



**Mental health self-help handbook  
for youth:  
STRESS**

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## ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The mental health self-help handbook aims to provide youth with information about the most common mental health challenges they face and offer practical help for dealing with said challenges.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

This handbook was developed within the Mental Health Programme which is part of the project "MladiHub - building employment skills, competencies and networking for youth", financed by the British Embassy Skopje and implemented by the National Youth Council of Macedonia.





# Table of contents

## WHAT IS STRESS?

What is stress and what causes it?..... 3

## SYMPTOMS AND TYPES OF STRESS

Symptoms of stress..... 5

Types of stress..... 6

## COPING WITH STRESS

Managing stress (Stress management)..... 9



# What is stress?

## 1.1 What is stress and what causes it?

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension. It can be a result of any event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry or agitated. Stress is your body's reaction to a challenge or a task that is required of you.

Stress is a kind of psychological pain. Small amounts of stress can be beneficial as they can improve sports performance, motivation and the reaction of the environment. However, excessive amounts of stress can increase the risk of stroke, heart attack, ulcers and mental illness such as depression, as well as worsen a pre-existing condition in humans.

Causes of stress or factors seen as causing stress to an organism are called stressors. Stressors are chemical or biological agents, environmental conditions, an external stimulus or event that is thought to cause stress in the body.

**Stressors are usually psychological in nature and are unpleasant, but also pleasant events that happen suddenly and put the person in great uncertainty and in a very unfavorable situation with a feeling that he or she cannot control and deal with the unexpected events.**



The human body mainly strives to achieve inner peace so-called "homeostasis" and when a stressor disrupts inner peace, the body immediately sets into motion physiological mechanisms that act in the following ways:

- Secretion of stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol),
- Establishing direct physiological links between the nervous system and the immune system,
- Biological changes in the nervous system that lead to increased activity of some organs (heart, lungs, liver).

### **Some situations that are considered stressors are:**

- Loss of a loved one,
- Termination of an emotional relationship or divorce,
- Financial problems,
- Losing a job,
- Employment
- Change of job,
- Relocation,
- Marriage and starting a new life,
- Unwanted pregnancy,
- Wanted pregnancy,
- Death of a close friend or relative,
- Loans,
- Important exams,
- Quarrels and disagreements in the family,
- Severe illness,
- Frequent arguments with your partner,
- Loss of personal valuables,
- Violation of the law, etc.



# Symptoms and types of stress

## 2.1 Symptoms of stress

Stress can affect all aspects of your life, including your emotions, behaviors, cognitive ability, and physical health. No part of the body is immune. Since people deal with stress in various manners, the symptoms of stress can vary as well. The symptoms may be vague and may be the same as those caused by medical conditions. Therefore, it is important to discuss them with your doctor (psychologist / psychotherapist).

### **Emotional symptoms of stress include:**

- You get easily excited, frustrated and in a bad mood.
- You feel overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control.
- You experience difficulties relaxing and calming your mind.
- You feel bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless and depressed.
- Avoiding others.

### **Physical symptoms of stress include:**

- Lack of energy,
- Headaches,
- Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation and nausea.
- Pain and tense muscles,
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat,
- Insomnia,
- Frequent colds and infections,
- Loss of sexual desire and / or ability.
- Agitation and shaking, tinnitus, cold or sweaty hands and feet,
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing.
- Jaw clenching and teeth grinding.



### **Cognitive symptoms of stress include:**

- Constant concern,
- Many different thoughts / racing thoughts,
- Forgetfulness and disorganization,
- Inability to focus,
- Poor assessment,
- To be pessimistic or to see only the negative side of things.

### **Behavioral symptoms of stress include:**

- Appetite changes - either do not eat or eat too much,
- Delay and avoidance of obligations,
- Increased use of alcohol, illegal substances or cigarettes,
- Showing more nervous behaviors, such as nail biting, agitation / trembling, and tempo.

## **2.1 Types of stress**

Stress can be positive in terms of activating the person's body, mind and energy. It can be defined as the capacity of the individual to mobilize every resource that the body has in order to respond promptly and adequately to any given situation. However, if stress persists for a long time, the body's resources will be depleted and the person will develop harmful or negative forms of stress reactions. In order to deal with the effects of stress, it is helpful to recognize its various forms and sources.

**Basic stress:** Everyday life can be stressful even at the best of times. Dealing with routine issues at home and at work produces an ongoing but usually manageable level of "baseline" or basic stress.



