



stresscontrol

Face your fears; be more active; watch what you drink

Step 4

Clearing the decks Finding Hidden Problems Quick Control Skills 20 ways to cope

Step 4 lets you get to grips with the stress. This will get you on the right track before the course starts. This gets you moving on the task of 'becoming your own therapist'

Clearing the decks

Before you learn new ways to get on top of stress, think of ways to get rid of the things that might be making you worse. These may include:

Alcohol

Many people with drink problems start down that road by using drink to calm their nerves. Having a drink is fine but if you drink to cope with stress, you may start to depend on it. If you can't go to certain places or do certain things unless you have a drink before hand, you are storing up trouble.

Symptoms such as nausea, sweating and shaking may be related to alcohol. Drinking too much will mess up your sleep and make you more prone to stress the next day. Panics may be related to drinking. Heavy drinking makes stress worse -

Stop it now.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a **stimulant** that affects the central nervous system (CNS). Low levels of caffeine can help you think more clearly, keep you alert and help you work for longer.

Caffeine can be found in coffee (especially fresh), tea, fizzy drinks like Coke, Pepsi, Irn-Bru, pain killers such as aspirin, cold remedies and headache tablets. Energy tablets like Pro-plus have very high levels as do energy drinks such as Red Bull. Chocolate has caffeine though at quite a low level. Many other products contain caffeine so check the packet if you are concerned.

The effects of too much caffeine can be very similar to those of stress. As a **very** rough guide, about 6 cups of fresh coffee or 10 cups of instant coffee or 12 cups of tea a day could be enough to make you feel worse. As we all have our own limit at which we can be affected, you should check from the list below if you think caffeine might make your stress worse:

Effects of too much caffeine: feeling nervous, irritable, agitated, shaky, headaches, muscle twitch, flushed face, upset stomach, increased heart rate, speeded up breathing, poor sleep (especially if you take caffeine at night).

Your body can get so used to caffeine that, if you just cut it out dead, you can get:

Withdrawal effects: throbbing headache, tiredness or drowsiness, anxiety, depression and feeling sick.

These feelings could last up to one week

If you think caffeine may affect you, you should:

- wean yourself off it slowly. This will stop withdrawal effects
- Switch to **decaffeinated** tea and coffee
- Switch from fizzy drinks to caffeine-free drinks or pure fruit juice
- Take as few pain killers, etc. as you can (check this with your GP if concerned)
- Stay clear of all energy drinks or tablets

The 'Miracle Cure'

It does not exist. Stress often takes a long time to build up so it is not going to clear up overnight. No-one else can control your stress. To get on top of stress takes a great deal of hard work on **your** part. So the answer lies within you. 'Stress Control' aims to put you on the right lines but, at the end of the day, it will be you, through your hard work, who controls the stress.

Though they can be relaxing at the time, there is no good evidence to show that hypnosis, acupuncture, aromatherapy or homeopathy are of much use in the long run. **You** must learn to control the problems yourself. These treatments don't teach you how to do this. 'Stress Control' does.

Reassurance

This may be nice in the short term but you can become dependent on it. If you ask people at home or at work for reassurance a lot, they will quickly get fed up with you. This can lead to friction and, hence, more stress. You have to feel strong enough to supply your own answers.

Self-criticism

If people under stress have one great skill, it is this. Bashing yourself doesn't help. If things go wrong, accept them. Learn from your mistakes and then get on with things. You have to learn to pat yourself on the back every time you try to combat your stress. This will help your self-confidence to pick up.

Avoidance

Common sense says that if doing something makes you more tense, you should avoid it. **COMMON SENSE IS WRONG**. Avoiding may help in the short term. In the long run, you just build up more trouble for yourself. You have to face up to the problems in your life. Facing up to stress will be hard in the short term but, in the long run, will greatly help you control your stress. You will look at this in session 4.

Finding hidden problems

You must check that your stress is not trying to tell you that there is something wrong in your life. Check to see if you need to face up to any problems at this stage. These problems could include:

Relationships

Sexual

Children

Parents

Friends

Work

Money

Being stubborn

Immaturity

Being too dependent

Drink or drugs

Gambling

By no means everyone who feels stressed has a hidden problem, but you should check to see if there are any in your life. Examples might be:

- ⇒ your partner is drinking and treating you badly
- ⇒ you are being bullied at work
- ⇒ you are in a lot of debt
- ⇒ you need to patch up a quarrel with a family member

There may not be an easy answer to hidden problems but you must at least look for one. If you don't face up to them, they will keep your stress alive.

