

**STRESS
AND
HOW TO
COPE WITH IT
BETTER**

XXXXXXXXX MEDICAL PRACTICE

ABOUT STRESS

Basic Information:

Stress is one of the major problems facing all of us today. We were simply just not 'designed' to cope with the everyday stresses of modern life. We did not evolve to live in cities, to work in offices and factories, and especially to live at the pace that we seem to live at now – and it is getting worse! Our bodies are basically not able to cope very well with the number, variety and constancy of the stressors found in modern life. We are able to do an amazing amount, but we work longer, commute further, shop more, stay awake longer, and sleep 20% less than we did 100 years ago. This eventually stresses us out – physically, emotionally and mentally. In the UK, at least 40 million working days are lost each year due to stress. Stress contributes massively to mental and physical disorders. Stress also damages our immune systems. About 1 in 5 people in Scotland have a problem with stress at any one moment.

Causes of Stress:

These are numerous and include: Major life changes and life events; Noise; Crowds; Poor Sleep, Bad Diet, Unhealthy Lifestyle; Alcohol or Drug Misuse (also symptoms of stress); Aggravation & Abuse; Pressure to perform (work, school, sports, etc.); Traffic; Chemicals; Trauma; Poverty; Discrimination; Frustration; Pregnancy; Work Pressures; Negative Emotions; Loneliness; Family Conflicts; Money Worries; Alienation; Uncertainty; Illness; Unemployment; Sexual Problems; Identity Problems; Relationship Difficulties; Going to College; Loss of any kind including Theft; Relationship Break-up; Divorce, Redundancy; Abandonment, Death (of someone close to you) - anything can cause stress!

Symptoms:

The physical symptoms of stress are very varied. You may experience:

- Feeling tired all the time; • Your body feeling heavy and listless; • Poor sleep;
- Either a poor appetite, or cravings for certain foods: chocolate, junk food, coffee, alcohol, etc.;
- Constipation or diarrhoea; • Constantly breaking down into tears; • Low sex drive;
- Nervous habits like nail biting, hair pulling, skin picking, etc. • Breathless feelings; • Anger;
- General malaise and lack of energy; • Spots, blemishes or skin rash; • Hard to relax;
- Tense muscles; • Trembling or shaking; • Shortness / quickness of breath; • Feeling sick;
- Pounding heart or racing pulse; • Fast breathing; • Dry mouth; • Hot flashes or Chills;
- Feeling Sick; • "Butterflies" in the stomach; • Headaches & Migraines; • Restlessness.

The emotional symptoms of stress are also varied. You may experience:

- Feeling so low or sad that you want to cry all the time; • Feelings of anger or irritation;
- Depression; • Feelings of low self-esteem and of nothing good around you (pessimism);
- Feeling inadequate or helpless; • Loss of interest in friends, activities, social life, etc.;
- Finding it very hard to make decisions; • Low motivation; • Loss of all desires;
- Unable to make contact with friends; • Finding emotional expression very hard;
- General anxiety; • Procrastination (putting off things); • Confusion; • Mind racing.

Health Implications:

Stress is considered to be a major factor in: cardiovascular disorders (hypertension and coronary heart disease); diabetes; asthma and other respiratory disorders; colds and fevers; ulcers and gastritis; several skin disorders; backaches; headaches; the speed in growth of several cancers; chronic infections; infertility and sexual disorders. Stress also affects our intake of cigarettes, alcohol, sugar and carbohydrates, legal and illegal drugs; it impacts on family, social and work relationships, our capacity for pleasure, our levels of tolerance, and our general sense of self-esteem. It increases our aggression. In short, it is a killer. Yet it is ironically based on an early animalistic survival or emergency response system: the "fight-or-flight" mechanism.

Understanding Stress:

Any 'perception' of threat – it doesn't have to be real – triggers our basic animal "fight or flight" mechanism. A number of hormones, mainly adrenaline and cortisol, instantly flood through your body and prime it for intense physical activity: your muscles become ready to act; your mind becomes more alert; your heart rate speeds up; adrenaline slows down or shuts down your digestive system, speeds up your breathing, releases sugar for quick energy, and so forth: all perfectly designed to prepare your body to "act" physically – to fight or run away – to survive.

If, at this point in time, you actually undertake the strenuous physical activity that your body is now 'primed' for, your body will relax naturally afterwards. However most of the stuff that we 'perceive' as threats are not particularly life-threatening, and thus we often cannot react physically at that moment. The stress hormones therefore don't get 'burnt off' naturally through the resulting physical activity, so the physical symptoms persist and the body stays "alert". The next time the adrenal system is triggered, we may not have been able to relax properly in between these stressors and so the new tensions will 'sit' on top of the old. Thus we build up layer-upon-layer of stress. Then we start to worry about being stressed, or making mistakes, or being snappy or rude with people, and the resulting anxiety adds further to our levels of stress.

