

Coping with Stress

By Samaritans with Professor Cary Cooper

Professor Cary Cooper is Deputy Vice Chancellor and BUPA Professor of Organisation Psychology and Health at the University of Lancaster. He has published widely on the subject of stress. Samaritans is grateful for his support.

- **Stress is what happens when the pressure you're under is more than you think you can cope with.**

Stress is blamed for more lost working days than the common cold. Stress can result from sudden changes in circumstance just as much as from on-going struggle. And the more stress gets to you, the less likely you are to feel you can cope with what life throws your way.

- **But stress needn't get the better of you!**

Recognising the signs, taking control of your reactions and making sure you get the right support can make all the difference to how you deal with stressful situations. This booklet will give you some ideas on reducing your stress levels, giving you the means to look forward with more confidence.

Knowing the Signs of Stress

- Feeling angry or irritable, mood swings
- Feeling anxious, apprehensive or nervous
- Feeling depressed or low
- Suicidal thoughts
- Disturbed sleeping patterns
- Withdrawing from people
- Increased eating or drinking or loss of appetite
- Unable to concentrate
- Feeling guilty, ashamed, embarrassed
- Feeling helpless or out of control
- Loss of self-worth
- Frequent colds, infections, aches, pains or allergies
- Changes in weight
- Breathlessness or feeling faint
- Sweating or clammy hands

How many of these symptoms of stress do you recognise?

In the long term, stress can lead to more serious physical effects. Knowing the signs can be a useful early warning, allowing you to take action to reduce stress levels.

If you're suffering symptoms on a regular basis, you may wish to speak to your GP.

Taking control

When stress takes over, ordinary challenges can look like threats, and serious events can seem unbearable. Take control where you can – you can't always change the world around you, but you can change your reaction to it.

Focusing on the negatives, predicting the worst and blaming yourself or others can all take their toll.

Give yourself a break

For example:

- **Instead of thinking:**

It's all over, and there's nothing I can do about it.

- **Try thinking:**

How can I attack the problem in manageable pieces?

- **Instead of thinking:**

I should be able to handle it – I've failed.

- **Try thinking:**

I need some support to get through this. Who can I go to?

Look after yourself

- It's easy to let stress take over your life. Making sure that difficulties aren't your only focus can be essential to getting through them.
- Some form of physical exercise – even walking – can get your body's defences working and help bring stress levels down. Team sports can be particularly good.
- Eating well is essential when you're feeling stressed – make sure you get a good balanced diet to be at your best.
- Take time to do the things you enjoy.
- Spending all your time worrying will only wear you down further and leave you less able cope. Give yourself things to look forward to - even a few hours out of the usual routine can give you a sense of perspective.

Get the support you need

Seeking support from other people can be key to getting through stressful situations. Ironically, your reaction when under stress can often be to withdraw from those who might offer the most support. Even worse, stressful times can put a strain on the relationships you most depend on.

Even so, taking the time to talk things through with someone else can be an important step to seeing your way clear of a stressful situation. Friends, family members and work associates can allow you to let off steam. By banding together, common solutions can start to become clear. Either way, talking to someone will help you realise that you are not on your own and help to reduce tension.