



ABERDEEN
CITY COUNCIL

Stress Information Booklet

A guide for all Aberdeen City Council employees



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What is stress?

For most of us, stress is part of our everyday lives. Everyone experiences it in one form or another, although we react to it in different ways.

A certain amount of pressure can be positive as it can keep us lively and enthusiastic and in some situations, it can alert us to potential threats or dangers.

Negative stress arises when more pressures and demands are made on our time and energy than we are able to cope with.

When we find ourselves under pressure, our bodies react automatically to ensure that we are prepared for action and meet the challenge before us. Muscles become tense, our hearts beat faster and we become more alert. These reactions are temporary and go away when the pressure or threat subsides.

However, sometimes the balance tips too far and the pressures we are exposed to are so persistent and intense that we feel totally unable to cope. This can lead to health problems, both of a physical and psychological nature and can interfere with normal daily activities and relationships.



Causes of stress

Today, stress and its symptoms are common and can affect people of all ages and from all walks of life. We all may face difficulties with particular aspects of our lives that can cause stress. These include:

- problems with relationships - with a spouse, partner, children, friends or colleagues;
- financial difficulties;
- bereavement;
- serious illness of either yourself, family member or friend;
- divorce/separation;
- being abused;
- bullying/harassment;
- problems at work - changes to the job, excessive workload, job insecurity, anxiety about promotion;
- coping with unemployment or redundancy;
- moving house.

Some of these things cannot be foreseen and can happen to us very suddenly. Others are unavoidable and we have very little control over them, although we may feel we are in some way to blame. We may also feel as if we should be able to cope, no matter what happens.

As individuals we all have a basic need for both emotional and financial security.

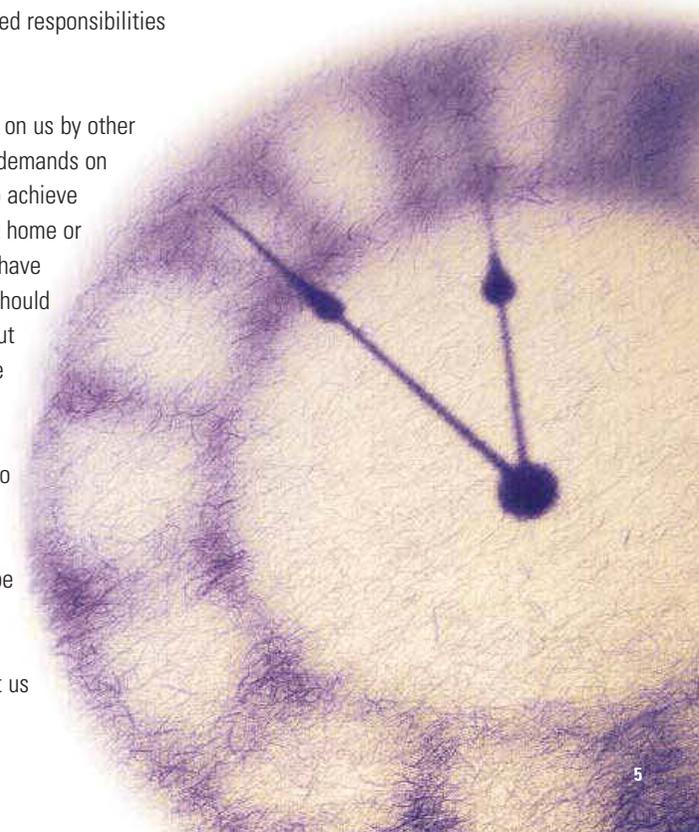
Nowadays many of us live long distances from our families, or on our own, and many experience financial problems. All of these factors can have a significant effect on our security levels.

Technology has had an important effect on working practices. While predominantly very constructive, many of us feel very threatened by the pace of change, or we may be faced with increased responsibilities or job insecurity.

As well as demands made on us by other people, each of us makes demands on ourselves. We may aim to achieve certain things - at work, at home or in our personal lives. We have expectations of what we should be able to do. If it turns out that we cannot meet these standards we have set ourselves, we may put ourselves under pressure to do better. This in turn can produce an enormous amount of stress. It may be that our expectations are unrealistic, or that things beyond our control prevent us meeting them.

Some people become more vulnerable to stress after a traumatic experience, for example, if they have suffered bereavement, been the victim of a serious crime or have financial worries. As time passes they may not be able to get back on top of things but feel continually weighed down.

