

## Managing Stress and Anxiety

All of us have experienced stress and anxiety. They're natural feelings in response to the pressures of daily life. Sometimes when we're put under extra strain, these feelings become overwhelming. This guide can help. It looks at the strategies you can learn to manage stress and anxiety better, to help you cope with the challenges that life often brings.

## Understanding Stress and Anxiety

Life is full of stressful situations. Work, finances, and family relationships can throw up situations that make us feel tense, worried, or struggling to get to sleep at night.

As we will see below, the stress response is natural and a key part of how we've evolved to survive. However, there are situations where the stress response can become a problem:

- **Responding with stress in non-threatening situations:** Sometimes, our stress response can be overactive and kick in at the very thought of something. Someone with a phobia of spiders might start to feel their heart start to race just by thinking about them. Or we might find ourselves constantly worrying over something that isn't going to happen for a very long time.
- **Long-term stress:** We might deal with so many stresses in life that we notice long-term symptoms, such as poor sleep, fatigue, muscle tension, high blood pressure or stomach aches.

In both of these situations, our natural stress response has started to work against us – it's getting in the way of our daily lives, making us experience unpleasant sensations, and sometimes causes us to avoid situations altogether.

If this is the case for you, then this guide is here to help. It looks at what you can do to take control of the things that are worrying you by tackling the symptoms of anxiety, and problem-solving the stressors in your life.

But to do this, it's important to understand why we feel anxious and recognise the stress response within us.

## Understanding the stress response

Historically, the main thing we had to fear as humans was coming face-to-face with a predator. These days, the things that worry us aren't quite as tangible, but they cause us to have the same response. It might be a presentation at work, having to catch a train on time, juggling our job and

family responsibilities, or uncertainty over the health of a loved one. We can think of these things as **stresses**.

When we come face to face with a threat – whether it's real or just imagined – our body's "stress response" kicks in. This is designed to prepare and protect us from immediate danger – so it happens extremely quickly, before we have had a chance to think rationally about the problem before us.

In the short term, the stress response raises our blood pressure, makes us more alert, increases our focus, and gives us a burst of energy that allows us to act quickly – and even perform incredible feats of strength we're not usually capable of.

This response is designed to be helpful in the short term. It can help us perform our best in a sporting event, musical performance, or even defend ourselves in an argument.

The problem, as mentioned before, is when this response kicks in too often, either because we're under a lot of stress on an ongoing basis, or we've become hyper-reactive to our own thoughts. Over the long-term, this can lead us to experiencing symptoms and patterns of behaviour and thought that aren't helpful at all.

## Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is a common response to a significant amount of stress, whether it's a particularly intense period of stress or a longer period of low-level stress. Anxiety can affect us in many ways, sometimes in ways we don't notice. You might be experiencing:

- **Cognitive Symptoms** – such as reduced concentration, efficiency, and productivity, poor judgement, 'brain fog', indecision and self-doubt.
- **Emotional symptoms** – such as sadness, irritability and anger, cynicism, and frustration
- **Physical Symptoms** – such as a racing heart rate, tension headaches, jaw clenching, muscle spasms, frequent colds, indigestion, stomach aches, or diarrhoea
- **Behavioural symptoms** – such as increased use of alcohol or tobacco, withdrawal from others, disrupted sleep patterns, loss of sense of humour, or interpersonal problems like frequent arguments with family members.

These symptoms can have a significant impact on your quality of life if they affect you on a day to day basis. Anxiety can also cause you to avoid certain situations or actions that would bring on the symptoms, limiting what you're able to do.

The good thing is that these symptoms can be overcome – and there are strategies you can that will help you manage stressful situations more effectively.

## Identifying your stressors

Now that you understand how the stress response works and how to recognise the symptoms of anxiety, it's time to look at your own situation. Before you can start to tackle the symptoms of anxiety, you need to understand what triggers them.

To do this, you'll need to start keeping a diary. Whenever you're feeling anxious or worried, note down the following:

- any symptoms you're feeling – particularly physical symptoms
- what's going through your mind – what are you thinking?
- what did you do to cope?

If you keep a diary for around two weeks, you'll quickly build up a picture of what triggers your stress response, how it affects you, and what coping strategies you already have. You'll gradually be able to assess whether these coping strategies are good for you or whether you can replace them with better ones, as you read more of our guide.

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

## Dealing with what you can't control

There are lots of things that are outside of our control at any one time. For many centuries the main factor outside of our control was the weather. In the modern day, there are other big forces that we feel a lack of control over, such as the economy or the changing climate. Even with modern health care, it's easy to feel a lack of control whether our loved ones will become sick.

