COPING WITH STRESS

How to manage stress and help your heart

FIGHT FOR EVERY HEARTBEAT
bhf.org.uk
Introduction

The British Heart Foundation is fighting for every heartbeat.
Our research has shown how stress can have an impact on your risk of developing coronary heart disease.
The aim of this booklet is to help you understand what stress is, how it can affect your heart health and what you can do about it. It includes useful information and practical tips to help you cope with stress.

Stress is a normal part of life – we all feel stressed sometimes.

If you feel that you aren’t coping with stress, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Many people don’t want to ask for help as they feel that it’s a sign of failure. But it isn’t. It’s really important to get help as soon as you can, so you can start to regain control.

If someone close to you is concerned about your stress, even if you’re not, there’s no harm in talking about it.
The first person to approach is your GP. They should be able to talk with you about any potential treatment and may refer you to another local professional.

This guide does not replace the advice your health professionals may give you based on their knowledge of your situation.
What is stress?

Stress is a word people often use to describe how you may feel when everything seems too much.

You might start feeling stressed when you feel you have too much to do, or too much on your mind. You may have been feeling overwhelmed for a long time. You may also feel that other people are asking too much from you, or that you’re having to deal with situations that you can’t control or change.

Over a long time, stress can be hard to deal with and bad for your health. If you’ve felt under stress for a while, it may lead to depression or anxiety or more severe mental and physical health problems.

But stress is a normal part of life – we all feel stressed sometimes. We need to learn to find the best way to cope and it varies from person to person.

Fast fact
You’re not alone
One in five people are affected by stress at work.
What is coronary heart disease?

Coronary heart disease (CHD) is the single most common cause of death for both men and women in the UK.

It begins when your coronary arteries – the arteries that supply your heart muscle with oxygen-rich blood – become blocked or narrowed because of a build-up of fatty deposits.

In time, your arteries may become so narrow that they can’t deliver enough oxygen-rich blood to your heart muscle. **Angina** is an uncomfortable feeling, tightness or pain in your chest which may spread to your arms, neck, jaw, back or stomach. You may also feel breathless. You should see your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.

Sometimes the fatty deposits can become unstable, and a piece may break away causing a blood clot to form. If this blood clot blocks your coronary artery, part of your heart muscle will be starved of oxygen-rich blood and may become permanently damaged. This is a **heart attack**.

Heart attacks can kill. If you think you or anyone else is having a heart attack, you should phone 999 for an ambulance immediately.

If you want to know more, read our booklets **Heart attack** (order code HIS7) and **Angina** (order code HIS6). Go to bhf.org.uk/publications and search for them online.
Research doesn’t show stress causes CHD, but it has shown how stress can have an impact on your risk of developing CHD. It all depends on how you cope with it.

If you struggle to cope with stress, you can develop some unhealthy habits. For example, you may eat unhealthy food as a form of comfort or smoke or drink more to help you deal with how you feel. Some of these habits can increase your chance of developing CHD.
The main risk factors for CHD are:

- smoking
- having diabetes
- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol
- obesity
- physical inactivity
- alcohol – if you regularly drink too much
- age
- ethnic background (people from South Asian or black African backgrounds are at a higher risk)
- having a family history of coronary heart disease
- sex – men are more likely to develop CHD at an earlier age than women.

The more risk factors you have, the more likely you are to develop CHD. Even though some risk factors can’t be changed, there is plenty you can do to reduce your risk and help protect your heart.

Stopping smoking, being more physically active, eating healthily and maintaining a healthy weight, blood pressure and cholesterol will all help to reduce your risk.

And improving your physical health can, in turn, boost your ability to cope with stress.

Fast fact

Some stress can be good for you

It can help you stay focused and alert, helping you to achieve a target. For example, if you have to finish off some important work, that situation can be stressful. But the stress you feel can spur you on to meet the deadline.

LOOK AFTER ME AND I’LL LOOK AFTER YOU
The stress warning signs

If you think you’re experiencing harmful levels of stress, tune in to your warning signs. Think about how you feel, how it changes your behaviour and how it affects other people.