Sometimes, it can be a gradual build-up from various different sources that can bring us to breaking point, rather than one obvious trigger.



Individual indicators of stress

Everyone has their own characteristic way of reacting to stress. Outlined below are some of the most common symptoms. It's unlikely that you will experience them on a regular basis but you will probably find some that may be true of you.

Stress can make it difficult to cope with day-to-day demands. Other people may not be able to tolerate your company and even the closest of relationships can become tense.

The whole experience can make you feel as if you are losing control over your life and that there is no way of regaining that control.

We should all learn to recognise our own individual warning signs.

Emotional	Tense, irritable, angry outbursts, feeling a sense of 'pressure', feeling 'trapped', low feelings, emotionally fragile, tearful, needing to be supported, resentful of demands, episodes of anxiety and/or depression. Long term - emotional collapse, burn-out syndrome.
Physical	Muscular tensions, 'wound up' feeling, on the go/can't relax, headaches, fatigue prone, energy lost, increase in minor illnesses, sense of physical strain, indigestion, weight loss/weight gain, skin conditions e.g. eczema, sexual difficulties, menstrual abnormalities. Long term - raised blood pressure, coronary heart disease, gastric ulcer, reduced immune competence.
Behavioural	Time/deadline urgency, increased pace, over-committed, changes in eating/drinking, self sedation, use of drugs, self neglect, growing inefficiency, withdrawal, sleep disturbances/excess, nightmares.
Cognitive	Concentration fragmented, distractible, inflexible thinking (no way out), threat laden thought, perception of hopelessness or injustice.
Relationships	Less able to cope with people's needs, problems at home, impatient, intolerant, inclined to row, wanting to be left alone, over controlling towards others, need to 'lean' on others.

Do you cause yourself stress?

As individuals, we can often cause ourselves a great deal of negative stress.

If you answer Yes to any of the questions below this indicates areas of change where you can make a positive contribution to reducing factors that may cause personal stress.

Review how you might cause yourself stress through such things as unrealistic expectations, bad time management and unhealthy eating habits.

Do you for example:	YES	NO
Set yourself unrealistic objectives and find there simply isn't enough time to get everything done?		
Have an unrealistic expectation of what you can achieve in the time available?		
Always have high expectations of yourself and others?		
Tend to be negative or pessimistic?		
Continually eat late at night and often very quickly?		
Try and achieve unrealistic goals?		
Regularly skip eating lunch?		

Learning to cope with stress

There is a lot we can do to reduce the negative effects that stress can have on our overall health. It is worth remembering the ABC of handling stress.

Awareness	What causes stress? How do you react?
Balance	There is often a fine line between what is considered positive stress and negative stress.
Control	What can you do to help yourself?

Your responsibilities

We all have a responsibility for managing our own stress and for behaving in a way that does not cause stress for others. You should therefore take steps to minimise stress whenever possible.

The following measures and actions are likely to have a positive effect on stress levels. You are encouraged to seek further advice where appropriate.

Speak to your supervisor or manager regularly

Don't hesitate to approach your line manager about a problem - an important part of their job is to provide you with support. However, if they are not aware of your problems then they cannot help you. If you bottle things up matters will probably get worse. If you feel unable to discuss the matter with your line manager and there is no alternative person within your service, Human Resources will discuss any problem you have in confidence.

Speak to other people

If you feel stressed, don't suffer in silence. Compare notes with others. Partners, family and friends, colleagues or trade union representatives may also be able to provide useful advice or support.

Keep events at work in perspective.

Try to step back from events - do not let a minor criticism or mistake cause anger or resentment to build-up. Think of all the positive events that have occurred - little things or a single mistake should be seen for what they are.

Physical exercise/ other activities

Medical opinion suggests that physical exercise - anything from regular walking to active sports - is beneficial in reducing stress.

You may wish to seek your doctor's advice if you have a medical condition that will be affected by physical activity or if you have not exercised for some time.