However, while we don't have the ability to influence these events directly, **we do have some control over how we think and feel about them.** Here are some techniques that can help:

### 1. Accepting negative feelings

It's natural to feel anxiety and fear in response to a stressful situation – this is after all a survival technique. We often call this response the “fight or flight” response because it originated in how we responded to physical threats.

It's important to start by recognising that these feelings are normal and it's not your fault for having them.

### 2. Controlling your triggers

You can help to reduce the amount of time you spend worrying or feeling anxious by working out what it is that triggers them. For some of us, it's constantly checking the news – see below for guidance on how to reduce your intake of news. In some cases, it might be unhelpful conversation patterns with a family member or friend that leave us feeling anxious afterwards.

If you feel yourself getting anxious, therefore, think about what triggered it – was it something you watched, read, or heard? Was it someone you spoke to?

### 3. Setting aside some time to worry

When there is something that is bothering you it's quite easy to have it playing over in your mind while you try to solve the problem. The issue is that when something is out of your control, there is no solution to find. One strategy you can try is to limit the time you spend worrying by giving yourself “worry time”.

This can be a slot of about 15 minutes every day that you devote to worrying about things. Even if you don't reach a solution by the end of that time, promise yourself not to spend more time worrying until the next day.

## 4. Trying out some coping strategies

As well as trying to manage your worry on a day-to-day basis, it's important to have some strategies for coping when these feelings of stress and anxiety threaten to become overwhelming. There are a number of relaxation and grounding exercises you can try that are clinically proven to help you control feelings of fear, worry and anxiety. Read about them in our guide.

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

## Focussing on what you can control

The factors that are in your control vary from situation to situation, but there are some common things all of us can work on to help us be in a good position to cope with the stresses of life:

### Healthy habits

We feel stress and anxious more keenly when we're tired and we're not eating properly. These of course are common symptoms of stress itself, so it's important not to blame yourself too much if you feel like you've slipped from your healthy habits because of the stress you're dealing with.

Still, if we try to eat healthily where we can, and stay active, we can put our bodies in the best position possible to deal with stress. The next section looks at what you can do to stay active, even if you lead a busy life or don't have much time to get out of the house.

### Daily routines

Having a routine for yourself can create a sense of structure and is a good way to tackle stress and feelings of uncertainty. A routine is important for giving yourself time to practice self-care (explained in a later section), as well as the important relaxation techniques that can help you when things feel overwhelming.

### Setting Goals

Setting goals and achieving them gives a sense of control and purpose. Think about something you would like to achieve over the next few weeks and how you can achieve it. There may be a number of things you want or need to do that you can still do at home, it could be watching a film, reading a book or learning something online.

You could have multiple goals across a range of areas including social and family interactions, physical or personal development.



## Support from others

It's important to remember that there may be a number of friends or family members who can help you if you're finding things challenging. They might be able to offer practical support, financial support, or even just a listening ear so that you can talk through your worries with them. They can be especially useful if you want to engage in some problem-solving (see the later section on this).

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

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

Guideposts Trust Limited Registered in England No1282361 Registered Charity No272619  
Guideposts Trust was established in 1972 and relies upon voluntary and financial support for its work

0800 048 7035

GIS@guideposts.org.uk | [www.guideposts.org.uk](http://www.guideposts.org.uk)  
General Enquiries: 01993 893 560



## Staying Active

### Why is it important to stay active?

Your physical health has a big impact on how you are feeling emotionally and mentally. Being active reduces stress, increases energy levels, can make you more alert and help you sleep better. During stressful times, it can be easy to fall into unhealthy patterns of behaviour which in turn can make you feel worse.

That's why it's important to explore different ways of adding physical movement and activity to your day, and find some exercises that work best for you.

### What kind of exercise should I do?

Exercise does not need to be particularly intense. Slower-paced activities, such as walking, have many benefits for health and wellbeing. Regular physical activity is associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety across all age groups. Here are some things you can do:

- Go for a walk or jog
- Go for a bicycle ride
- Do some gardening
- Play active games with your family.

### Tips on staying active at home

It's still possible to stay active even if you spend most of your time at home. The key thing is to make sure you're not sitting all day. If watching TV, get up during every commercial (or periodically) and do a lap around your home or an active chore – do some laundry, do the dishes or take out the bins.

Here are some ideas on active things you can do within home:

- Put some music on and walk briskly around the house or up and down the stairs for 10-15 minutes 2 or 3 times per day.
- Dance to your favourite music.
- Do an exercise or strength training video.
- Perform some yoga – deep breathing and mindfulness can also reduce anxiety.