Long ago, humans developed two responses to danger: ‘fight or flight’. Our bodies still respond in this way. Listen to these physical, emotional and behavioural signs. They tell you that you need to make a change.

Turn over to the next page to find out more
Physical signs and symptoms

Do you experience:

☐ feeling sweaty or shivery?
☐ your heart beating fast?
☐ a dry mouth?
☐ frequent headaches?
☐ nervous twitches or restlessness?
☐ a loss of appetite for food, fun or sex?
☐ weight gain or loss?
☐ tight, knotty feelings in your stomach?
☐ feeling sick or dizzy?
☐ needing to go to the toilet a lot more than usual?
☐ difficulty sleeping, disturbed nights or waking early?
☐ tiredness or exhaustion?
☐ odd aches and pains?

Emotional signs and symptoms

Do you often feel:

☐ upset?
☐ fearful or worried?
☐ irritable?
☐ aggressive or angry?
☐ tearful?
☐ isolated from the people around you?
☐ you’ve lost your sense of humour?
☐ you’ve lost interest in life?
☐ a sense of hopelessness?
☐ scared or frightened?
Behavioural signs and symptoms

Do you:

☐ smoke or drink more than you used to?
☐ comfort eat?
☐ struggle to laugh at anything?
☐ forget things?
☐ shy away from making decisions?
☐ find it difficult to concentrate?
☐ start tasks and not finish them?
☐ regularly work until you’re completely exhausted?
☐ withdraw from relationships or social situations?
☐ clench your jaws or grind your teeth?

Many of these signs and symptoms can be linked with general health problems.

If you answered **yes to a few or more** of these questions, you may be experiencing the effects of prolonged stress.

If you answered **yes to only one or two** of these questions, you should continue to keep an eye on your stress levels.

**Nina’s story**

“I drive my husband to and from work every day. Until recently this made me feel stressed because each morning I would worry about being late for my job. I’d also worry about my husband having to wait for me at the end of the day. I spoke with my employer, explaining the situation, and they agreed to change my working hours. I now don’t have that worry and enjoy a stress free commute.”
When are you stressed?

If you think you’re stressed, it’s a good idea to keep a diary for a couple of weeks, to help you see the triggers that may add to your stress levels.

A diary will also help you see how you react and what helps you cope with stress. Once you know how and when your stress is triggered, it will be easier to understand what the cause might be. We’ve filled in an example to help you.

When you’ve completed the diary, you may:

❤ be able to see the different triggers you experience, and which ones were most stressful
❤ notice some of the signs that warn you that you’re stressed
❤ be able to see some of the things which helped you manage your stress well.

Turn over and begin to fill in your stress diary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1. Define the trigger</th>
<th>MISSED THE BUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2. Mark how stressed you felt (0 = least, 5 = most)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3. Describe the signs or symptoms of stress</td>
<td>TEARY, EYE STARTED TWITCHING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4. Mark how well you coped (0 = least, 5 = most)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5. Note down what helped with the symptoms</td>
<td>DEEP BREATHING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What makes you stressed and what can you do about it?

Thinking about which areas of life trigger stress will help you find ways of coping with stress better.

Use the table below to sort your stress triggers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triggers I can change</th>
<th>Triggers I can’t change</th>
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You won’t help yourself by worrying about things you can’t change or things that will sort themselves out.

You need to deal directly with the triggers you can change to prevent more complex problems.

Turn over for some common triggers for stress, and some suggestions for what you can do to deal with them.
Work

If you feel stressed at work you’re not alone. One in five people in the UK feel ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ stressed by their work. It may be a cause of stress or it may be the place where your stress shows up.

If you are stressed at work, try to talk through the possible reasons with your manager. They may be able to help you develop skills to cope with the causes of your stress. You may also find it useful to speak with a sympathetic colleague about stress at work.

Myth buster

I feel stressed at work and they won’t help

Employers are required by law to look after the wellbeing of their employees and manage the workplace environment to reduce stress levels.