So we need to find ways out of this cycle of stress, anxiety and what can even result in depression. Some level of anxiety is good, helpful and healthy. It keeps us safe, it helps us stay alert; without it we might get hit crossing the road, or we could not pass exams, or be able to deal with a crisis. A little bit of stress can be quite useful and motivational. Too much anxiety and stress just debilitates us. Chronic (long-term) stress and anxiety can make you very ill.

Reducing Stress: There are several things that you can do to help to reduce your levels of stress considerably. These are mentioned in more detail later and can work best in conjunction with each other, and most practitioners would agree that a combination of these is the only way to reverse long-standing (chronic) stress conditions. They share one common feature: they all help the body to restore its natural functioning. Your 'body-mind' is beautifully designed to heal itself, and it will do so, given half a chance. However, if your anxiety states get too high, you really need to take active steps to re-balance your basic physiological systems.

Exercise: The very best thing that you can possibly do to combat your stress is firstly to do some aerobic exercise on a regular basis. This really helps you to 'burn off' any built-up stress hormones and helps to re-balance your basic physical functioning (the Autonomic Nervous System). Regular aerobic exercise is therefore a great 'first step.' The ideal amount – though you may not be able to achieve this immediately – is to get to the point where you are doing about 45 minutes of aerobic exercise 5-6 times per week. It also makes you feel better: you produce endorphins (the nice hormones) when you exercise, and you might even lose a little weight and this can help.

Relaxation: Once you have started to do any physical exercise regularly, the very next thing to do is to learn to relax physically. What happens in a state of relaxation is that your body begins to switch to a place where:

- ❖ Your mind is not so alert and is more tranquil
- ❖ You are not producing so many stress hormones
- ❖ Your breathing rate is slower and your breathing is probably deeper
- ❖ Your heart rate is slower and your blood pressure is lower
- ❖ Your muscles begin to relax
- ❖ Your digestion starts up again.

These are all restorative and self-healing. If these basic self-healing methods are not being utilised, then nothing much else written about in this leaflet can make a great deal of difference. So you need to learn how to do this exercise and relaxation 'rhythm' properly. Sometimes doing some relaxation first thing in the morning is really good, especially if you tend to wake up anxious. Aerobic exercise should be followed – later in the day – with some more relaxation. Ideally each relaxation period is about 20 minutes. Try to do some quality relaxation about 8-9 times per week. This pattern or rhythm of exercise and relaxation really does work as it helps to re-balance your

basic Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). [There is a page later on about the Physiology of Stress.](#)

SELF-HELP PRINCIPLES

The main self-help principles for coping with stress are:

1. **Exercise More:** The important features are not what you do, but how much and how often. Regularity is essential; and so is aerobic, getting out-of-breath and a bit hot & sweaty. Try to vary the pace and vary the type of aerobic exercise. There are some suggestions later on. Exercise that is enjoyable is also probably much better for you: a forty-minute stiff walk to the nearest hilltop is sometimes nicer than pounding away on a running machine in a gym for the same period. Playing football in the park with the kids is usually more fun (even if you lose) than bench-pressing weights with macho body-builders in the gym. Remember that these are all principles of de-stressing: so don't stress yourself too much doing any type of exercise. Just do it! Ideally 5-6 times per week: 45 minutes minimum.
2. **Regular Relaxation** – an absolute minimum of 20 minutes once a day or 10 minutes twice a day. Look for deeper, regular breathing first; then an absence of 'busy' thoughts; and then try for an inner feeling of warmth and relaxation throughout the body. Try and keep wiping out invasive thoughts. Whether your relaxation method is called "Deep Relaxation", "Heart Coherence", "Autogenic Technique" or is some form of meditation, the method is relatively unimportant: the regular experience is essential. Lying on the sofa listening to Chopin or Mozart can also bliss you out, so can a Radox bath. Do whatever works for you.
3. **Manage Present Conflicts & Stress Better:** There are many simple ways of doing this, though they are not, by any means, usually easy. There are lots of different techniques, and again the method is not particularly important, but the principles are:
 - **Identify** what your stressors are. External stressors can be: pollution, hydrogenated fats, smoking & alcohol, excessive sun exposure, heavy workloads, emotional problems, bereavement, divorce or separation, difficulties at home or work. Internal stressors can be: Food allergies and intolerances, auto-immune diseases, high cholesterol, metabolic waste not being eliminated properly, blood sugar imbalances (& diabetes), hormonal imbalances, nutritional deficiencies, endogenous depression (from chemical imbalance), etc.
 - **Conflicts:** With conflicts or emotional stress, try go to the source of the conflict: talking to other people doesn't usually work. Arrange a time & place and let them know it is about a problem you are having; approach them amicably; talk about some good things first and then about the (difficult) behaviour or the conflict you are experiencing, and how you are affected by it; finally say what you would like, or need, to happen next. This doesn't guarantee that the conflict will disappear, but at least you are talking about it, saying you have a problem (with them?) and doing it a way which is least likely to cause offence.
 - **Prepare** in advance for known (stressful) events: get good information; don't rush things; don't leave things to the last minute; don't skimp. Prioritise the important or immediate tasks. Know what you do well and stick to that. Take one day at a time. Learn not to be a perfectionist. Try not to escape from the present. Address any problems now!
 - **Avoid debt!** Try not to overspend or get into debt (any further). Consult someone to help manage your finances a bit better or to consolidate your debts. There are plenty of experts and good advice is fairly readily available. You might have to get over some embarrassment about being in debt, or the extent of your debts, but it is best to be open and honest with those people who matter: partners, parents, bank managers, creditors, etc.
 - **Talk to someone.** Ask for support. Get some professional help: be it from the HR or the H&S dept, a staff counsellor, an employee assistance programme (EAP), someone in the church, marriage guidance, your doctor, etc. Also listen to those around you; they can often see your situation more clearly than you can. Whatever the cost to your pride, pocket or principles, just do it. Life is complicated enough already without the inner turmoil as well as more everyday stress and conflict to deal with. Try to develop a more positive