# Guideposts

Here for You

- Find ways to do simple muscle strengthening exercises around your house such as:
  - Squats or sit-to-stands from a sturdy chair
  - Push-ups against a wall, the kitchen counter or the floor
  - Lunges or single leg step-ups on stairs

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

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

0800 048 7035

Guideposts Trust Limited Registered in England No1282361 Registered Charity No272619  
Guideposts Trust was established in 1972 and relies upon voluntary and financial support for its work

GIS@guideposts.org.uk | [www.guideposts.org.uk](http://www.guideposts.org.uk)  
General Enquiries: 01993 893 560



## Practising Self-Care

Self-care is an important part of staying well. Many of us have multiple responsibilities to juggle, whether these are work responsibilities or family to care for. Ultimately, we can't provide support to others if we're not doing well ourselves, so even if your main goal is to support others, you need to be looking after yourself as well.

Self-care is the active process of acknowledging and tending to your needs. Many of us subconsciously turn to short-term coping mechanisms naturally when we're stressed or anxious, but this process is imperfect: sometimes we don't recognize that we're stressed or anxious, and sometimes we do something that isn't helpful in the long run.

### How do I practise self-care?

There are two steps to self-care:

#### 1. Acknowledging your feelings when you have them

Look at the list of symptoms, and see if you recognize any of them in yourself. Over time, you'll get better at identifying the symptoms you're experiencing.

#### 2. Knowing about and practising the coping mechanisms that help

Different symptoms tend to need different coping mechanisms. For example, if you're feeling panicky and your heart is racing, you might benefit from a relaxation or grounding exercise. If you're finding yourself feeling tired, you might need to invest in preventative measures such as eating nutritious foods, staying active, and [getting adequate rest](#).

Try to incorporate the preventative practices into your daily routine. You don't have to do everything at once. You might find that, over time, one of your coping mechanisms becomes less effective, and you need to try something else. It's important not to be too rigid about what you do to cope – just do whatever works for you.

When it comes to self-care, the more strategies we have in our toolkit, the better.



## Keeping boundaries

Stress is a common response when we are stretched beyond our normal capabilities. A key part of self-care is recognizing what your limits are in what you can do, and making every attempt possible not to do more. This means, for example, taking regular breaks – even if you don't feel like you need them right now. In some cases, it might mean having a conversation with a family member or partner about the responsibilities you have and if anything can be different. These are not easy conversations to have – but they can be essential to your ability to continue giving the support you give.

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

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

0800 048 7035

Guideposts Trust Limited Registered in England No1282361 Registered Charity No272619  
Guideposts Trust was established in 1972 and relies upon voluntary and financial support for its work

GIS@guideposts.org.uk | [www.guideposts.org.uk](http://www.guideposts.org.uk)  
General Enquiries: 01993 893 560



## Relaxation techniques

Some of us are physically affected by stress – our breathing becomes rapid, our muscles start to tense, and our heart beats faster. Relaxation techniques can help you to manage these uncomfortable symptoms, and can also be useful if you struggle to get to sleep.

Relaxation is a skill that can be learned, and it can be very reassuring to know that you have something you can do when things get too much. These strategies form part of your “tool box” to cope with stress and anxiety as it arises.

Here are some evidence-based relaxation techniques you can try out. Here are some things to remember as you work through them:

- **These techniques take time to practise** – they won’t necessarily work very well for you the first time, but after a few times, you may start to see the difference
- **Not every technique will work for everyone** – this process is about finding the right one for you.
- **You might need to combine these with other techniques** – such as distraction techniques or other thought management strategies.

### Controlled breathing

Controlled breathing is an exercise you can try to tackle hyperventilation – the rapid and shallow breathing that is a natural response to stress. Hyperventilation can be alarming when you don’t know how to control it, and can lead to other symptoms such as dizziness or chest pain, so it’s important to know how to tackle it.

You can practise this exercise seating, standing or lying down on the floor. Make sure you’re as comfortable as possible. It can help to place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach to feel the difference when you breathe deeply.

1. Breathe in through your nose slowly and steadily. Allow your stomach to expand as much as possible – this shows that the air is going into your lungs.
2. Breathe slowly and steadily out through your mouth.
3. Each time you breathe, try to count to five to make sure you’re keeping your breathing steady.

Practise this technique whenever you can. At first, the exercise might feel strange and you might not be used to the sensations you're experiencing. Practising regularly can help to normalise these feelings and improve your technique.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a well-established technique invented by Dr. Edmund Jacobson in the 1920s.