Health at work

There’s a lot you can do to make a difference in your workplace and improve the health, wellbeing and fitness of your colleagues.

Our Health at Work could help. Visit bhf.org.uk/healthatwork to find out more.

Dawn’s story

Coming back to work from a serious illness, I was feeling stressed. My working hours weren’t ideal and I wanted to change them. My employer allowed me to alter my working pattern and they agreed to me working from home when I need to. This has really improved my work-life balance. I don’t feel so stressed during my working day, which in turn means a less stressful home life.

Dawn, mid 40s, Camborne
**Relationships**

Relationships don’t always run smoothly and can be the cause of a lot of stress.

If you’re having problems in one area of your life, it can put a strain on your relationships with others.

Whatever the problem with a relationship, the first step towards dealing with it is to acknowledge it and try to work things through together.

Try to talk through the issues, stay positive, look at what you can do to improve things and accept that some things are outside your control.

For help and advice, contact the National Debtline on 0808 808 4000 or nationaldebtline.co.uk. Your local Citizens Advice Bureau can help. Visit citizensadvice.org.uk

**Loneliness and isolation**

People who are lonely, particularly older people, are more likely to find everyday experiences stressful. At the same time they get less support from others to cope with this stress.

For help and advice, contact the National Debtline on 0808 808 4000 or nationaldebtline.co.uk. Your local Citizens Advice Bureau can help. Visit citizensadvice.org.uk

**Major life events**

Losing a loved one, losing your job, going through divorce or a separation, moving house or having a baby can all be stressful.

You can find life events stressful, whether or not you planned them yourself.

Talk with your friends and family. They may be able to suggest something that will help you see your situation in a different light and provide you with practical and emotional support.

**Money problems**

Money problems can cause high levels of stress and depression. They can cause relationship breakdowns, families to split up and even lose their homes.

If you’re having problems with your relationship, it may be helpful talking to a professional relationship advisor. Go to relate.org.uk for more information.

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What can you do about stress?

The best thing you can do is work on the triggers causing you to feel stressed. Changing your immediate response to stressful situations will also help.

Relax

Learning how to relax is a really good way to cope with stress. Once you’re used to doing it, you’ll find it can make a difference to your mood and to your energy levels. It can also help prevent common mental health problems like depression.

Relaxation is more than just sitting back and being quiet. It’s an active process that calms your mind and body. You should include activities that help you relax in a healthy way in your everyday routine.
A quick relaxation technique

1. Tune in to your breathing. Take one deep breath in, hold it, and then tell yourself to let go as you breathe out through your mouth. Breathe naturally for a while, then repeat the deep breath and ‘let go’ with your outward breath.

2. Tense up and then relax the muscles in one part of your body, such as your hand, foot or stomach. When you let go, try to let all of the unnecessary tension slip away. Do the same for muscles in other parts of your body.

3. Drop your shoulders.

4. Apply your relaxation skills in increasingly testing situations – you’ll soon start to feel the benefit.

There are a number of other well tested relaxation techniques. Go to mind.org.uk to find out more.

Change your physical responses

Physical symptoms such as tense muscles, clenched teeth, feeling butterflies in your stomach and taking short, fast breaths are quite common. Try to relax and remind yourself that being stressed won’t help.

Challenge your mental responses

It’s easy to become angry, defensive, depressed or frustrated when pressure mounts up. Take a step back, give yourself some space and time and plan what you can do to improve the situation.

If you have thoughts like ‘I can’t cope’ or ‘I’m useless’ try challenging them with positive thoughts like ‘there are lots of things I’m good at’ and ‘I know I’ll get through this in time’.

Vicki’s story

I work in the food industry and recently had to take a food hygiene test. This made me feel stressed because I’ve never passed an exam before and I knew I had to pass it to keep my job. My employer put me on a course before I took the exam, which really helped. I am really pleased to say I passed! I now don’t feel stressed when I’m at a course because I know I’ll have the help and support I need.
Look at your lifestyle

Once you’ve begun looking at your triggers for stress, you should also look at your lifestyle.

Eat healthily

☑️ It will help you control your weight and reduce your risk of CHD.