Basic stress can be caused by a variety of sources of tension on an individual, emotional, family or social level. The same-mentioned can increase with changes in the everyday environment (being away from family without proper communication, working with new people from different cultures, uncertainty about work, new information, etc.). Basic stress usually subsides after the first few weeks of a new activity / task.

**Acute stress:** Acute stress is a very short-term type of stress that can be positive or more distressing; this is the type of stress we most often encounter in everyday life.

**Chronic stress:** Chronic stress is stress that seems endless and inevitable, like the stress of a bad marriage or extremely hard work; chronic stress can also originate from traumatic experiences and childhood traumas.

**Episodic acute stress:** Is acute stress that seems to be out of control and is a way of life, creating a life of constant anxiety.

**Eustress - Eustress:** Is fun and exciting. It is known as a positive type of stress that can keep you energized. It is associated with adrenaline rush, such as skiing or rushing to the finish line.

**Critical Incident Stress:** Refers to the range of physical and psychological symptoms that a person may experience as a result of participating in a traumatic critical incident. The stress of a critical incident is simply a normal reaction of the body to an abnormal event.



Some amount of stress from time to time is not something you should worry about. Ongoing, chronic stress, however, can cause or worsen very serious health problems, including:

- Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and personality disorders.
- Cardiovascular disease, including heart disease, high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythm, heart attack and stroke.
- Obesity and other eating disorders.
- Menstrual problems
- Sexual dysfunction, such as impotence and premature ejaculation in men and loss of sexual desire in both men and women.
- Skin and hair problems such as acne, psoriasis and eczema and permanent hair loss.
- Gastrointestinal problems, such as GERD (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease), gastritis, ulcerative colitis, and irritable bowel syndrome.

**The connection between your mind and body is obvious when you examine the impact of stress on your life. Feeling overwhelmed by a relationship, money or your life situation can create physical health problems. The opposite is also true. Health problems, whether you have high blood pressure or diabetes, will also affect your stress levels and your mental health. When your brain experiences high levels of stress, your body responds appropriately. Serious acute stress, such as being involved in a natural disaster or a verbal argument, can cause heart attacks, arrhythmias, and even sudden death. However, this happens mostly in individuals who have an underlying cardiovascular disease. Stress also takes an emotional tax.**



**While some stress can cause feelings of mild anxiety or frustration, prolonged stress can also lead to exhaustion, anxiety disorders, and depression. Chronic stress can also have a serious impact on your health. Your autonomic nervous system will be overactive if you are experiencing chronic stress, which in turn will damage your body.**

## Coping with stress

### 3.1 Managing stress (Stress management)

If you live with high levels of stress, you are putting your entire well-being at risk. Stress can ruin your emotional balance as well as your physical health. It narrows your ability to think clearly, to function effectively, and to enjoy life. You always get the impression that you cannot cope with stress. Bills will not stop coming, the day will not increase and there will not be more hours, and your school, work and family responsibilities will always be hard. But you have much more control than you might think. Effective stress management helps you control the stress in your life so that you can be happier, healthier and more productive.

The ultimate goal is a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation and fun and resilience to keep up with the pressure and deal with challenges in a direct manner. But managing stress is not the same for everyone. That's why it's important to experiment and find out what works best for you.



**Here are some tips to help you manage your stress successfully:**

### **1. Identify the sources of stress in your life**

Stress management begins with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This is not as simple as it sounds. Although it is easy to identify major stressors such as job changes, relocation or divorce / breakup, accurate identification of the sources of chronic stress may be a tad bit more complicated. It is too easy to ignore how your own thoughts, feelings and behaviors contribute to your daily stress levels. Surely, you may know that you are constantly worried about work and school deadlines, but it may be because of your procrastination, instead of real job requirements, and it all causes stress.

If you want to identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitudes and excuses:

- Do you explain the stress as temporary ("I have a million things going on right now") even though you cannot remember the last time you took a deep breath?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life ("Things are always crazy here") or as part of your personality ("I'm a nervous guy, that's all")?
- Do you blame other people or external events for your stress or do you see it as something completely normal and ordinary?

**As long as you do not accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining your stress, your stress levels will remain outside your control.**



### **Start a stress diary.**

A stress diary can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and how you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, write it down in your diary or use a stress tracker on your phone. Keeping a diary will allow you to see patterns and common habits.

