# HOW TO MANAGE STRESS

Stress is a part of our modern working lives. For some of us, it can feel like your team, your boss, your customers and your clients are all vying for your attention at the same time. Over time, this adverse pressure can be overwhelming, resulting in stress. Although some short-term pressure can be a positive thing, letting stress get on top of you certainly isn't.

Not dealing with stress hampers job performance and undermines job satisfaction, as well as leading to emotional and physical health problems. Here we set out an approach you can use to tackle stress on an ongoing basis. Following these tips will ensure that you are proactive rather than reactive, an important thing when it comes to coping well with stress.
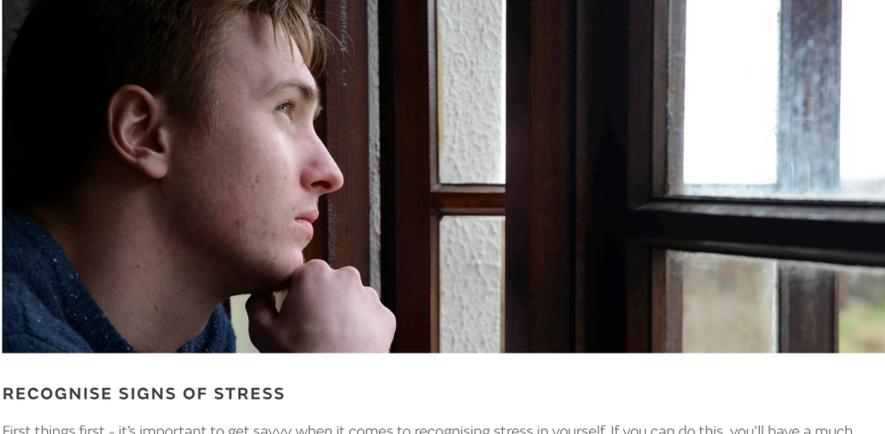
RECOGNISE SIGNS OF STRESS

First things first - it's important to get savvy when it comes to recognising stress in yourself. If you can do this, you'll have a much better chance of taking some positive steps before things start to spiral out of control. Some key signs and symptoms of stress to look out for are:

- feeling **anxious, irritable, depressed** or **lacking in confidence**
- **losing interest** and **withdrawing** from your work, particularly when you have previously enjoyed it
- feeling **tired** or having **difficulty sleeping**
- finding it **hard to concentrate** or being **easily distracted**
- physical symptoms such as **headaches, muscle tension** and **stomach problems**

Starting a **stress journal** is an excellent way of helping you identify the regular **stress triggers** in your working life, how you tend to deal with them and whether your existing strategies are helpful in reducing your stress.

Over a period of time, note down:

- **what caused your stress** (these might be things like having multiple deadlines, not having enough resources or knowledge to complete a task, or other people giving you extra work at the last minute)
- **how you felt**, both physically and emotionally, at the time
- **how you acted** in direct response to the situation you were in
- **anything you did** that helped you to feel better

....

AVOID UNNECESSARY STRESS

Not all stress can be avoided, but a lot of it can be! Use your stress journal to identify what causes you to feel stressed, and try to **eliminate** or **minimise** potential sources before they become a real problem for you. For example, you could:

Learn to negotiate your workload
At work, many people feel they must say 'yes' to every project, assignment or task that comes their way. Taking on more than you can handle is a one-way ticket to stress and, ultimately, to complete **burnout**. Remember that you are not a superhero, and that it is OK to negotiate your workload rather than agreeing to everything. For example, if you are asked to take on an additional project or task that you know you don't have capacity for, ask which of your current tasks the new project can replace. Saying 'I can do x, or I can do y, but I cannot do both' will help you and your manager determine what is most important without overburdening you.

Avoid people who make you feel stressed
We all know people who are natural 'stress heads' - colleagues who say that they feel stressed all the time and constantly talk about every minor gripe that comes their way. This can be incredibly draining, as well as stressing out those around them. If someone consistently makes you feel stressed then try to limit the amount of time you spend with them, and keep conversations strictly work-based.

Prioritise multiple projects or tasks
If you know that you need to deliver multiple projects or tasks at the same time, it makes sense to get proactive and **plan the work in advance, allocating your time accordingly.** If you feel you have a lot on your plate, talk to your colleagues and work with them to identify potential issues at an early stage. This can prevent them from growing into full-blown crises in the future.