☑️ It will boost the feel-good hormones that make your body more able to deal with stressful situations.

To learn more, go to bhf.org.uk/eatingwell or order our Eating well booklet

Be active

☑️ It boosts the hormones that help relieve your symptoms of stress and will reduce your risk of developing CHD.

☑️ It gives you more energy and stamina and helps you maintain a healthy weight.

To learn more, go to bhf.org.uk/stayingactive or order our Get active, stay active booklet

Stop smoking

☑️ It makes you twice as likely to have a heart attack and won’t relieve the symptoms of stress for any length of time.

To learn more, go to bhf.org.uk/smoking or order our Stop smoking booklet

Drink less alcohol

☑️ Alcohol can leave you feeling depressed.

☑️ Drinking too much can be harmful for your heart and your general health.

☑️ Men shouldn’t regularly drink more than three to four units a day. Women shouldn’t drink more than two to three units a day.

☑️ Aim to have two alcohol free days a week.

For more information about alcohol, visit bhf.org.uk/alcohol
Stress-busting top tips

We all need to find our own ways of coping with stress and they vary from person to person.

Sort out your worries
Go back to page 16 to see how you can divide them up and work on them.

Share your worries with someone
Don’t keep things bottled up.

Try to make changes to improve your lifestyle
Avoid smoking completely and drinking too much alcohol, eat healthily and get active. However much you think doing the opposite will help, it doesn’t in the long run.

Remember the positive things in your life
Such as your loved ones, a pet or something you’re looking forward to.

Get organised
Make a list of the things you need to do and do the most important things first. This should allow you to feel more in control of your situation.

Try not to do too many things at once
If you have too much on at the same time you could make mistakes.

Practise being assertive
If people are asking too much of you, be prepared to tell them how you feel and to work with them to find a solution.

Pause and relax
It doesn’t matter if you’ve not finished everything – you need to take a break every now and then.

Try to accept things you can’t change
There’ll always be things you don’t like or find difficult – the key is to change your attitude to them.

Look back at your achievements
Don’t worry about what still needs to be done at the end of the day – you can always carry on tomorrow.

Make time for your friends and family
They can help you to keep your worries and concerns in perspective – you can do the same for them too.

Take up a hobby or interest
You can make new friends and do something different to your current everyday routine.

Change your scenery
Walking is free and great for your heart health. Look at and enjoy your surroundings rather than thinking about your worries.
Getting help

Don’t be afraid to ask for help from a professional.

Talk to your GP. They may be able to help or may refer you to another health professional.

You may want to find a private practitioner. To find a qualified counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist, contact one of the organisations below.

**British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies**
Victoria Buildings
9-13 Silver Street
Bury BL9 0EU
Phone: 0161 797 4484
Website: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**
BACP House
15 St John’s Business Park
Lutterworth
Leicestershire LE17 4HB
Phone: 01455 883316
Website: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

**British Psychological Society**
St Andrews House
48 Princess Road East
Leicester LE1 7DR
Phone: 0116 254 9568
Website: [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)

"Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be"

Abraham Lincoln
Resources from the British Heart Foundation (BHF)

For over 50 years we’ve pioneered research that’s transformed the lives of people living with heart and circulatory conditions. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease.

We produce a wide range of resources to help you and your family and friends look after your heart health.

To order any of our heart health resources:

- Call the BHF Orderline on 0870 600 6566
- Email orderline@bhf.org.uk
- Visit bhf.org.uk/publications

You can also download many of our publications from our website bhf.org.uk

For information about all of our resources, ask for a copy of Take heart (code G5).

Inspired to make other lifestyle changes?

Coping with stress is only one part of keeping healthy to protect your heart. Being physically active, stopping smoking and eating healthily are all important too and we have resources available to help you. Order or download the below booklets or visit bhf.org.uk/prevention for more information and advice.

