



**NHS Newcastle and North Tyneside
Community Health**

Stress Control

Week 1

PART A: WHAT IS STRESS?

This part of the handout tells you all about stress.

Read through it a few times.

Talk it over with those close to you.

What is stress?

The most common form of stress is a mix of anxiety (tension, nerves) and depression (feeling flat, sad). It often comes with sleep problems, panic feelings and anger. Drink problems are also common.

Stress is not a black and white thing. We all have some stress in our lives and some times are worse than others. This may be due to what we have to face - problems at work, money problems, ill-health, problems in the family and so on. We all worry and we all feel down from time to time. Think of blood pressure - we all have it but if it is too high, you have to do something about it. It is the same with stress.

When does stress become a problem?

Stress in itself is not a problem (some people thrive on it). It depends on how much stress you get. A small amount of stress can be good for you.

Stress should cause us concern when it does not die down and when it affects us at times when we know it should not. Such times could include sitting watching TV, talking to a work mate, walking down to the shops.

You may feel that your mind is taken over by it. You might find it coming and going for no reason. You might feel you are losing control of your life. You might feel you are cracking up. You might feel you can't cope with things that others seem to cope with.

It is not the same as a 'fit of the blues' or 'having a bad day'. A good kick up the backside will not shift stress. It is a lot more complex than that.

Meg

'My life should be great just now. I've got no real problems in my life. Yet I'm so flat and feel so sad much of the time and I don't know why'

Anne

'It's been one thing after another this year. My dad dying, the new job, the problems we're having with my eldest daughter. I'm at the end of my tether with it all and I just can't get a grip'

Stress becomes a problem when we feel we can't control it. Stress comes about when the pressures on us outweigh our ability to cope.

Stress Control aims to help you learn better ways of coping. This shifts the balance in your favour and you are more able to get a grip on it.

Is stress a common problem?

In the UK this year, three out of ten people will have a problem with stress. This same figure is found right across the world. This makes stress one of the biggest problems in the world today. It also looks as if stress is a growing problem across the world.

More people go to their GP with stress than with any other problem. We also know that about half of all people with stress do not go to the GP at all. They may not realise that they have stress. They may feel that no-one can help them. However even talking about your stress may help as you may think of ways to help yourself.

Harry

Harry is 17 years old. He is unemployed. He first felt depressed three years ago when he broke up with a girl. At first, he felt this was normal (as indeed it was) but in Harry's case the depression stayed and got worse.

"I went from being happy-go-lucky to feeling that I have the world on my shoulders. I know I am hard to live with and that I snap all the time at home. My friends have been great but they are fed-up with me as I never phone them or go out any more. Every day is the same - grey. I can't tell you the last time I felt like a laugh. I don't do anything any more as I feel dead beat and just want to sleep all the time.

I cry a lot now and I'm dead jumpy. I thought that when you felt depressed you just slumped in a chair and stared at the wall all day, but I feel quite agitated and I'm always on the go. I know I'm stressed out as well. I can't relax and I worry about daft things but I can't stop. I get dead panicky if I have to go the shops. I just think everyone is looking at me.

I hate myself and I wonder if I deserve to be like this. My sleep is away to pot and I hardly eat these days. Though some days are better than others, I often go to bed hoping I don't wake up in the morning."

The way it affects you

People under stress often feel that their mind is taken over by it. You may feel you are losing control over your life. You may feel that you are cracking up. You may feel you can't cope with things that everyone else can cope with. This raises three points:

NOT EVERYONE COPE

Stress makes you feel that you cope less well than others. Yet we know how common this problem is. Think of how well you may be able to hide your stress from others. They may be hiding their stress from you. Once you learn all the signs of stress, you might start to see it in many others.

STRESS AFFECTS ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE

Stress can affect all of us - young or old, outgoing or shy, clever or dim, male or female, rich or poor. You are not strange, mad or stupid because you have stress. Stress is a normal part of life. You might just have too much of it just now.

INSIGHT

As a rough rule of thumb, the more you think you are cracking up, the less you are. You know you should not worry or feel so down as much as you do. The problem is that you can't stop feeling like this. This understanding is called **INSIGHT**.