attitude to yourself, your work and family, and the world.

4. **A Healthy Diet:** When we are stressed out, or in distress, our diet usually goes to pieces and we focus much more on “comfort foods”. Often our intake of alcohol and other ‘legal’ drugs (sugar, caffeine, chocolate & cigarettes) also increases. We are what we eat. And the road back to health usually means adopting a better balanced diet. Most people know the main principles:
 - ✓ Reduce unhealthy (animal) fats
 - ✓ Increase healthy (Omega-3) fats (oily fish, nuts, seeds, some oils)
 - ✓ Reduce carbohydrates considerably
 - ✓ Reduce sugar & salt intake: don’t drink too much alcohol.
 - ✓ Drink much more water – *at least 2 litres a day*
 - ✓ Eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
 - ✓ Eat less processed foods & pre-prepared meals
 - ✓ Eat more organic and home-cooked foods, if possible.
5. **Dealing with Trauma and Painful Memories:** If there have been traumatic events and/or events that provoke anger, sadness or other painful memories, these really need to be dealt with by working on them, talking through them, and eventually coming to terms with them in some way. You will not heal fully, if you are still traumatised, or if these ‘old wounds’ are still upsetting you emotionally. These sorts of things – whilst in the past – carry a lot of current stress. Which methods you use: EMDR, emotional counselling, psychotherapy, etc. are relatively unimportant, but the process of emotional healing is *totally* necessary. Be as honest with yourself as possible about your need to heal.
6. **Enrich Your Relationships:** Talk more to those around you; spend more quality time with them; listen to them (really listen); and value them more. Discover more about their background, their (general & specific) thinking, their feelings, and their ideas. Ask about what affects them, or what troubles them. They will then feel that you are genuinely interested in them. Respect their views and how they cope: and how they cope with you. Empathy is a key concept. Then you can talk to them about what troubles you have; open up and share a bit more. Now you know (about) them a bit better, you might trust them more. This can become the start of a much better relationship. You might also have to learn to say “No” to those who you feel are imposing on you, using you, or abusing the present relationship. Become more aware of your own limits and boundaries. When you do, others might respect your limits and boundaries better. Maybe there is one particular friend you can already really trust and relax with: when did you last spend quality time with them?
7. **Regular Sleep and Waking Gently:** Getting into a regular routine of sleep is one of the most essential points. Always try to go to bed at the same time, and to wake up at the same time. Getting in to the habit of such a sleep pattern is very important, and not very easy. Try to avoid stressors: including *coffee*, *sugar* and *alcohol* right before sleep. A gentle walk after dinner can be a good relaxant; so can a nice warm bath, or a massage. Then try to adjust the amount of sleep you get to the right amount for you: different people need different amounts: anywhere between six to eight hours is the most common. Then try ‘dawn simulators’ or a light (on a timer) going on gently before the alarm clock wakens you. Try to spend a few minutes in bed before getting up: don’t rush into the day already stressed. Don’t worry if you wake a little early: learn to stay lying down, reasonably relaxed, without getting anxious. You are still resting, even if you are not asleep.
8. **Focus on Your Health:** Your health is very important and it also is not a constant. It needs to be worked at – actively – in order for you to stay healthy. So, learn to take care of yourself, on all different levels, especially when you are stressed out. Explore some of the other activities & possibilities that are around or available: there are probably many more than you think and some of them can be quite fun. Try something a little different, as you might have got yourself into a rut. Take a little time out, like a long week-end break, that can really refresh you (you may have some time ‘in lieu’ available). Get away and regenerate yourself. One of the 24-hour ‘packages’ spent at a ‘hydro’ hotel can be really nice (massage,

jacuzzi, sauna, steam room, etc.) without breaking the bank.