Quick control

Getting on top of stress takes time. While you are learning to do this, it can help to learn these simple skills that can help you in the short term:

Keep your life as normal as you can

You might find that stress invades many areas in your life. Try to put up barricades to stop it. It will help a lot if you keep a routine going in your life even if you don't feel like doing so. If you go to the football at the weekend, **keep going**; if you visit your mother's house during the week, **keep going**, if you go to the bingo twice a week, **keep going**. As work is an important part of our routine, try to keep going to it if you can.

Tablets

You should always discuss tablets with your GP. Some people want to fight stress without tablets and that is fine. It can often be a good idea to **combine** treatments - tablets and 'Stress Control'. You may be given **diazepam** but usually only for a very short period. You may take a **beta-blocker** such as Inderal and Propranolol. Your doctor may suggest you take **anti-depressants (ADMs)**. These can often help a lot when used with 'Stress Control'. For more information on these, go to www.glasgowsteps.com booklet download section.

Talking

If you bottle up your feelings, you will build up pressure inside yourself. Don't hide stress - accept it. Talking to a trusted friend or loved-one can allow you to get rid of this stress. You should focus on ways to control the stress. Others may also be able to give you good advice that you have not thought of. Get your worries off your chest.

Mantras

Sit alone in a quiet, dark room. Try to clear your mind as much as possible. Think of a word or phrase e.g.:

"I am calm"

"Relax"

"I am in control"

Close your eyes and slowly repeat the word or phrase in your mind over and over again. Do this for ten minutes each day or when you feel stressed. If unwanted thoughts come into your mind, try to push them away.

Describing your setting

As soon as you feel your stress rise, describe (out loud if you want) something you can see in great detail. For example:

"I can see a picture on the wall. There is a boat on a river. There is a mountain to the left of the river. Two people are walking along the river bank. The sky is clear and it looks like it is sunset. The picture has a wooden frame."

If outside, you can focus on certain things e.g. all the sounds you can hear. You should do this in as much detail as you can as this will help distract your mind from stressed thoughts.

'Worry time'

This is a trick that many people find useful. You put aside 15 minutes in the evening. This is your time to worry about the things that have bothered you in the day. So if you start to worry about something in the morning, you stop and tell yourself to store it up for your 'worry time' that night. At the start of your 'worry time', you must think of what you were going to worry about and then try to worry about it. Chances are you may not recall what it was. You may feel it is not worth the worry. Even if you do, you may find it hard to bring on worry.

Breathing retraining

This is a quick method to use to calm your body. It can also be used to help prevent panic.

Sit in a comfy chair and relax as much as you can. Take a slow normal breath (not a deep breath) and think "1" to yourself. As you breathe out, think "*relax*"; breathe in again and think "2", breathe out and think "*relax*". Keep doing this up to 10. When you reach 10, reverse and start back down to 1. Try to put all else out of your mind. It may help to see the numbers and the word 'relax' in your mind's eye.

Don't be put off if you can't do this straight away. You can boost the benefits of this by breathing from the diaphragm :

Diaphragmatic breathing

Place one hand on your chest and the other over your belly button. As you breathe in, the hand on your stomach should be pushed out while the hand on your chest should not move. As you breathe out, your stomach should pull in. Your chest should not move.

To help, breathe in through your nose, purse your lips and breathe out slowly through your mouth. If you are a chest breather, you may find this difficult at first. If you can't get the hang of this, lie on your back on the floor and practise as it is easier to do in this position.

Put these two exercises together and do them twice a day. Once you get good at them, practise when you are at work, sitting on the bus, watching TV etc. The aim is to be able to do this no matter where you are. No-one will notice you doing them.

This approach is summarised on the next page.

Breathing Retraining

Take a breath in and think "**1**"

Breathe out and think "**relax**"

Take a breath in and think "**2**"

Breathe out and think "**relax**"

Repeat up to **10** and then back down to **1**

Concentrate only on breathing and on the number and "**relax**"
in the mind's eye

Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute).
Breathe in through nose. Purse your lips and breathe out
slowly through mouth.

Use the diaphragm - as you breathe in, your stomach should
push out while your chest should not move.

As you breathe out, your stomach should pull in. Your chest
should not move when you breathe out.

Practise twice a day in different places.



stresscontrol

Face your fears; be more active; watch what you drink

20 ways to cope

Read through all these ideas and pick up the one's that best meet your need.

1) Deal with problems on the spot

Don't bottle up your feelings. They will grow and grow inside you until they erupt. This will weaken your sense of control. So if there are problems at, e.g. work, make sure that you deal with them on the spot. Use **Problem Solving** to deal with them.

2) Strong, confiding relationships

Stress often makes us harder to live with. This can weaken relationships. But we know that strong relationships can help fight stress. So if you have a weak relationship, work hard at fixing it.

3) Slow down

Don't do things at 100 miles an hour. Eat, walk and drive more slowly. If you don't get as much done as you would like then it is no big deal. There is always another day.