Write down: What caused your stress (guess if you're not sure)?

How did you feel, both physically and emotionally?

What did you do in response to that? What did you do to feel better?

### **2. Exercise**

For starters, physical activity can help you improve your sleep. A better sleep means better stress management. Doctors still do not know the exact reason why, but people who exercise more tend to get better deep sleep that helps rebuild the brain and body.

Just be careful not to exercise before bedtime, as it can interfere with some people's sleep. Exercise also seems to help with mood. Part of the reason is that it stimulates your body to release a number of hormones such as endorphins and endocannabinoids that help block pain, improve sleep and help you calm down. Some of them (endocannabinoids) may be responsible for the feeling of euphoria that some people report after a long run.

**People who exercise also tend to feel less anxious and more positive.  
When your body feels good, your mind often follows.**

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### **Get rid of stress using the following activities:**

- running
- swimming
- dancing
- cycling
- aerobics / yoga

If you do not have time for a formal exercise program, you can still find ways to move during the day. Try to:

- Ride a bike instead of driving your car to the store.
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Clean your house.
- Take a walk during the lunch break and whenever you have some spare time.

### **3. Eat healthy!**

The benefits of eating healthy food are very important components of your mental health. A healthy diet can reduce the effects of stress, boost your immune system, improve your mood and lower your blood pressure. Too much added sugar and fats can have the opposite effect. And junk food can look even more appealing when you are under a lot of stress.

In order to stay healthy, include complex carbohydrates, lean proteins and fatty acids found in fish, meat, eggs and nuts. Antioxidants also help. They protect your cells from damage that can be caused by chronic stress. You can find them in foods like beans, fruits, berries, vegetables and spices, such as ginger.



### **Stick to a healthy diet following a few simple tips.**

- Make a shopping list.
- Bring healthy snacks with you when you leave home.
- Stay away from processed foods and try not to eat mindlessly.

Scientists have identified some nutrients that appear to help reduce the effects of stress on the body and mind. Make sure you get enough of the following nutrients as part of a balanced diet: Vitamin C, Magnesium and Omega-3 Fatty Acids.

### **4. Sleeping and 8 hours of sleep!**

A common side effect of stress is that you may struggle to fall asleep. If this happens three times a week for at least 3 months, you may have insomnia, inability to fall asleep and wake up frequently. Lack of sleep can also increase stress levels and cause a cycle of stress and insomnia.

Good sleep habits can help relieve stress. This includes your daily routine and the way you set up your bedroom.

#### **Habits that can help include the following tips:**

- Exercise regularly.
- Get out in the sunlight.
- Drink less alcohol and caffeine before bed.
- Make a bedtime schedule. Do not use your phones / computers 30 - 60 minutes before bedtime.

#### **Try meditation or other forms of bedtime relaxation.**

- Your bedroom also plays an important role. In general, your room should be dark, quiet and cool. Your bed also plays an important role. Your mattress should provide you with space and maximum comfort.



## 5. Use relaxation techniques

### **Yoga.**

For exercise, but it can also be used for meditation. There are many types of yoga. The ones focusing on slow motion, stretching, and deep breathing are best used for reducing your anxiety and stress levels.

### **Meditation.**

It has existed for more than 5,000 years for a reason. Meditation works well for many people and has many benefits. It can reduce stress, anxiety and chronic pain, as well as improve sleep, energy levels and mood.

#### **To meditate, you will need to:**

- Find a quiet place.
- Focus your attention on the word, phrase, object, and even your breath. Let your thoughts come and go and do not judge them.

### **Deep breathing.**

When you practice deep breathing, you are activating your body's natural ability to relax. This creates a state of deep relaxation that can change the way your body responds to stress. It sends more oxygen to your brain and calms the part of your nervous system that handles your ability to relax.

Try to breathe with your stomach. Adjust yourself in a comfortable position, close your eyes and place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. Inhale deeply through the nose. You should feel your abdomen rise more than your chest. Now, exhale through your nose and pay close attention to how your body relaxes. Repeat.



## 6. Manage time effectively

Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're torn apart by responsibilities and running late, it is hard to stay calm and focused. Additionally, you may be tempted to avoid or reduce all the healthy things you need to do to control stress, such as socializing and getting enough sleep. Good news is that there are things you can do to achieve a healthier state, that is, a balance between work and life.

### **Do not overdo it.**

Avoid scheduling too many activities or trying to fit/finish too many activities into one day. Too often, we underestimate how long things will last.