Consider also some of the more holistic approaches, or alternative health concepts, or complementary medicine perspectives. Shiatsu, massage, acupuncture, tea-tree oil, green tea, or lavender oil baths can often help and be very pleasurable: so treat yourself!

9. **Contact with Nature:** We have often lost contact with nature and we don't realise how important this can be for us. The woods, the fields, the beach, the moors, the hills are all easily available, and wonderful. Go take a walk. Get your hands in the earth; digging the garden or potting out some plants in window boxes. It is not an extra chore: it can be really relaxing. Allow yourself a breathing space: do something gentle that you enjoy in nature.
10. **Breathe!** Breathe! Breathe! Become much more aware of your breathing, regularly, daily, hourly. When we are anxious or stressed, we tend to breathe in and hold our breath. Eventually this adds to our stress and distress. Stop and breathe in for a count of 5, through your nose, and then exhale for a count of 7, out through the mouth. You can visualize breathing in 'peace', 'strength', or whatever it is that you need; and then breathing out all that stress and anxiety and pain and distress. Let it all leave your body as you breathe out. When you breathe in, fill up your chest area and torso, up to the shoulders. When you breathe out, breathe out right down to the bottom of your belly. A hand on the chest or belly, when you breathe deeply, can serve as a reminder. Try doing this regularly, even every 15 minutes or so, just for a few in-breaths and out-breaths each time.
11. **Humour:** There is an archetypal story of a man who cured himself of cancer by locking himself in a hotel bedroom for 3 weeks with nothing but a collection of silent movies by Charlie Chaplin & Buster Keaton. He laughed his way back to health. Humour is very important for stress release. Find something that makes you laugh. Go out with people who you feel comfortable with, and with whom you can laugh and have a good (pleasant) time.
12. **Talk to Someone:** This has been mentioned before. It is important, so it gets mentioned again. Not everyone finds this easy; but it does work. Trying to do it all by yourself (macho), or not wanting to bother other people (self-sacrificing), or thinking that other people are more important or have more worries than you (self-demeaning), or whatever – just does not help you one little bit. You are still stuck with the problems or difficulties that you have and are causing you stress. Many people are capable of listening, and just the experience of talking about some of the things that are worrying you, can often mean that you provide yourself with some of the answers that you need. Take the plunge: just say to someone – a good friend, your partner, your (friendly) manager, a colleague perhaps: “I read this little booklet at the doctor's surgery on Stress and I have just realised that I am a lot more stressed out than I thought I was.” See how they respond. It is a start, or it is a good first step.

**Adopt something like this or some of these ideas
as your Self-Help “12-step” Programme for beating stress.**

STRESS & MODERN LIFE

Modern Life and Stress:

Our modern lifestyles involve us in less physical activity than ever before throughout the 5 million years of human evolutionary history. Our patterns of life and work have never been more stressful. Stress levels have rarely ever been higher. The reason is that whenever we get upset or threatened in any way, our basic “fight-or flight” mechanism, based on adrenaline, is activated. This has been mentioned before.

If we do not fight or run away (like one of the animals) or because we are ‘civilised’, then the stress hormones, the by-products and companions of adrenaline, like cortisone, remain unused and stay in our systems. Then they can start to build-up and this causes us additional problems – more stress: increased heart-rate, tense muscles, aggressive emotions, startle-patterns, lighter sleep, increased weight, reliance on de-stressors (drugs and alcohol), and poor digestion. Stress also restricts our ability to re-balance ourselves, internally as well as emotionally: our immune systems and self-regulatory functions can become seriously compromised. We suspect that as much as 70% of all disease and illness is linked to stress.

The threats that usually face nowadays are essentially non-physical: someone has upset us, we are worried about money, we are frustrated at work, our kids have left the sitting room in a mess, we are late, there is a traffic jam, etc. The hormones in our bodies are still being triggered by these stressful situations, by our stress or dis-stress, but our bodies are not being utilised for physical action and so the hormones just stay in our systems. They can even be detected up to three weeks after a stressful event: and that is just from one event. How often do we get stressed like this? How do we deal with it, or not deal with it?

We can start to channel the stress more appropriately, first of all into some sort of physical activity so that it gets worked out of our bodies naturally and helpfully. The more inactive we are, the more the stress hormones will accumulate. The more the stress hormones accumulate, the more likely we are to react to situations in a stressful way; and so a vicious spiral builds up.