4) Divide problems up

If you face a huge problem and can see no way to cope with it, see if you can divide it up into 'bite sized' bits. Then tackle the bits one at a time. Problem Solving is very good for this.

5) Must's and Should's

"I **must** see my mother today"; "I **should** offer to run the football team this year". Work out what is reasonable for you to achieve and be happy with this - "If I get through all the things I want to at home, I'll take a run down to my mothers. If not, I'll see her later in the week"; "I don't get a chance to relax as it is so it's daft to take on more pressure - someone else can take a turn"

6) Coping with ruts

If you feel your life is in a rut just now - same old routine day in and day out then think about change. Plan your weekends - do something different - go for a drive, visit friends, go for a long walk. Take up new hobbies. Look for challenges. If you can afford it, plan the odd week-end away as a change of scenery can help.

7) One thing at a time

Think of someone at work cradling a phone between his shoulder blade and ear. With one hand, he is writing a letter and, with the other, searching through some papers. At the same time, he is trying to grab a quick snack. He is overloading the system. If you are making a phone call, make only the call and nothing else. The message is don't keep too many balls in the air at the one time.

8) Look and sound relaxed

Other people will pick up how you are feeling by seeing your 'body language'. So try to look relaxed, e.g. don't sit on the edge of your seat, slow down your speech, relax your shoulders, don't fidget. Ask those close to you how you act when you are tense so that you know what changes to make. You will feel better if you know that, on the outside at least, you are looking calm. Use *relaxation* to help.

9) Past experience

If you are in a jam, ask yourself if you have been in a similar jam before. How did you deal with it? If what you did worked, try it again. If it didn't, learn from your mistakes.

10) Don't accept other people's targets

Do people expect too much of you? If you feel they do, **confront** this. Have a quiet word and try to sort this out. If you can't agree, say 'NO'.

11) Eating

Some people suggest that supplements of vitamins A, C and E help stress but this will not help unless your diet is very poor. Bear in mind that taking too many vitamins can be as bad as taking too little.

It may be that you can reduce stress levels **in the short term** by taking a lot of carbohydrates (potatoes, rice, pasta, bread, etc.) and cutting down on protein (meat, fish). So if you face a very stressful day, you might plan to have this meal the night before. But as you need balance in food, do not stick to a diet like this for more than a few days.

Over the long term, try to eat more healthy foods - get away from fried and fatty food. Cut down on sugar and salt. Eat fewer sweets and cakes. Eat more fruit, veg and whole-wheat bread. Don't eat too much.

12) Smoking

Some people find that smoking helps them to relax. But smoking kills. It also floods the body with nicotine. This stimulates the body and may increase feelings of stress. Try to stop. Ask your GP for help.

13) Situations out your control

There are things in life that you can't change - maybe you are out of work, maybe a loved one is ill. If you accept that you can't do anything to change things for the better, this may help deal with the stress that remains.

14) Build relaxation into your life

No matter how busy you are, put aside some time each day just for you. Go out for a walk, phone a friend, do the garden, read a book, watch TV, listen to music. Once you stop using the tape to relax, try to keep this time for yourself.

15) Prioritise

If you do have a busy life, you must set up your priorities. Decide what has to be done and decide what can wait. Put these priorities in some order. Number 1 has to be done first thing, number 2 by 12 o'clock.....number 10 has to be done by the end of the week. Keep revising your list.

16) Do the worst thing first

If you have a list of things to do, do the one you least want to do first. You can get it out of the way and the rest of the tasks will be easier to cope with. If you keep putting it off, it will prey on your mind and may seem a lot worse than it really is. Tie this in with your priority list.

17) Don't try to be Superman or Wonder Woman

Do you try to do it all?, succeed at everything?, be the best?. Why? Bear in mind that the house or your job will still be there long after you are gone. Stick to your good points and learn to live with your faults. Accept you are not perfect. None of us is.

18) Confide in others

If there are people around whom you can trust, let them know how you feel. They may be able to see ways out of problems that you have not thought about. In any case, getting things off your chest can help. It may also help reduce the feelings of being alone that are so common in stress.

19) Other people's shoes

Imagine you have a problem. Imagine how you would react if a friend came to you with that same problem. What advice would you give them? Would that advice work for you?

20) Keep up a routine

If you are off work, make sure you get up early. Make sure you get dressed first thing. Make sure you eat cooked meals at the right times. As far as you can, make sure you do the same things that you normally do. Keeping a structure in your day will help hold back the problems.

Last words

The aim of **Step 4** is to start the fight against your stress. From now on, you will be learning more skills to fight stress. **Step 5** teaches you the first major skill – Controlling your body. You will get this handout when you come to the first session of the course.

In the meantime, keep fighting the stress using the skills you have learned.