....
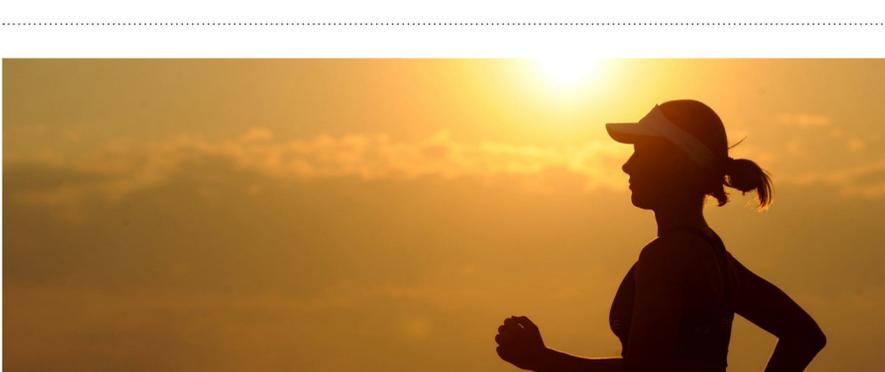
LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Taking care of your physical and emotional health helps you to become more **resilient** and therefore better able to cope with stress. However, this doesn't mean you have to completely overhaul your lifestyle. Just a few simple changes can make all the difference when it comes to **lifting your mood** and helping you to feel more **in control.** Key things to consider are:

Taking regular exercise
Exercise is a great stress reliever, even though sometimes all you want to do is flop onto the sofa after a stressful day at work. Aerobic activities such as running or swimming are great ways to increase your energy levels and help you to feel more relaxed. A good tip is to try to build regular exercise into your day, perhaps by going to the gym before work or taking a walk during your lunch break.

Eating well
Eating well can help you get through difficult days. By eating small but frequent meals, you can help your body maintain an even level of blood sugar, keep your energy up, stay focused, and avoid mood swings. Start your day properly with a good breakfast, and keep energy levels up with balanced nutritional meals throughout the day.

Reducing caffeine and sugar
The temporary burst of energy we get from caffeine and sugar often ends with a corresponding slump in mood and energy levels. Try not to drink endless cups of coffee, and resist the late afternoon sugar cravings if you can! By limiting the amount of coffee, tea, chocolate and junk food in your diet, you will feel more relaxed and do your body some good at the same time.

**Reducing alcohol and cigarettes**
These things provide an easy escape or distraction from stress but, ultimately, they only mask the issue and don't tackle the root cause. Reducing or cutting out drinking and smoking can help you deal with problems with a clear mind.

Getting enough sleep
Not only can stress and worry cause insomnia, but a lack of sleep can leave you prone to even more stress. Things can feel ten times worse when we are tired, and research from the National Sleep Foundation also demonstrates that it affects our ability to pay attention, react to signals and remember new information. [5] Try to ensure that you are getting enough sleep - the recommended range for adults is seven to nine hours a night.

Keeping an eye on your work-life balance
With all the stresses and competing priorities that people face in the workplace, it can be difficult for some people to maintain a healthy work-life balance. In order to avoid burning out, it is essential to take your free time as seriously as your work time, and to **define clear boundaries** between your work and home life. Doing this will ensure that you remain productive while at work, giving you a clear head to start each day afresh. Try to get into some **good daily habits**, such as taking a regular lunch break and not eating a rushed lunch at your desk. Get some fresh air and exercise each day if you can. It is also important to keep an eye on your working hours, and to seek support from your own manager or HR department if you are feeling stressed.

....
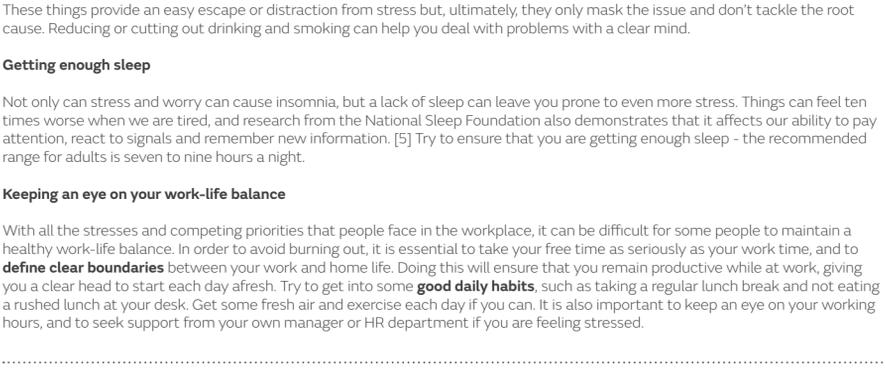
MANAGE YOUR TIME MORE EFFECTIVELY

It makes sense to plan your day in advance to ensure that your time is used as effectively as possible. This not only helps you gain **more control** over stressful situations, it also directs your attention on to the **most important areas** of your job role. Some helpful planning tips include:

Using Covey's time management quadrant to prioritise tasks
Covey's time management model can help you prioritise your workload and focus your efforts on the most important tasks. The model is based on the assumption that we should manage time around what is **important**, not what is most urgent, and that this should be carried out and planned across the different roles. All of your daily tasks and activities can be distinguished using two categories: **importance** and **urgency**. Covey has designed a simple four-box matrix to convey this. Covey believes that the key to success is concentrating on highly important, but non-urgent issues, across all the identified roles. These, he argues, are the most important in terms of managing your time most effectively, but are also the ones that are most commonly ignored.

Breaking big projects down
Large projects can often seem daunting. However, by breaking them down into logical steps, you can organise the work into more manageable chunks. This will allow you to tackle each one in turn rather than trying to do everything at once.