We need to consider the emotional and psychological pressures that we are under. Our school reports said, “*S/he must work harder.*” There is the ‘protestant work ethic’ that can make us prioritise our job before our family, and other people before ourselves. At work, there are ‘targets’ and quotas. The bosses put the managers under stress; they try and get us to comply with something that is essentially unrelated or meaningless to us: annual reports, share price, and profits. There are now regular newspaper reports making this sort of connection. (viz: Scotsman 20-Jan 2006, p.16: “*A stressful job could be the death of you.*”)

At home, mortgage prices have escalated astronomically. One full-time wage-earner can not now provide for a family, with children, in a decent home. Many people have to do extra work at home, outside of their full-time hours. Home is not such a safe place any longer and we have to pay for burglar alarms and fire alarms and higher insurance policies. We worry more about the children’s school, and whether they spend too much time in front of the TV or computer and away from us. We hardly have time for them: yet they are so important to us. And they want so much! They are also under stress: school work and exams; peer group pressures; separated (often alienated) parents; powerful emotions, especially in adolescence.

Even when we go on holiday, the journey there is often stressful: airports are not people friendly; flights can be early in the morning or late at night; and there are shuttle buses, taxis or hire car firms to negotiate with, before we can get to our hotel and relax.

There is so much going on that is stressful, and that we have to cope with. Marital breakdowns, panic attacks, hysteria, road rage, teenage vandalism, drug taking, and violence suddenly seem slightly more ‘sensible’ reactions to situations that are essentially intolerable to our basic physiology, and our intrinsic ideas as to what life *should* be like: inexcusable, but understandable.

FITTING EXERCISE INTO YOUR LIFE

As explained, aerobic exercise is a very important tool in the struggle to defeat stress, and it is also very good for anxiety and depression. In fact it is excellent for all forms of mental health. It is great for general health as well: it can help to cut down on the risk of your developing major illnesses and it can help you to live longer as well. Much of 'aging' is due to decreased mobility for an increasingly sedentary lifestyle.

Regular exercise makes you feel and look better. It helps to release serotonin and endorphins – the 'happy' hormones, responsible for the 'feel-good' factor. It boosts your energy levels; reduces tension and anger; improves concentration; improves your sleep; increases heart and lung capacity; increases bone density; and has many other benefits for specific illnesses.

A little exercise goes a long way. You do not have to take out a subscription to a gym (that is how they make their money); run a marathon; or become a health freak. However it is usually necessary to 'fit' more exercise into your life – somehow – and then try to keep on doing it regularly.

The best form of exercise is **aerobic** exercise – where you get out of breath, and feel a bit hot and sweaty. Ideally you should try to do this 3-4 times a week, with a minimum of 40-45 minutes each time. You can do this anytime, anywhere, anyhow.

Here are a number of suggestions:

- "Power-walk" (or jog) around the edge of the local golf course or park.
- Occasionally bike to work, or to visit someone.
- Get an exercise bike, tread-mill, or stepper; put it in the corner of the bedroom or living room; and use it regularly!
- Instead of watching or listening to your favourite 'soap' sitting down – exercise whilst you do so.
- Most evenings, try to walk around the block for half an hour before you go in and get ready for bed.
- Swimming 40 lengths (using different strokes) when you go to the swimming pool.
- Volunteer to exercise your neighbour's dog: make him/her very happy and get lots of doggy love, whilst you get slim and trim.
- Get a 'pedometer', clip it on, and count your daily steps: try to build up towards 10,000 steps per day (most people do 3,000-5,000 anyway).
- Get out of the car on the way home from the weekly shop and power-walk the last two miles yourself whilst the others put the shopping away.
- Double-dig the garden vegetable plot; clear out the garden shed, attic or garage; make a compost heap (or turn it over).
- Get off the bus a stop early and walk the last few hundred yards.
- If it is raining, get busy with the housework: vacuuming (175 calories per hour), shopping (245), sweeping (280), cleaning the floor (315), painting (360), etc.
- If you are relatively immobile, get some mini-dumbbells and lift weights with hands and arms only.
- Try take a point of doing one good long walk (6.5 -10 miles / 10-16 km) every couple of months, ideally up and down some hills.
- Join up with a work colleague and exercise, play squash, or something similar during a lunch hour or after work once per week.
- Get a group of friends, church goers, work colleagues to form a team together, meeting once a month or so, to (say) raise money for charity by doing sponsored walks, competing with other teams, digging gardens, washing cars, etc.
- Work towards a long-term goal: power-walking a marathon (or half-marathon); doing the West Highland Way, the Pennine Way, or the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage; going on a cycling or trekking holiday.