Is it a 'real' problem?

There is still, for some, a stigma about stress. People are, on the whole, not keen to admit to it. They may be good at putting on a mask to hide it. Often, people won't accept it is stress. Many go to their GP to get help for a body symptom - headaches, upset stomach, heart racing, etc. Some feel quite angry if they are told it is stress.

John

'I told my boss I was stressed out. She just about fell off her seat. She thought I was the most laid back guy in the place. Yet inside, I feel as if I'm falling apart'

Most people would rather have a "real" problem like a broken leg. At least with a broken leg, you know what caused it, you know how to mend it and you know that, in a few months time, you will be fine. Stress is not like this. It is often hard to say why you have stress, you may not know what to do to help and you don't know how you will feel in a few months time.

Stress is as real as any medical problem. The causes of stress and the things that keep it going are complex. Giving yourself a good shake will do nothing to shift stress.

Who can get stress?

All of us. It is clear that there is nothing special about people who get stress. Try answering the following questions:

Do you find it hard to relax?	YES	NO
Do you find it hard to stop worrying?	YES	NO
Do you worry about worrying?	YES	NO
Do you often brood about the past?	YES	NO
Do you find it hard to get through the day?	YES	NO
Do you find it hard to be cheerful most days?	YES	NO

The more times you said '**YES**' means that stress is playing a big part in your daily life.

Who is most at risk?

As mentioned before, people from all walks of life can get stress. It is very hard to predict who will get stress, but it does seem that women and those with social problems are more prone to stress.

Women

Women are more prone to stress than men (about twice as much). Is this because they are weaker? No. Women still, on the whole, get the short end of the stick. They may work but still do more about the house and do more with the children than men.

Due to male pride, men may also be better at hiding stress and may be more likely to drink as a way of coping with stress. Men are twice as likely to have a problem with drink than women. So maybe more men start off with a stress problem, drink to control it and end up with a drink problem that is really hiding stress.

Social factors

There is a clear link between stress and social factors. People who live in the poorer areas in our cities are twice as likely to have stress than those in the most wealthy. Other social factors can make people more prone to stress.

- ◆ money problems
- ◆ being a single parent
- ◆ a lack of control over your life
- ◆ poor education
- ◆ poorer health
- ◆ money problems
- ◆ not having support from others
- ◆ bad neighbours

Jan

“I live in the high flats. We have got some right head cases in the flats so I can't let the kids use the lifts on their own. So they are round my feet all day. I've not got the money to take them out a lot. They can drive me mad. My family have their own problems so I don't like to ask them for help. I worry about how I'm going to manage this Christmas.”

Kay

“The house is too cramped for us but we just can't get out. My partner has to work all the overtime he can get to keep our heads above water so I don't see him much. I just feel I am surviving week to week. It's not much of a life.”

Neil

"I took my redundancy from BT. Then I was on benefits for eight months until I got another job. I was a skilled worker and I earned good money in the office. Now I have to work for peanuts. A trained monkey could do it. There is no pride in my new job and I have to work long hours to earn enough to live."

Common sense tells you that these factors would make any normal person more prone to stress. But they do not tell the whole story. A great number of people who do not have any of these problems still suffer from marked stress. At the same time, many people who do have a lot of social problems do not have stress. So there is no easy answer as to why stress hits some but not others.

Kate

Kate is a 45 year old school cleaner. She says she is a born worrier but over the past three years, she has become a 'nervous wreck'

"I worry about the smallest thing - being late for the doctors; what the people at work think of me; worry if the kids are 5 minutes later home from school; just everything. I'm better if I keep myself busy but I can't relax at all in the house. I never sit at peace for more than five minutes. Though I get off to sleep, I wake up a lot in the night and can't get off to sleep again.

I'm always on edge; I bite the head off the kids all the time for no reason. I can go for days with a throbbing headache that starts at the back of my neck and goes all the way to the top of my head. I just feel tense all the time.