### **Prioritize tasks.**

Make a list of tasks you need to do and solve them in order of importance. Solve high-priority tasks first. If you have something particularly uncomfortable or stressful to do, finish it early. As a result, the rest of the day will be more enjoyable.

### **Make a step-by-step plan for your projects.**

If a project seems huge to you, make a plan step by step. Focus on one step at a time, rather than undertaking everything at once.

### **Delegate responsibility.**

You do not have to do it all by yourself, whether you are at home, at school or at work. If other people have the ability to take care of the task, why not let them? Let go of the desire to control or monitor every single step. You will get rid of unnecessary stress in the process



## 7. Find time for fun and relaxation.

Do not be so preoccupied with the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing oneself is a necessity, not a luxury. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you will be in a better place to deal with the stressful factors in life.

**Create more spare time for yourself.** Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule, do not let other responsibilities affect this time. This is your time to relax from all the responsibilities and recharge your batteries.

**Do something you enjoy every day.** Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it's watching the stars, playing the piano, or working on your bike.

**Nurture your sense of humor.** This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in many ways.

## 8. Connect with others.

There is nothing calmer than spending quality time with another human being that makes you feel safe and understood. In fact, face-to-face interaction triggers a surge of hormones that counteract the body's defensive "fight or flight" response.

It is a natural stress reliever (as an added bonus, it also helps to avoid depression and anxiety). For that reason, do it to connect regularly and personally with family and friends.



**Keep in mind that the people you are talking to may not be able to fix your stress. They just have to be good listeners. And try not to let yourself look weak or be a burden that will prevent you from opening up.**

**The people who care about you will be flattered by your trust. It will only strengthen your relationship. Of course, it is not always realistic to have a friend close to you whom you can rely on when you feel stressed, but by building and maintaining a network of close friends you can improve your resilience to life stressors.**

### **Relationship building tips:**

1. Help someone else by volunteering.
2. Lunch or coffee with a friend.
3. Accompany someone to the cinema or to a concert.
4. Call or text an old friend.
5. Go for a walk with an exercise buddy.
6. Schedule a weekly dinner date with a friend.

**Behavior.** How you react to people directly affects your stress levels. Manage your responses and behavior by using the following tips:

- Try not to overdo it,
- Share the responsibility,
- Count to 10 before answering,
- Avoid a heated situation,
- Distract yourself with music or podcasts.

**Learn how to say no.** Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, taking more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress. Distinguish between "should" and "must" and, whenever possible, say "no" to taking on too many responsibilities.



**Avoid people who cause you stress.** If someone is constantly causing stress in your life, limit the time you spend with that person or end the relationship.

**Express your feelings instead of suppressing them.** If something or someone is bothering you, be more assertive and express your concerns openly and respectfully. If you have an exam to study and your chat roommate has just returned home, tell them in advance that you can only squeeze in five minutes to talk to them. If you do not express your feelings, both dissatisfaction and stress will increase.

**Be willing to compromise.** When asking someone to change their behavior, be prepared to do the same. If you are both willing to bend at least a little, you will have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.

## 9. Watch your caffeine intake

Caffeine may be the most widely consumed drug in the world, but its psychological effects are often underestimated. While low to moderate doses can make you feel more alert and energetic, too much caffeine can make you feel agitated and anxious.

However, it is important to remember that caffeine tolerance is different for everyone. Some people may be able to drink a moderate amount of coffee every day, about four or five cups a day, without noticing any bad side-effects. For other people, even a small amount of caffeine can cause a feeling of trembling or agitation.

If you think caffeine can contribute to feelings of anxiety, consider reducing your intake gradually. Gradually reducing caffeine intake over time can help minimize the unpleasant symptoms of caffeine withdrawal.



## 10. Talk to a therapist

It is not always easy to know when it's time to visit a professional about your stress and anxiety. Problems often accumulate over time, so it can be difficult to recognize when it becomes too much, because in the meantime it has simply become your new norm.

If your symptoms of stress and anxiety upset you and interfere with your ability to function normally, then it is important to talk to a therapist. But at the same time, you do not have to wait until things feel overwhelmingly out of control to ask for help. The therapist can help you identify the sources of stress and anxiety in your life and come up with strategies to help you deal with it.

They can also determine if you have an anxiety disorder and recommend effective treatments that can help you find relief, including psychotherapy or, ultimately, medication.



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