RELAXATION

It is incredibly important to relax as well. However, usually try relaxing after you have exercised. Done regularly, this will help you to re-balance your basic body functioning (Autonomic Nervous System), which is what gets overstressed. For most people under stress, it is very difficult to relax – for 2 main reasons: (1) (they think that) they don't have the time; and (2) they are so stressed that they cannot relax easily. It is therefore necessary to 'build-in' a programme of relaxation (ideally once or twice a day for 20 minutes) and this can either be done first thing, or should be done sometime after you do your exercise routine. There are many different ways to relax: here are several suggestions:

- **Progressive Relaxation:** You can get tapes or CD's of (usually) Progressive Relaxation exercises that tell you how first to tense, then to relax, all the various sets of muscles in your body. As you do this, you progressively relax more and more. It is sometimes called 'Differential Relaxation' as well.
- **Autogenic Therapy:** I often teach people the principles of a form of Autogenic Therapy, a form of relaxation that was designed for people with hypertension, and works using a script and an image for the various parts of the body. The advantage of learning something like this system is that you can do it anywhere and without any special equipment. You can get a book that teaches you, or there are special therapists (in Edinburgh).
- **Music:** Certain types of music are very soothing and relaxing: Mozart, Chopin, some Bach, Boccherini, Albinoni, etc. Try to get some CDs or tapes and listen to these in the car, or at home, instead of the radio. Alternatively tune your car radio to Radio 3 or Classic FM rather than the news or pop music. CDs of whale songs and flute music from Peru can be relaxing.
- **Warm Water:** This is very relaxing. Go for Radox-type baths, a nice long soak, with a candle and some gentle background music. Or get yourself to the nearest jacuzzi, maybe even in your lunch hour. Hydrotherapy is a well-established relaxation treatment.
- **Massage** is an excellent form of relaxation. It does not particularly matter what type of massage, but aroma-therapy massages are now quite popular and fairly readily available. They will usually cost between £20-30 but it is an excellent investment to kick-start you into a better pattern of relaxation and self-care. Ask your partner for a foot-massage as you watch TV together. Sometimes a bit of self-massage helps: first do the scalp; then the back of the neck; then one shoulder after another; then those tense muscles at the top of the chest towards the shoulder; and then those by the collar bones; can all be massaged by yourself, taking only a minute or two, whilst at work, and without any embarrassment. Stretch and yawn before you go back to work refreshed and more relaxed.
- **Breaks** are also important. You usually have scheduled morning, lunch and tea-breaks at work: so take them. Don't work on through them. You should have a half-hour minimum lunch break, by law: take it. Get out of the office or workplace. Don't pass up on holidays, or time in lieu. If you work from home: take 5 minutes every hour – as a minimum – and a lunch break away from your work. Arrange for quality time away, mini-breaks, long weekends, or whatever. Anything *less* than this is basically counter-productive in the long term.
- **Do Something Different:** A really good form of relaxation is to do something completely different. It doesn't have to be specifically relaxing: it could be something like Pilates, Tai Chi, Aikido or Yoga. Something physical is better than something sedentary, and these disciplines are more balancing than relaxing. But it could be a local drama group or a choir: something that will take you out of yourself, do something different, and maybe help you meet others as well.
- **Reading**, watching films or TV, listening to music or the radio, can also be very relaxing – in relatively small doses. It is best to have a regular routine and stick to it: reading the paper on the way to work; or watching the news or a favourite TV show at a set time.

MEDITATION

A very powerful form of relaxation is ‘meditation’. This does not have to be religious, or based on a particular faith. Essentially it is sitting still, breathing regularly, and quietening your mind. When you do this, your body slows down and you shift more into genuine physical relaxation. Eventually, your mind will slow down as well and you will become much more peaceful and relaxed.

“A still mind is a mind that is free from fear, free from fantasies, free from ruminations over the past, free from concern about what may or may not be happening to it. It is mind no longer disturbed by the many thoughts that come from believing that fulfilment lies in what we have or what we do.” Peter Russell

Meditation Position: Make sure you are not going to be disturbed: switch off the ringer on the phone; turn off the mobile; hang a note on the bedroom door; tell others in the house you are going to meditate for (say) 20 minutes. Settle into a comfortable sitting position, either on a straight-backed chair, with your feet flat on the floor, or on a soft surface on the floor sitting cross-legged. Your spine should be vertical, your body fairly relaxed, your weight supported and balanced.

Check your Body & Breathing: Bring your awareness to how your body is feeling. Spend a minute or so, checking your self out, doing a body scan. Become aware of how your body feels; warm or cold, comfortable or uncomfortable, the feel of your clothes against your skin, whether your belt or neck feels constrained. Make any adjustments necessary. Then, become aware of your breathing: it is shallow or light; is it only in the chest or the belly; are you holding your breath at all, or is it flowing in and out fairly freely. Become aware of which parts of your body move when you breathe. Maybe there is a slight pause at the top of the in-breath or the bottom of the out-breath. Maybe you are breathing in and out only through your nose, or only through your mouth. Don’t try to control your breathing, just allow the breath to flow – in and out. Simply let the breath breathe itself. This is very peaceful. You do not have to do anything else, just keep on doing this.

