons why it is important to learn to be more assertive are:

- ▶ you are more likely to get more of what you want;
- ▶ it will help you feel good about yourself and your behaviour and you will experience fewer feelings of regret or loss of control, which can lead to negative stress.


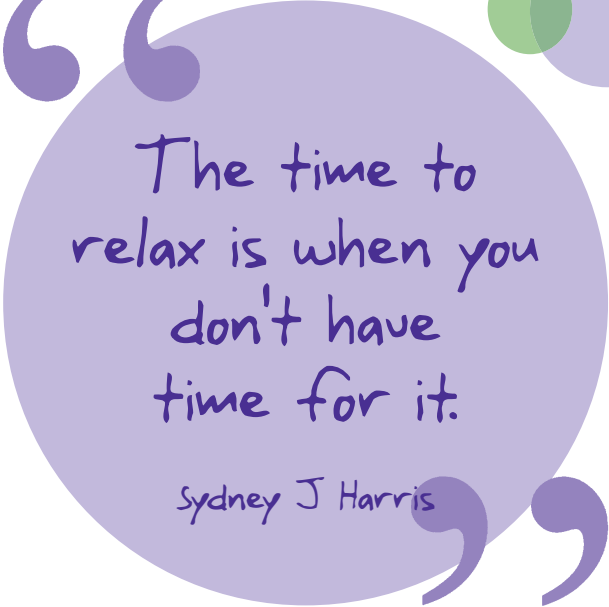
What does ‘being assertive’ mean?

- ▶ Being honest with yourself and others.
- ▶ Being able to say what you want, need or feel.
- ▶ Being self-confident.
- ▶ Understanding other people’s point of view.
- ▶ Being able to negotiate and reach workable compromises.
- ▶ Having self-respect and respect for others.

As with time management, learning to be more assertive takes both time and practice. The following are some basic guidelines:

- ▶ What do you really think about the situation you are currently facing? Be realistic and positive.
- ▶ Be clear and direct in what you say - misunderstandings often occur as a result of unclear messages.
- ▶ Use appropriate body language to back up your assertive behaviour. Adopt an open, relaxed posture with your knees, and face the other party square on. Establish eye contact and keep your voice steady and firm.
- ▶ Keep calm and stick to the point. Relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, may help.
- ▶ If necessary, repeat and clarify your message. People often do not listen completely to what is being said to them.
- ▶ Respect the viewpoints of the other person. In many situations compromise is necessary to move forward.





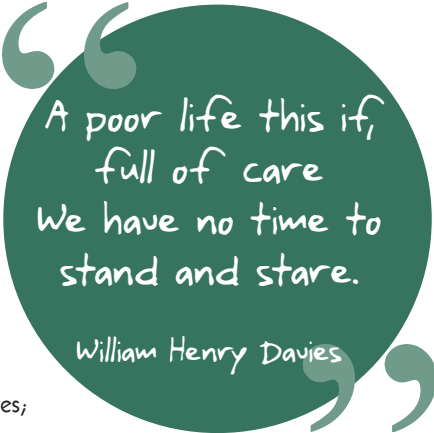
The time to  
relax is when you  
don't have  
time for it.

Sydney J Harris

### The role of diet

Our bodies are remarkably efficient at extracting the nutrients we need, but at times of negative stress these needs increase. It is therefore important you ensure you:

- ▶ Eat a balanced diet;
- ▶ Eat regular meals (including breakfast);
- ▶ Eat complex carbohydrates (e.g. wholemeal bread, pasta and jacket potatoes) rather than refined carbohydrates (e.g. biscuits and crisps);
- ▶ Say no to caffeine! It is not just in coffee but in tea, soft drinks and some common headache remedies;
- ▶ Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables;
- ▶ Drink alcohol in moderation;
- ▶ Try and drink more water during the day. 2.2 litres per day is the recommended amount for women, 3 litres for men.



A poor life this if,  
full of care  
We have no time to  
stand and stare.

William Henry Davies

Eating and drinking healthily will support your nervous and immune systems, keep your blood sugar levels stable and help your body get rid of some of the surplus fats.



# Support Taic

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There are a number of places you can go if you feel that you need advice, help or just to talk to someone about stress.

## Human Resources

Personnel are there to provide support and you are able to discuss any problems you are having.

## Family doctor

Many people will turn to their family doctor when they experience the first signs of stress. It is important to be checked out by a doctor to rule out the possibility of physical illness. If your doctor prescribes any medication it is important you get him or her to explain the effects and any likely side effects.

## Trade unions

Trade union representatives can provide another source of support and are able to discuss with you any problems you feel you are having.

## Acting together

In some situations, you may not be the only one affected by stress. Others may be exposed to the same kind of pressures and it may be helpful to act together to begin to make improvements.

We don't stop  
playing because we grow old;  
we grow old because  
we stop playing!