There are a number of evidence-based muscle relaxation exercises to help you deal with muscle stiffness caused by stress. Progressive Muscle Relaxation takes the longest, but it's important to learn it first so that you can successfully carry out shorter versions of the exercise.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation involves taking each part of your body and going through the same cycle:

- Tensing the muscles without straining them, and concentrating on the sensation for around five seconds.
- Relaxing the muscles, and concentrating on the feeling of relaxation for around 15 seconds. Notice the difference between how the muscles are now, compared to how they felt when you tensed them.

To master the technique you'll need to practise it twice a day, making sure you give yourself a space that is quiet and comfortable so that you can go through the whole exercise without disturbance. Eventually, you'll be able to try a shortened version to target specific muscles (see below).

## Release-only relaxation

Release-only relaxation is a shortened form of PMR where you skip out the "tense" stage and focus only on relaxing each muscle group one at a time. You should only move onto this technique once you've mastered PMR, and you can clearly tell the difference between tensed and relaxed muscles.

## The Relaxation Response

This method was popularised by Dr Herbert Benson and is designed as an alternative to the "fight or flight" response that we are adapted to do. The idea is to learn the technique and eventually be able to employ it in response to a stressful situation. The exercise is designed to be easier to carry out wherever you are and whatever position you're in – standing, seated, or lying down.

There are four things that can help bring about the relaxation response:

- **A calm, quiet environment.** This is helpful to carrying out the exercise but isn't always available.

- **A mental device.** This is something to keep your mind focussed on to prevent it wandering while you carry out the exercise. It could be a word you repeat over and over, a song you play in your head, or a memory or scene you play out.
- **A passive mind.** This means that you adopt a “let it happen” attitude when thoughts occur and allow them to pass you by.
- **A comfortable position.** It’s best to be in a seated position for this exercise.

To carry out the relaxation response:

1. Close your eyes
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose, becoming aware of your breathing.
3. Breathe slowly out through your mouth.
4. Keep your mental device in mind as you breathe.
5. Don’t worry about distracting thoughts or whether you’re doing the exercise well. Just allow thoughts to occur and pass by.
6. Continue until you feel you are relaxed and are ready to stop. Dr Benson advises trying the exercise for 10 to 20 minutes, but you may be able to become relaxed in a shorter period with practice.
7. Once you’re ready to stop, keep your eyes closed and stay in a sitting position for a few minutes, then open your eyes.

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

## Problem-solving

Life throws many difficult situations our way, and it is often the anticipation of a challenge ahead that can trigger a stress response in us and cause anxiety. One of the most useful skills you can learn is how to tackle your worries through a problem-solving approach.

We all try to problem solve, but not many of us know how to do it well. Structured problem solving is a six-step approach that can help you tackle a variety of challenging situations – in work, at an important event, or even in your home life. This guide looks at how to do it.

### Step 1: Identifying the problem

This is an essential starting point, because you might have what looks like one problem, but is actually several problems. It's important to break your problem down so that you can tackle each part one at a time.

#### Example

*Maria was anxious about her job contract finishing over summer. She was worried about the prospect of running out of money before her next contract began in September, and knew that she couldn't work during that time due to a series of planned hospital visits. She was also worrying about what would happen next year – and whether she would ever be able to save up money on her current wage and contract.*

*Maria decided to separate out these problems and focus on the most immediately pressing problem – how to manage until her next pay packet at the end of September.*

If you have multiple problems you want to tackle, it's time to choose which one to tackle first. Some people like to go for the hardest problem first, whereas others like to get an easy problem out of the way – it's up to you.

### Step 2: Brainstorm solutions

A solution can be anything at all you might do to tackle the problem. To carry out this step, it's important to write down anything that comes to mind – good or bad.

Think about not just what you can do, but also who can help you. You might find a lot more things become possible when you look around at the support you can get.

**Even if “solutions” like avoiding the situation altogether or turning to alcohol come to mind, write them down.** You'll be narrowing down your solutions list later in the process, and it can help to

have some bad solutions to compare with the good ones. Another benefit to simply writing solutions down without thinking is that this is essentially a creative exercise – so it's best not to stop yourself while you're in the flow of ideas by trying to critically assess the solutions you've already put down.

## Example

*Maria identified the following potential solutions to staying financially afloat during July, August and September:*

- *Create a budget to control spending during those months*
- *Put off some costs, such as getting a hair cut or buying new shoes, until September*
- *Use her current account reserve (£200) for the costs mentioned above then save it up again in the winter*
- *Wait until August to pay for travel costs to the hospital*
- *Ask to borrow money from her boyfriend and pay it back after September*

## Step 3: Go through each solution and list the pros and cons

This is the first chance to critically assess the solutions you've put down. Make a table with each solution and write down the advantages and disadvantages of each solution.