Either Empty Your Mind or Focus Your Mind: Sooner or later your mind will start to wander, or thoughts will come into your mind to distract your awareness and your ‘peace of mind’. This is very common, especially in the early ‘learning stages’. It is not a mistake or failure: it is just what the mind does. Congratulations for noticing that your attention is not on your breath. Just empty your mind of the thoughts, and/or re-focus on your breathing. This will happen over and over again. Just keep on emptying your mind of thoughts and re-focussing your awareness on your breathing. Sometimes you might wish to focus or meditate on a particular topic, like ‘world peace’, or ‘healing’. As you breathe in, breathe in and focus these qualities inside of you; as you breathe out, send out these qualities into the world. Again, your attention may wander at times, or thoughts may cascade through your mind. That is normal: just re-focus your attention and awareness. Make each moment count. Keep coming back to the topic of the focus or meditation. All thoughts have equal value: there are not ‘good’ thoughts or ‘bad’ thoughts. Thinking is not ‘bad’ and an empty mind ‘good’. Do not get distracted by judgement, or by content. Do not try to suppress or eliminate certain thoughts or topics. What matters is your awareness of your thoughts and when you are thinking, and what you do about it: judge it, hang on to it, or (preferably) let it go.

Continue like this for 15 to 20 minutes (or longer if you wish). 15-20 minutes is the minimum time to get the maximum benefit. Try doing this once or twice a day – regularly, every day. The affect is cumulative, so you may not notice a huge difference after the first few times. The effect is usually quite subtle, though – over time – it is powerful. After a while you will notice when you miss doing your meditation. Just find a few moments and do it again.

Practice, practice and more practice: You are gradually training your mind to become less reactive and much calmer. You will find this has other, wider benefits. Your stress levels will diminish. You will be able to concentrate more. You will feel more centred. You will have greater patience. You will become less judgemental. Each meditation is different: they vary. Some meditations can be dramatic, visionary or life-changing, however these are fairly rare. In some meditations, you may fall asleep. Just observe the differences. Don’t get caught up in the ‘glamour’ of a powerful meditation. You are mainly just relaxing your mind and your body. This is also extremely good for many medical conditions, like hypertension (high blood pressure).

MINDFULNESS

When we are stressed, we often become absent-minded, or we may be doing something (like reading a book) and realise that we are not aware of doing it (or what we are reading): our mind is distracted. When we are ‘automatic pilot’ like this, our body is doing one thing and our mind is doing another. Accidents and mistakes can then happen. Negative thoughts can build up and coalesce. We are trying to find ‘better’ solutions, but we are also often constantly monitoring (and judging critically) how we are doing. On a day-to-day basic, mindlessness is not very productive and is often quite harmful. Multi-tasking is all very well, but it is not very relaxing.

Mindfulness means – paying attention – in a particular way – on purpose – in the present moment – and non-judgementally. It can be useful for anxiety, depression, better pain control, anger management, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and self-healing as well as for stress. The core skills of mindfulness are: **Be Aware** and **Let Go**.

Being aware is literally just that: being aware you have a pain here; that you find this or that activity stressful; that you don’t have the energy for ‘this’ any longer; or that you are irritated by that person. Letting go is literally just that: letting go of your irritation, your pain, your stress, your boredom and fatigue; freeing your self from attachments or fixed ideas.

Practicing Mindfulness: You start practicing mindfulness by introducing ‘mindful’ meditations into your regular routine of meditation. Let mindfulness (or awareness) become the ‘focus’ of your meditations. In your meditation, done as before, become aware of every feeling or sensation; every thought or every noise outside – the ticking of the clock, the distant traffic, bird song. And then let these perceptions go! Expand and extend your awareness – and then just let any insights or sensations go: there is a continual emptying process. Try to stay in the moment: what am I aware of now? What now?

Then you can extend your mindfulness practice into everything that you are doing. How am I doing this? How interesting! What am I feeling now? How interesting! And now let this go. The moment passes. You are doing something else. How interesting! And now move on to the next step.

You can go deeper into what you are doing. When eating a tangerine, become aware of the texture of the skin, and the contrast with the fruit inside. The feel of the skin being peeled; the tiny spurt of juice; the separation of the segments; the explosion of taste; the smell; the discarded peel. You can become aware of the tree on which it grew; the water and the sunshine necessary for it to grow; the people who grew it and picked it; the country it grew in and how it got into your hand. What a depth and miracle of mindfulness there is in this one action. And now move on to the next action.

When you are doing the washing up, standing at the kitchen sink (or some other action), just do the washing up, become aware of the bubbles and the water; the action of the sponge or mop on the plate; the change in the appearance; the way some bits stick and others don’t. Be aware of the sunshine (or weather) outside; the bird song or street noises; other people in the house - these are all part of the experience of doing the washing up (or whatever you are doing). If you catch yourself thinking about tomorrow’s shopping list, stop doing the washing up, write down the shopping list, then return to doing the washing up. Stay in the moment. If you don’t like washing up, and want to finish it quickly – so as to watch TV or eat dessert, you may be equally incapable of enjoying TV or dessert: your mind will jump on to the next action. Focus on this one, just this one, and you may find that you quite enjoy the process of washing up mindfully.