- Eating well (code G186)
- Get active, stay active (code G12)
- Put your heart into walking (code G26)
- Cut down on salt (code G160)
- Stop smoking (code G118)

Our resources and services are free of charge, but we rely on donations to continue our vital work. If you’d like to make a donation, please call our donation hotline on 0300 330 3322 or visit our website at bhf.org.uk/donate

Or, please complete the form at the end of this booklet and send it to us at the address on the back cover.

Heart Matters

Heart Matters is our free, personalised service to help you live with a healthy heart. Join Heart Matters today to access benefits including Heart Matters magazine, a Helpline and an online members’ area with recipes, articles and lifestyle tools. Register online at bhf.org.uk/heartmatters or call 0300 330 3300 (calls are charged at a similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers).
How you can help

Coronary heart disease is the UK’s single biggest killer.

Join our fight for every heartbeat in the UK. Every pound raised, minute of your time and donation to our shops will help make a difference to people’s lives.

Become a volunteer and help run our shops, support local events and fundraising or even campaign for the UK’s heart health – there’s something for everyone.

Take part in one of our events – they’re a great way for you to have fun, get fit, and save lives. Choose from cycles, runs, walks and many more.

Join our Heartstart initiative and learn to save lives with the skills of emergency life support. Over 2.6 million people already have.

Give to your local BHF shop – it’s easy to donate your unwanted items to us and help us raise vital funds.

Make a one-off donation, set up a direct debit, give in memory or leave a gift in your Will – there’s lots of ways to support us.

Shop from the heart with our online shop – all profits from the BHF Shop help fund our life-saving work.

For more information visit bhf.org.uk/youcanhelp or call 020 7554 0000.

Thank you.
Join our fight for every heartbeat in the UK and make a donation today

Please accept my gift of either £10 £15 £20 Other

(please make your cheque/postal order / CAF voucher payable to the British Heart Foundation.)

OR please debit the above sum from my:

☐ AMEX ☐ CAF Card ☐ Master Card ☐ Visa/Delta ☐ Maestro

Card No. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Valid from ☐/☐/☐ ☐ ☐ ☐/☐/☐/☐

Expiration date (security code) Issue no (Maestro only)

The British Heart Foundation is the nation’s heart charity, registered charity number 225971 (England and Wales) and SC039426 (Scotland).

Once completed, please return the whole of this form to: Freepost RRZJ-LCHX-EKCR, British Heart Foundation, Greater London House, 180 Hampstead Road, London NW1 7AW.

If you do not wish to be contacted by post, please tick this box. (MP0074)

If you do not wish to hear from us by phone, please tick this box. (MP0075)

If you do not wish to hear from other similar organisations to contact us. (MP0060)

Are you a UK taxpayer? If you are a UK taxpayer please tick the first box so we can claim back up to 25p for every £1 you give at no extra cost to you.

GA1 Yes, I am a UK taxpayer and would like the BHF to reclaim the tax on any of the donations I have made in the last four years and any future donations I may make.*

Date ☐/☐/☐ ☐ ☐/☐/☐ ☐

GA2 No, I am a non-taxpayer.

* To qualify for Gift Aid, you must pay an amount of UK Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax at least equal to the amount that all the charities or Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs) will reclaim on your gifts for that tax year (6 April one year to 5 April the next) and you understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify.

Acknowledgements

The BHF would like to thank all who have given their time and support to develop this resource.

Children’s resources

Do you want the kids in your family to be more active and eat healthier? Help them make some changes now by encouraging them to visit the following websites:

ccafe.net a website for 7-11 year olds

cyheart.net and yoobot.co.uk websites for 12-19 year olds

We also produce free resources for parents, teachers and those who work with children to help them encourage young people to live a heart healthy lifestyle. Go to bhf.org.uk/teachers for more information, or call the BHF Orderline on 0870 600 6566.
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For over 50 years we’ve pioneered research that’s transformed the lives of people living with heart and circulatory conditions. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease.

But so many people still need our help.

From babies born with life-threatening heart problems to the many Mums, Dads and Grandparents who survive a heart attack and endure the daily battles of heart failure.

Join our fight for every heartbeat in the UK. Every pound raised, minute of your time and donation to our shops will help make a difference to people’s lives.