Not over-committing yourself
Try to avoid scheduling meetings and appointments back-to-back or trying to fit too much into a single day. More often than not, things overrun, so ensure that you have factored in enough time to address everything. Only have a meeting if it is absolutely necessary, and aim to stick to the agreed agenda to prevent things going off at a tangent.

Delegating some responsibility
Effective delegation is one of the key ways in which you can reduce stress by freeing up your time. Consider what tasks and activities you could pass on to a member of your team. Don't view this as shirking your responsibilities; delegation can be a great way to create exciting development opportunities for your team. Rather than just delegating tasks when you are feeling under pressure, a good long-term approach is to delegate more complex 'stretching' tasks when you are not feeling stressed yourself. This not only gives your team members more of a development challenge, it also means that you will have more time available to help and support them through a more complex piece of work, rather than using delegation as a short-term solution to alleviate stress.

....

BREAK BAD HABITS

Many of us compound our job stress with **negative thoughts, mindsets** and **behaviours**. It is therefore important to develop an awareness of the things you do and say that make your stress worse. For example:

Don't be a perfectionist:
No project, situation, or decision is ever 100% perfect, so striving for absolute perfection will just add unnecessary stress to your day, as well as affecting your colleagues. Research shows that while perfectionism can sometimes be a good thing, it also has a dark side, which can drive people towards impossible goals.

Change your mindset
If you automatically see the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Actively choose to think positively about your own work, avoid negative thinking colleagues and take time to reflect upon and congratulate yourself for small achievements, even if no one else does.

Don't be a control freak
Many things at work are beyond our control - particularly the behaviour of other people. Rather than stressing out over what people say and do, try to focus on the things you can control, such as the way you choose to react. Getting into this mindset can help you detach from a lot of the stress that may be going on around you, allowing you to focus on getting your work done.

....
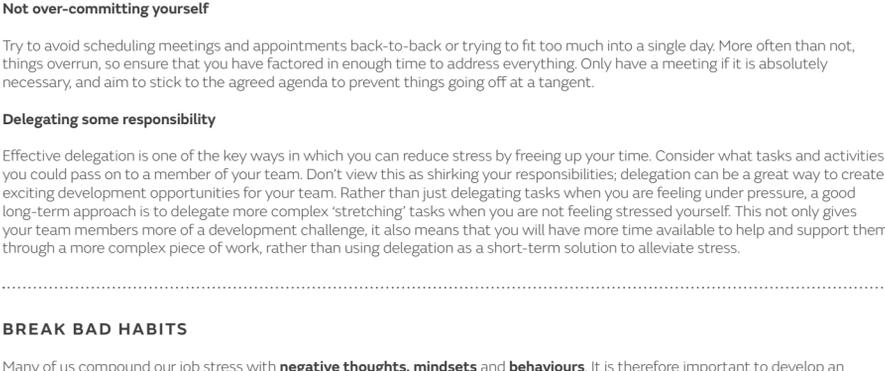
SEEK SUPPORT

In some situations, simply **sharing your thoughts** with someone you trust can help reduce stress. Talking a problem or issue over with someone who is both supportive and empathetic can be a great way to let off some steam and relieve stress. Connecting with colleagues at work is a good way to deflect stress, particularly if you are able to develop friendships with some of your colleagues. Listen to what they have to say, and don't forget to **return the favour** when they are feeling stressed.

Regardless of your role, status or position, it is important to be able to talk to others when you feel stressed. Some people can find this difficult to do, because of the perceived stigma that saying you feel stressed is a sign of weakness. Initially, you may like to speak to your manager or a colleague to talk through how you are feeling, and what support might be helpful for you. Additionally, your **HR department** or **Occupational Health Advisor** (if you have one) should be a good source of further information and support. You may also be able to access **external sources of support** and **counselling**, such as an **Employee Assistance Helpline.**

....
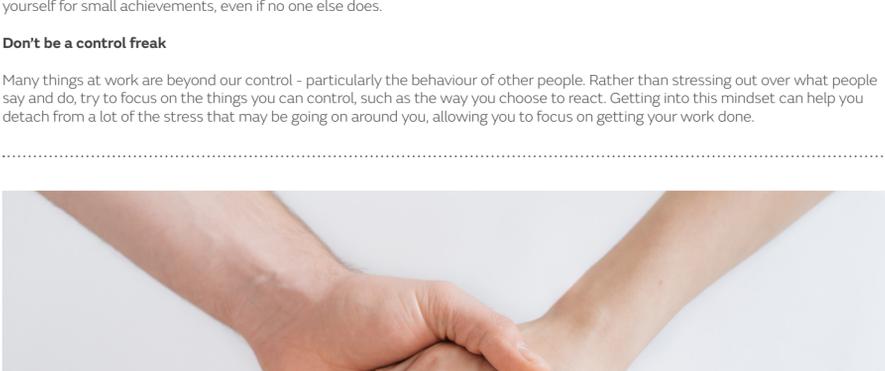
LASTLY, LIGHTEN THE MOOD IF YOU CAN!

When used appropriately, humour is a great way of relieving stress in the workplace. When you or those around you start to take things too seriously, try to find a way to lighten the mood by perhaps sharing a joke or a funny story. This helps to build team spirit and break any tension that may be building up.