The Process of Mindfulness: There is no end to this process. Each meditation, each ‘mindful’ action builds and grows. The further in you go (into the territory of mindfulness), the bigger it gets. You will slow down a little, you will become calmer and less reactive, you will look at the wider picture and become more thoughtful. It is so simple, and it is not – for a moment - easy. This is definitely ‘the road less travelled’ – yet it is a very rich journey. We are not trying to get anywhere: we are making every moment count; we are really enriching the journey itself. We can even make each step that we take (literally) mindful: this is a walking meditation.

Adapted from Thich Nhat Hahn: ‘Peace is Every Step’.

RESOURCES

- Anxiety Disorder Resource Centre:** www.anxiety-uk.org/ A free resource centre for people with anxiety and anxiety disorders.
- BBC Healthy Living:** www.bbc.co.uk/health/healthy_living/complementary_medicine/ An introduction to Complementary Medicine written from a user's point of view
- Breathing Space Scotland:** www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk 0800 838 587: A good resources for information, advice, and sign-posting for various mental health issues and a range of related problems: financial and work issues, bereavement, pain, etc. The organisation also provides telephone support (free confidential phone line) for sufferers.
- Doing Well:** www.doingwell.org.uk This website offers extensive advice and information on depression, its treatments, and how it is managed. There are some useful patient's stories and an opportunity to share your own experience. There is a self-assessment function and an emphasis on the management of depression.
- Living Life to the Full:** www.livinglifetothefull.com Free access to a mental health skills course based on CBT. Includes several teaching sessions.
- Mental Health Foundation:** www.mentalhealth.org.uk The Mental Health Foundation exists to help people survive, recover from and prevent mental health problems.
- MIND:** www.mind.org.uk A national and excellent advocate for people with mental health issues giving information on and self-help about stress, anxiety, depression, mental health and related issues.
- MoodJuice:** www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk This NHS Forth Valley website has a number of downloadable documents containing information on how to cope with Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Panic Attacks, Bereavement, Post Traumatic Stress, Sleep Problems, etc. similar to these handouts, with lots of local contacts and further information.
- Safe and Healthy Working** www.safeandhealthyworking.com 0800 019 2211: A free and confidential professional advice line to Scottish employers and employees.
- Talking about ... Stress** booklet, NHS Health Scotland, www.healthscotland.com You can download this booklet as a PDF file from their publications section.
- International Stress Management Association:** www.isma.org.uk

Self-Help Books:

- Brewer, Sarah (2000) *Simply Relax: The Beginner's Guide to Relaxation*. Duncan Baird.
- Burns, D. (2000) *The Feeling Good Handbook*. Plume.
- Davidson, J. (1999) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress*. Alpha Books
- Davis, M., Eshelman E.R., & McKay, M. (2000) *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. New Harbinger.
- Dryden, W. (2005) *Ten Steps to Positive Living*. Orient.
- Lowen A. & Lowen L. (1977) *The Way to Vibrant Health: A manual of Bioenergetic exercises*. Harper.
- Rushton, A. (2004) *How To Cope Successfully with Stress*. Wellhouse Publishing
- Servan-Schreiber, David (2004) *Healing without Freud or Prozac: Natural approaches to curing stress, anxiety & depression without drug and without psychoanalysis*. Rodale.
- Thich Nhat Hahn: (1995) *Peace is Every Step; The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. Rider Publications
- Tyrer, P. (2003) *How to cope with stress*. Sheldon Press
- Various booklets: **Understanding ...** Series: (Mind Publications); **Mental Illness** (The Health of the Nation: BAPS) **University of Abertay, Dundee** Counselling Service leaflets; **NHS Borders: Doing Well** series; **MoodJuice** (web site)... and many others

National Organisations & Help Lines:

- MIND** Info Line, PO Box 277, Manchester, M60 3XN. Tel: 0845-766-0163
- The Samaritans** The Upper Mill, Kingston Road, Ewell, Surrey KT17 2AF. Tel: 0208-394-8300
- CRUSE** Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1UR. Tel: 0208-939-9530
- Compassionate Friends**, 53 North Street, Bristol BS3 1EN Tel: 0117-966-5202
- SANE**, Cityside House, #1, 40 Adler St., London E1 1EE Tel: 0207-375-1002; Help-Line 0845-767-8000
- NHS Help Line** Tel: 0800-22-44-88

Edinburgh & Lothian Resources:

- Mental Health at Work:** www.mentalhealthatwork.info/links.htm
- Edspace:** www.edspace.org.uk