I always feel under threat and think that people are putting me down even when I really know they are not. I find myself getting into arguments with people in my mind even when there is no need to. I can get all worked up and not know how to calm down again. I might pick over whole conversations to see if I have said or done the wrong thing. I just feel I'm not in control the way I should be. I doubt myself all the time and I don't know how to get out of this mess. I'm just wasting my life"

Stress can be broken up into four parts :

1. **WHAT YOU FEEL:** What emotions can be found in stress
2. **WHAT YOU THINK:** What goes through your mind when you are under stress
3. **WHAT YOU DO:** How you act when you are under stress
4. **HOW YOUR BODY REACTS:** Physical symptoms you get when you're under stress

Let us look at each of these in turn...

1. Stress can affect your <i>feelings</i>	Tick the ones that affect you
◆ You may feel uptight	
◆ You may feel flat	
◆ You may feel easily upset	
◆ You may feel a strong guilt	
◆ You may feel easily embarrassed	
◆ You may feel low a lot of the time	
◆ You may feel full of anger	
◆ You may get jealous easily	
◆ You may feel discomfort easily	
◆ You may feel insecure	
◆ You may have lost your sense of humour	
◆ You may feel without hope	
◆ You may feel tearful	
◆ You may feel that stress brings out the worst in you. You become more small-minded, petty and resentful	

2. Stress can affect your <i>thoughts</i>	Tick the ones that affect you
◆ You may worry or brood about things you know you should not worry or brood about	
◆ You may lose self-confidence	
◆ You may feel your memory is poor	
◆ You may feel very self-conscious	
◆ You may feel cut-off from others	
◆ You may feel you are at the end of your tether	
◆ You may find it hard to concentrate	
◆ You may find it hard to relax your mind	
◆ You may feel that you can't control your world	
◆ You may have lost interest in a lot of things	
◆ You may not like yourself	
◆ You may be waiting for the worst to happen	
◆ You may feel easily confused	
◆ You may feel you have no get up and go	

3. Stress can affect your <i>actions</i>	Tick the ones that affect you
◆ You may avoid doing things or going places as you fear you will not be able to cope with them	
◆ You may be more quick tempered or angry	
◆ You may be withdrawing from life	
◆ You may be unable to relax	
◆ You may be making more mistakes	
◆ You may try to 'play safe' more than usual	
◆ You may try to avoid responsibility	
◆ You may be drinking more than you should	
◆ You may be smoking more	
◆ You may be eating a lot more or a lot less	
◆ You may be more tearful	

4. Stress can affect your <i>body</i>	Tick the ones that affect you
◆ You may have a lot of aches and pains due to tense muscles	
◆ You may be more prone to colds and flu	
◆ You may feel drained of energy	
◆ You may never feel 100%	
◆ You may lose or gain weight	
◆ You may be easily startled	
◆ You may get a lot of headaches	
◆ You may feel your breathing changes when tense	
◆ You may feel you have to push yourself through the day	
◆ Your body may feel uptight much of the day	
◆ You may find that your body reacts very easily to stress	
◆ You may find it too hard to get to sleep or to stay asleep	

Margaret is a 26 year old typist. She has had panic attacks for the past 2 years. Her first panic attack was at work. The room was small, hot and full of people. She felt that there was not enough air in the room.

“The panic came on out of the blue. It felt like a cold wave crashing over my head. One minute I was boiling hot then the next minute I was freezing cold. My heart was racing and the sweat was pouring off of me. I felt as if I was there but not there if you know what I mean. I thought I was going to pass out.

After that, I was sure that my heart was dodgy. Even after all the tests came back fine, I still felt I was dying when I had a panic. Yet when I feel calm, I know fine well that panics won't kill me or make me mad and that they will pass. But this flies out the window as soon as the panic builds up.

I've just got back to work. I find that I can cope better if I keep myself dead busy. But I'm still tense most of the day. I'm always dead aware of my heart rate. I still find it hard to believe that panic can affect me so badly. Over and above the panic, I'm more tense and down. I think I drink more than I should as well.”

Myths and Facts

There is a great deal of nonsense talked and written about stress. As a result, you may not have a true picture of your problem. This section looks at the popular myths about stress and then gives you the facts:

Myth

Stress is a mental illness.