George Bernard Shaw

# Information and advice

## Fiosrachadh agus comhairle

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Whether you are seeking help on an individual basis or as part of a group, various information and advice centres can help. These include:

### CITIZEN'S ADVICE BUREAU

~ on a range of practical and legal matters ~

### TRADE UNIONS OR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

~ that can help with work related issues ~

### THE SAMARITANS

Tel: 01463 713456

### SCOTTISH ASSOCIATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

[www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)

### MIND

Tel: 0300 123 3393

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

### PSYCHOLOGY ON LINE

[www.psychologyonline.co.uk](http://www.psychologyonline.co.uk)

### STRESS FREE NET

[www.stressfree.com](http://www.stressfree.com)

### THE CONSUMER HEALTH INFORMATION CENTRE

[www.chic.org.uk](http://www.chic.org.uk)

### TEACHERS' SUPPORT NETWORK

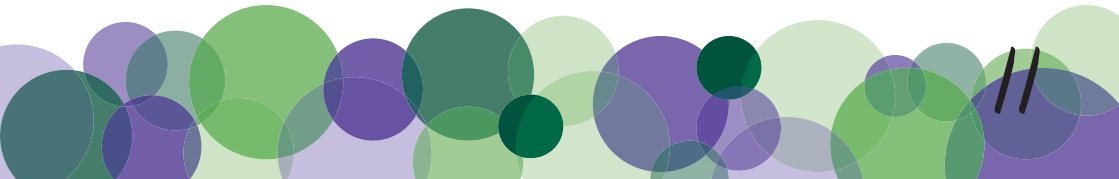
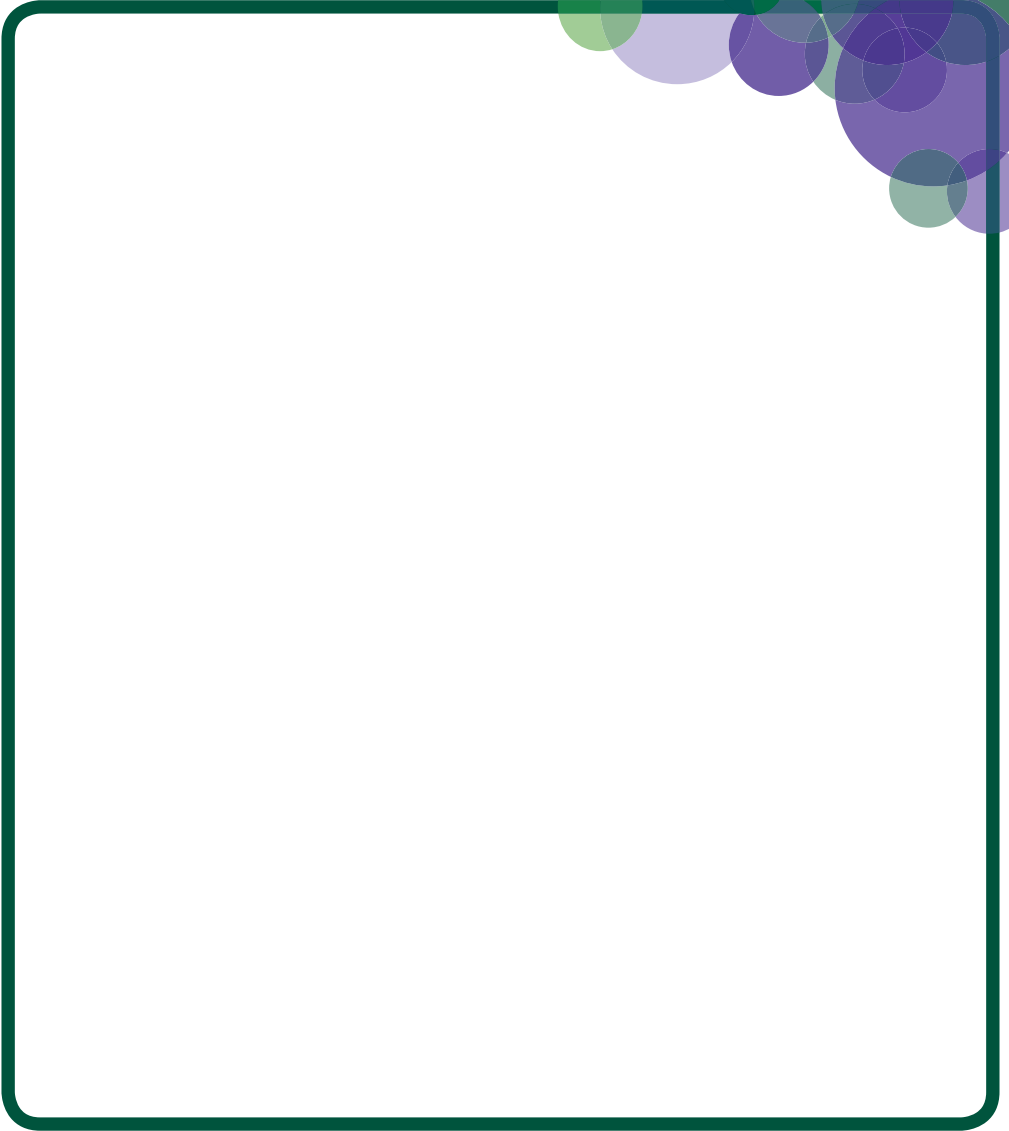
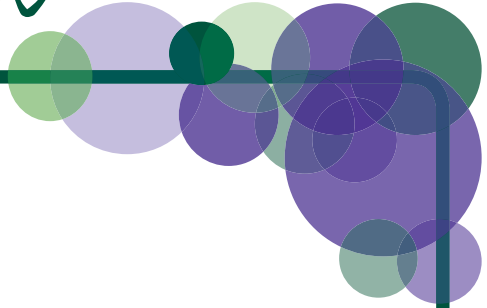
~ is a national free and confidential support, information and coaching service for teachers and school staff ~

Tel: 0800 5642270

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

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This booklet has been produced by:

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