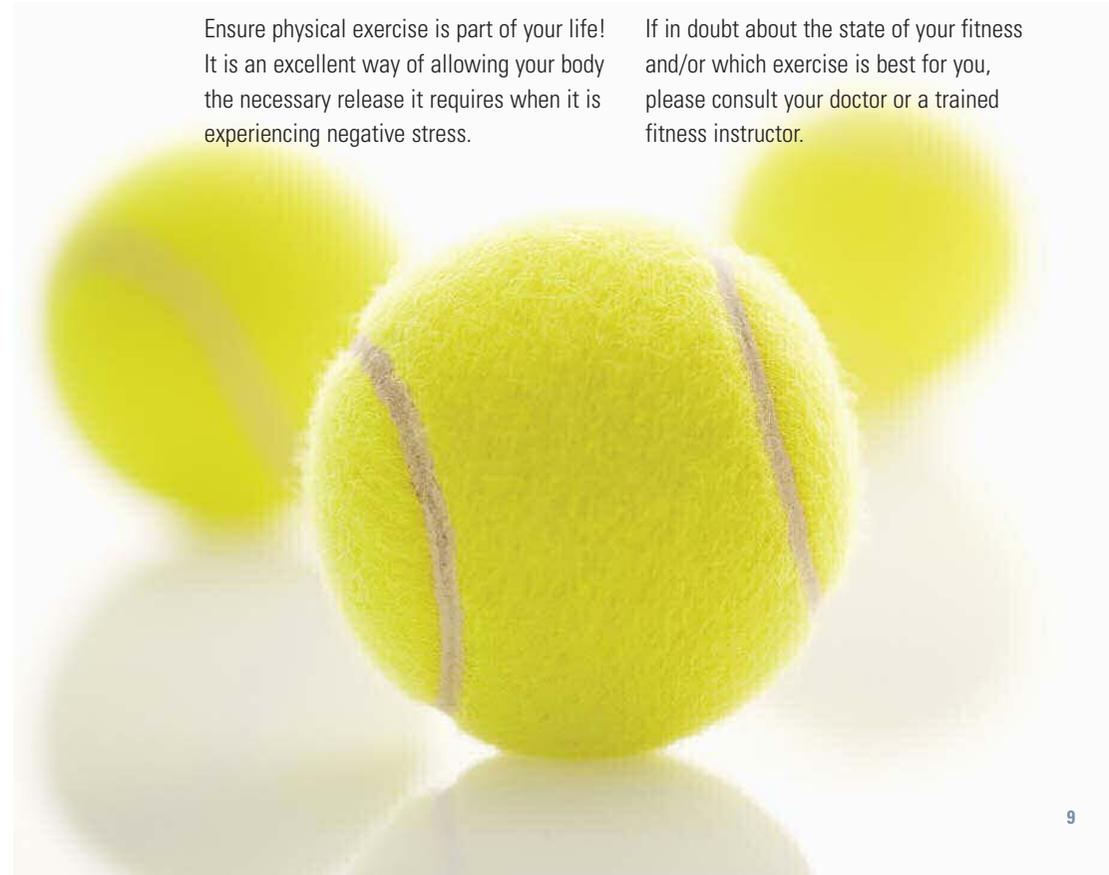
Ensure physical exercise is part of your life! It is an excellent way of allowing your body the necessary release it requires when it is experiencing negative stress.

Exercise

The benefits of exercise include:

- using up the excess energy released by the "fight or flight" reaction;
- improving blood circulation;
- lowering blood pressure;
- helping clear the mind of worrying thoughts (even if only temporarily);
- improving self image, making you feel better about yourself;
- increasing your social contact.

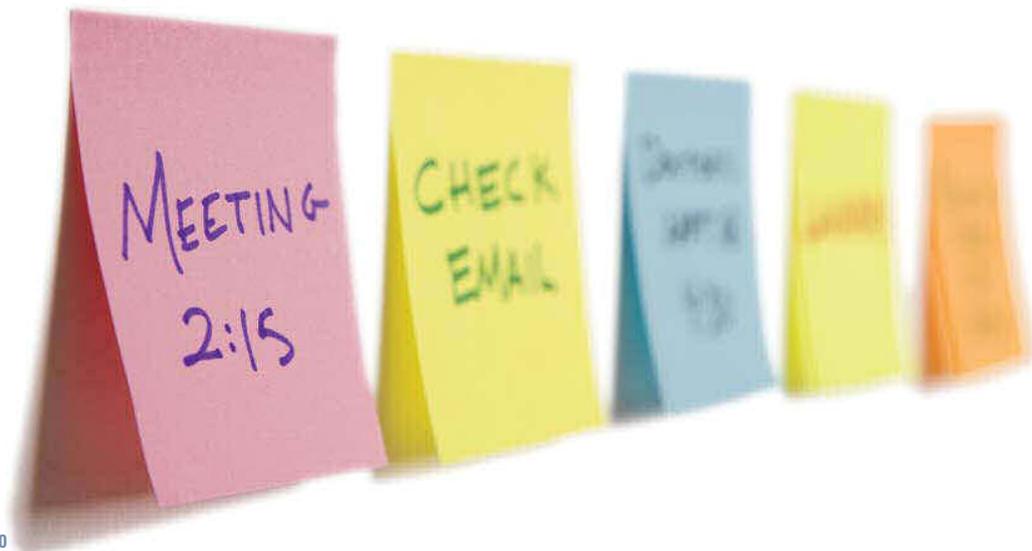
If in doubt about the state of your fitness and/or which exercise is best for you, please consult your doctor or a trained fitness instructor.