FACT

No. Stress is not a mental *illness* (or a physical illness). It is the most common mental *health* problem. We all get stress from time to time. You have too much of a *normal* feeling.

Myth

Stress will lead to mental illness. Too much stress will take you over the edge.

FACT

Stress often feeds itself. So it can get worse and lead you to feel you are losing control. But it is unlikely to lead directly to mental illness.

Myth

Stress causes heart attacks, cancer and other serious illnesses.

FACT

In the long run, stress is not good for you but it does not *directly* cause any of these problems. It does act as a *risk factor* if you are prone to illness. So, in heart attacks, stress may play a minor role as part of a range of factors. You may be overweight, unfit, eat the wrong foods, have a family history, smoke and drink too much (the last two play much greater roles in heart disease and many cancers).

You should note that stress can *indirectly* increase your risk of illness as you may smoke more, drink more and eat more due to stress. So make sure you control these.

Myth

You need tablets to control stress.

FACT

Tablets can help people feel less stressed. Talk this over with your GP. However, in the long run, you must learn how to control the stress yourself. You must learn skills to help you get on top of the stress and to stay on top. This needs a lot of hard work on your part. 'Stress Control' is a good way to learn these skills.

Myth

Stress only affects weak people.

FACT

Stress can affect all of us. Now that people talk more openly about it, we can see just how common it is. It affects people from all walks of life.

Myth

You are born with stress. It's in the blood so you are stuck with it for life.

FACT

Even if you are a 'born worrier', you will be able to point to times in your life when you coped quite well. Stress is often caused by a range of factors. It is not just due to your nature. The big thing is how you try to handle stress - this is what can keep it alive. You can learn ways to handle it better. Never give in to stress - fight it all the way.

Gerry

Gerry is 22 years old. He works as a hospital porter. Gerry copes well with his job but experiences a lot of stress coping with tea-breaks.

“If I’m at the table with the guys I work with, I’m OK. If I don’t know a lot of them I go into my shell and I clam up. I find it hard to look at people in the eye. I’m sure they think I’m weird.

I find myself working out what I will say and of course that never works out. I can’t seem to just talk off the cuff. I think I’ll say the wrong thing. I hate signing my name in front of anyone as my hand shakes a lot if I think they are watching me. I’m scared they will say something about it.

If I’m out with my pal, I tend to drink too much to get a bit of Dutch Courage. I know that it is not a wise move. I want to ask a girl out on a date and one of her friends told my pal that she likes me. I try to build up my courage but I never go through with it as I know I’ll blush like mad and she would just think I’m daft.

My confidence has dropped through the floor. No matter where I am, I feel like a fish out of water. I look at all the other guys just being normal while I feel like a pure failure. Why can’t I cope like them?”

The causes of stress

Many things can cause stress. Completing Part B of the handout from Week 1 might lead you to work out what has caused yours. Some people find that it is hard to work out why they have stress. It is often caused by more than one thing. These can include:

Your nature

Childhood years

Those who had a lot of childhood fears (often in the first two years of life) - fears of the dark, strangers, being alone - seem to be more prone to stress in adult life. Children who took longer to settle at school, who often complained of aches and pains, who were irritable, who were very shy and who found it hard to deal with new situations may also be more prone to stress as adults.

Other childhood factors that make you prone to stress as an adult are:

- not having a stable, secure and loving upbringing
- being wrapped in cotton wool by a parent
- having coped with stress by avoiding facing problems
- having a lot of changes in your life - moving house, schools, you or others close to you becoming ill, parents separating, etc.

Adult years

If, by nature, you are easily upset, often tense, prone to low moods, worry, are often dissatisfied with yourself and others, often feel guilty, then you may be more prone to stress.

Other adult factors that make you prone to stress as an adult are:

Life events - the more changes in life, the more prone most of us become to stress. Good events (birth of a baby, getting job, moving to a nice area) as well as bad events (death of a parent, losing a job, being mugged) can trigger stress. This is due to having to adjust to change. If you have to cope with too much change, stress can result.