Once you've done this, you can safely eliminate the solutions that offer no advantage – such as avoiding the situation altogether. You can also start to get an idea of which solutions are the best, and offer lots of advantages without any downsides. The best solutions are also those which are easy to do and don't require you to depend on too many other people.

At the end of this step you should have a shortlist of the solutions you are considering. You might want to separate these solutions into the “best” solutions and solutions you would only consider as a last resort.

## Example

*Maria looked at each of her solutions:*

***Creating a budget*** – *The advantage of this solution was that it would give Maria peace of mind and make her feel less guilty when she spent money, knowing it was part of the budget. The main downside was time.*



**Putting off some costs** – The main advantage was that this would avoid dipping into any money saved, but the disadvantage was forgoing relatively essential purchases that were going to be made anyway.

**Using the £200 reserve** – Maria could see clear benefits from spending the money, but worried about not having it in case of unexpected costs.

**Waiting to pay for travel costs** – There were no advantages to this solution because the payment had to be made before Maria next got paid, and would be more expensive if left until later on. Maria rejected this solution.

**Borrowing money** – This would give Maria an extra financial cushion, but the main disadvantage was feeling dependent on her boyfriend. Maria decided this would be a “back-up” option if there were unexpected costs.

## Step 4: Choose the best solution(s)

Once you’ve assessed your solutions, it’s time to choose the best in the list. If you think several solutions would work well in combination, that’s ok!

**Prioritise the solution(s) that are the most doable.** It’s better than going for a solution that could deliver the best outcome, but which is difficult to realise in practice.

Once you’ve picked the solution, you need to make an action plan. This has to be as specific as possible, so ask yourself:

- What exactly do I need to do?
- When will I do it?
- Where will I do it?
- Who else is involved?
- What is the first step?

Finally, as well as choosing your best solution(s), always have a back-up plan. It can help relieve pressure on your main solution and therefore help you feel more relaxed when carrying it out.

### Example

*Maria eventually decided to draw up a budget to give her peace of mind about the months ahead. She then used the £200 reserve to pay for the essential costs, as well as booking visits to the hospital early on. She decided that if something unexpected*

*happened that she needed to pay for, she could borrow from her boyfriend for now then pay him back after September.*

## Step 5: Put your plan into action & review

If you've got to this step, you're as ready as you can be to put your solution into practice. So now is the time to do it!

Once you've carried out the solution, it's time to reflect on how things went.

- Sometimes, the plan will work as intended and you can come away from the experience confident you've found a solution you can use in the future.
- Sometimes unexpected things get in the way, and setbacks happen that stop you from solving the problem fully. If this happens, try to get a sense of why it didn't work, so that you can learn from the experience. You also have other strategies on your list that you can try next time.

Problem-solving doesn't always lead to the perfect outcome. But over time you'll develop strategies that work for you and help you tackle situations you might have avoided in the past. Regardless of outcome, problem-solving is a good way to manage your worries about a difficult situation and maintain control over how you respond. It's a useful tool in a wide range of situations, and can even make you better at helping someone else with their problems.

<https://guideposts.org.uk/wellbeing/managing-stress-anxiety/>

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>

## Further resources

Here is a list of websites, guides and tools to help you build on the strategies outlined in this guide and become even more effective in managing feelings of stress and anxiety.

### Further reading

NHS – [Every Mind Matters – Anxiety](#)

Helen Kennerly – [Overcoming Anxiety 2nd Edition](#)

Mind – [Anxiety and panic attacks](#)

Royal College of Psychiatrists – [Anxiety, panic and phobias](#)

### Anxiety Support

[Anxiety UK](#) – Offers anxiety support groups and an anxiety infoline.

[NoPanic](#) – wide range of guides on anxiety and various phobias, as well as the option to become a member and access recovery services.

### Apps

All of the apps on this list appear on the NHS's [recommended apps list for mental health](#).

[Stress & Anxiety Companion](#) – breathing exercises, relaxing music and games to help with anxiety

[WorryTree](#) – record and manage the things that are worrying you, and create an action plan.

[Beat Panic](#) – an app designed to help you overcome panic attacks

[My Possible Self](#) – learn how to manage fear, anxiety and stress

[Silver Cloud](#) – offers eight-week courses to complete yourself on topics such as stress, anxiety and depression

Please consider making a donation to Guideposts to help us continue with our work.  
<https://guideposts.org.uk/support-us/>