Time management

Using time effectively is important to good stress management at work. The following simple guidelines are recommended:

- make a "to do" list and prioritise tasks;
- set realistic deadlines for delivery of each of these tasks;
- break up larger tasks into smaller objectives and set deadlines for each;
- don't juggle paper: read it, act on it, file it or bin it;
- once a decision is reached, forget it and move forward; don't waste time thinking about whether it was a good decision or not;
- wherever possible, stick to one task at a time and finish it;
- decide on what time of day is good for you and use it for important tasks. Use your low point time for routine or less important tasks;
- prioritise phone calls, letters, etc. and deal with the most important or urgent ones first;
- decide priorities and stick to them. (priorities agreed with your line manager or supervisor are likely to be the best ones);
- keep meetings short and to the point;
- put a written note of future tasks in a diary;
- be aware that for many jobs interruptions are part and parcel of everyday work; therefore, don't resent them but treat them as positive opportunities to solve problems, help others, and/or improve services.



Relaxation

The benefits of relaxation include:

- lower blood pressure;
- better sleep and reduced fatigue;
- reduced pain;
- eased muscle tension;
- decreased mental worries;
- increased concentration;
- increased productivity;
- increased clear thinking.

Learn to relax

Many people find it difficult to find time to relax.

Do you recognise either of these common responses to making time for yourself?

- You have so many pressures that it is quite impossible to find enough time to get everything done let alone include time to relax.
- The thought of taking out time for you is too self-indulgent. It would just leave you feeling guilty.

But it is important that you do have a period of relaxation every day if you are to reduce the negative effects of stress.

For many people finding the time (and having the opportunity) to relax can be very difficult. They feel embarrassed at feeling the need to relax and often don't want other people to know they are tense. In these situations, simple relaxation techniques that can be practised almost anywhere can be very helpful.

Short and simple relaxation techniques

- Try the half-minute deep breathing technique. For thirty seconds just breathe deeply, slowing down the breathing as you exhale. Deep breathing can be very helpful in calming you down.
- Have a really good stretch.
- Take a break from what you are doing.
- Just for a moment, think of something that makes you smile.
- Make time for yourself.
- Do something just for you.
- Never suppress your desire to yawn - it will help to re-energise your body.

Make relaxation part of your daily routine. It doesn't have to take long but do ensure that you build it into your day. Many people have found the following activities helpful for everyday relaxation:

- reading;
- listening to music;
- having a warm bath - perhaps with aromatherapy oils such as lavender;
- watching a funny film on television;
- staring into space (visualise your favourite place).

Others may prefer to attend relaxation classes such as yoga, meditation, Tai Chi and massage.

Assertion

Do you find it difficult to say 'no'? Do you find yourself saying, "I wish I had done this" or "I wish I had not done that"?

Perhaps you are not assertive enough.

Some people find that although they can be assertive at home, it is often much more difficult at work. Often colleagues are also very pressurised and, in many cases, may be aggressive or demanding.

Two major reasons why it is important to learn to be more assertive are:

- you are more likely to get more of what you want;
- it will help you feel good about yourself and your behaviour and you will experience fewer feelings of regret or loss of control, which can lead to negative stress.

As with time management, learning to be more assertive takes both time and practice.

The following are some basic guidelines:

- What do you really think about the situation you are currently facing? Be realistic and positive.
- Be clear and direct in what you say - misunderstandings often occur as a result of unclear messages.
- Use appropriate body language to back up your assertive behaviour. Adopt an open, relaxed posture with your head, and face the other party square on. Establish eye contact and keep your voice steady and firm.
- Keep calm and stick to the point. Relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, may help.
- If necessary, repeat and clarify your message. People often do not listen completely to what is being said to them.
- Respect the viewpoints of the other person. In many situations compromise is necessary to move forward.