Hassles

Many people with stress have a lot of **hassles** in their life. A hassle is a problem that is there day after day. It may be quite small. It may be hard to do much about it. It gnaws away at you. It could be a problem at work, in the home, with the people next door, with debt or coping with illness. These hassles slowly wear you down and stress slowly builds.

Ruth

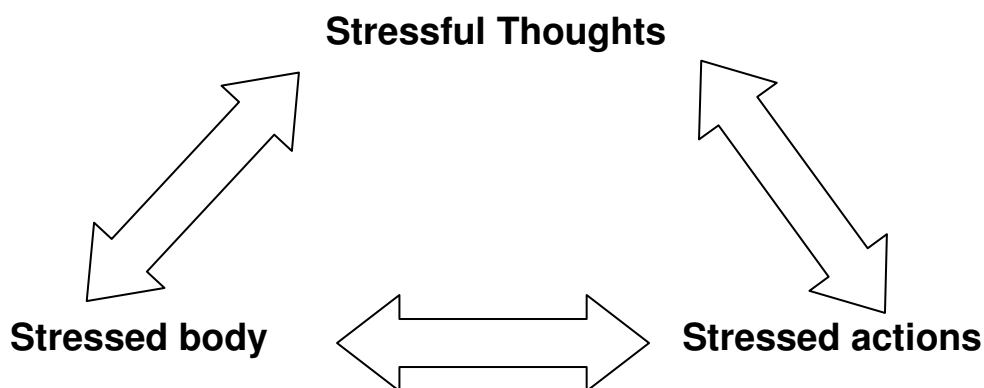
It's been one thing after another. We have had a lot of hassle with boys hanging around in the backstreets. I often find myself looking out the window at the slightest noise during the night. My mum is back in the hospital and I've got to make sure that my dad is doing OK on his own. It has just got a bit much for me over the last few months"

The effects of stress

In any case, the things that cause stress are not as important as the things that keep it going. After stress starts up, it can change you in all kinds of ways. It is these changes that can then keep the stress alive.

The vicious circle

I wrote about how stress affects your thoughts, actions and body. These now form a vicious circle that keeps stress alive. Your stressful thoughts feed your stressed actions. Your stressed actions feed your stressed body. Your stressed body feeds your stressful thoughts. And so on and so on.



Once stress gets a grip:

- self-confidence drops
- self-esteem drops
- you feel threat from all sides
- you doubt your ability to cope
- you can't stop your mind racing
- you start to avoid facing up to stress
- your body reacts easily to stress
- you may feel your back is up against the wall
- you may feel that stress brings out the worst in you
- you feel you can't control your life

You will reflect on these changes and feel yourself getting pulled down by them. The sense of control in your life weakens - instead of swimming over the waves, the waves are now breaking over your head and all you can see are bigger waves on the horizon. Instead of swimming, you feel it is all you can do to keep your head above the water.

It is only common sense to see that once all of these things get a grip, they will cause your stress to worsen. So, as the causes of your stress fade from the picture, these changes will feed it and keep it alive.

Put simply, once stress gets a grip on you, it keeps a grip. The aim of 'Stress Control' is to teach you how to shake it off.

IMPORTANT STATEMENTS

- **Stress is a very common problem. We all have stress. You have too much of a normal emotion. You should not aim to 'cure' yourself of stress but rather to control it.**
- **Stress is not a mental illness.**
- **You will not become mentally ill because of stress even if the stress is severe.**
- **You will not die because of stress even if it is severe - no-one ever has.**

- **We can all get stressed regardless of what happens to you in life.**
- **Once stress gets a grip on you, it feeds itself.**
- **Getting stress under control is a lot more complex than giving yourself a good shake.**
- **Tablets can help, but in the long run you should learn ways to get back in control.**
- **Until now, you may not have known how to combat stress. 'Stress Control' gives you the tools to do this. It will need a lot of hard work on your part.**
- **There is no magic cure - don't be impatient. It takes time to control stress.**
- **Believe in yourself - you can do it.**

Last words...

The aim of **PART A** is to help you see what stress is and how it affects people. Your next task is to do **PART B** where you work out how stress affects you. This will help you tackle it on the course.