What does 'being assertive' mean?

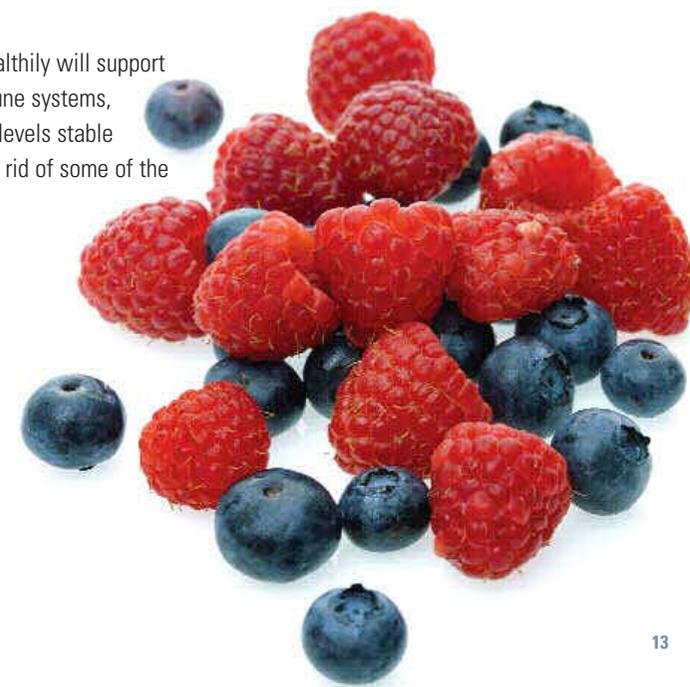
- Being honest with yourself and others.
- Being able to say what you want, need or feel.
- Being self confident.
- Understanding other people's points of view.
- Being able to negotiate and reach workable compromises.
- Having self respect and respect for others.

The role of diet

Our bodies are remarkably efficient at extracting the nutrients we need, but at times of negative stress these needs increase. It is therefore important you ensure you:

- eat a balanced diet;
- eat regular meals (including breakfast!);
- eat complex carbohydrates (e.g. wholemeal bread, pasta and jacket potatoes) rather than refined carbohydrates (e.g. biscuits and crisps);
- say "No" to caffeine! It is not just in coffee but in tea, soft drinks and some common headache remedies;
- eat plenty of fruit and vegetables;
- drink alcohol in moderation;
- try and drink at least a pint of water a day.

Eating and drinking healthily will support your nervous and immune systems, keep your blood sugar levels stable and help your body get rid of some of the surplus fats.



Support

There are a number of places you can go if you feel that you need advice, help or just to talk to someone about stress.

Employee Counselling Service

The council offers a support service to all employees, which is entirely confidential. Individual counselling, advice and support is available and can be arranged by contacting the Employee Counselling Service on **0800 970 3980**

Human Resources

Human Resources are there to provide support and you are able to discuss any problems you are having.

Family doctor

Many people will turn to their family doctor when they experience the first signs of stress. It is important to be checked out by a doctor to rule out the possibility of physical illness. If your doctor prescribes any medication it is important you get him or her to explain the effects and any likely side effects.

Trade unions

Trade Union representatives can provide another source of support and are able to discuss with you any problems you feel you are having.

Acting together

In some situations, you may not be the only one affected by stress. Others may be exposed to the same kind of pressures and it may be helpful to act together to begin to make improvements.

Information and advice

Whether you are seeking help on an individual basis or as part of a group, various information and advice centres can help.

These include:

- **Citizen's Advice Bureau** on a range of practical and legal matters.
- **Trade unions** or **professional associations** that can help with work related issues.
- **The Samaritans** 08457 909090
- **Scottish Association for Mental Health**
18a Carden Place, Aberdeen. AB10 1UQ
Tel: 01224 641164
Email: north.office@samh.org.uk
- **MIND**
Granta House, 15-19 Broadway, Stratford, London E1 5 4BQ
Tel 0208 519 2122
www.mind.org.uk
- **Psychology on line:** www.psychologyonline.co.uk
- **Stress free NET:** www.stressfree.com
- **The consumer health info centre:** www.chic.org.uk
- **Teachers' Support Network** is a national free and confidential support, information and coaching service for teachers and school staff
Tel: 0800 564 2270
www.teachersupport.info/scotland

