



What is stress?

When we say we're stressed, it usually means that we're tense about something that's happening in our lives – such as starting a new job or school, arguments with family, friends or a partner, or worry about an upcoming exam. Stress can also be a result of how you feel about things, the goals you've set for yourself, what you want out of life.

Some stress can be a good thing. It can provide motivation to succeed and push us out of our comfort zone. However, too much stress – and how much is too much varies from person to person – can lead to panic, headaches, trouble sleeping, anger, depression, anxiety and lots of other symptoms.

Most of us get stressed sometimes. It doesn't matter whether it's because of school, work, family or relationships. There are some simple tips to help you reduce and deal with the stress in your life:

1. Put off the big decisions

If you're feeling stressed, it's probably not the best time for you to be making major changes in your life, such as giving up on study or dropping subjects, leaving home or quitting your job.

2. Sort out relationship problems

Stress in relationships – whether this is with a partner, friends, your teachers, parents or other important people in your life – is a major cause of depression. You might want to talk to a counsellor or someone who can help you work things out.

3. Take time out

Don't spend too much time worrying about things that are stressing you out. Take some time out to do something distracting or something you enjoy, such as going out with friends, going to the gym or yoga class, listening to music, playing sports or watching a movie.

4. Keep things balanced

- Learn to say "no" more often. Don't feel you have to take on unnecessary new things that will add to your to-do list, or your stress levels.

- Avoid studying till late at night.
- Avoid taking on extra responsibilities.
- Organise your time so your homework and assignments are not left to the last minute.
- Make sure you have a balance in your day between work and doing things you enjoy.

5. Exercise

Doing a physical activity, such as swimming, walking, yoga, cycling, dancing or going to the gym can help reduce the tension in your muscles and your mind. Try to do some exercise every day, even if it's just walking around the block. We've included some exercises on the next page, which you can use if you're feeling stressed or anxious.

6. Seek help

Talking to a friend about how you're feeling might help you work out what's causing your stress and how to deal with it. Talking to your doctor, a counsellor or someone else you trust can also help. They may be able to give you some other tips to help you reduce your stress.

For more information

Castle, G. (2004). *Bite Size Chunks to Success: Controlling stress.*

This book is easy to read and details some useful stress management strategies, such as, time management techniques and conflict resolution.

Learn about other coping strategies for depression and anxiety

Ybblue fact sheet: Getting active to beat depression

Ybblue fact sheet: Getting the sleep you need

Ybblue fact sheet: Drinking, drugs and depression

Learn about other treatments for depression and anxiety

Ybblue fact sheet: Getting things sorted

Ybblue fact sheet: What's the deal with antidepressants?

Ybblue is a youth program of *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*. For more information about depression, anxiety and related disorders see www.beyondblue.org.au





Slow breathing exercise

Stress and anxiety can affect your heart rate and breathing patterns. A relaxed breathing rate is around 10 to 12 breaths per minute. Do you have times when you get stressed and you breathe much faster than that?

It's helpful to practise this exercise three to four times a day – maybe before school, at lunchtime and after school – so it becomes easy to use as a short term coping strategy for when you're feeling stressed or anxious.

1. Count and record the number of breaths you take in 1 minute (breathing in then out is counted as 1 breath).
2. Hold your breath and count to 5 (do not take a deep breath). When you get to 5, breathe out and say the word "relax" to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
3. Start breathing in (through your nose) and out slowly in a 6 second cycle. Breathe in for 3 seconds and out for 3 seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. In the beginning, it can be helpful to time your breathing using the second hand of a clock or watch.
4. Count to yourself: In-two-three, relax-two three.
5. Continue breathing in a 6 second cycle **for at least 5 minutes** or until your breathing has slowed down.
6. After you have practised this exercise, count and record the number of breaths you take in 1 minute.

Once you have the hang of the slow breathing technique, you do not need to keep timing your breathing rate before and after the exercise.

Muscle relaxation exercise

When you are feeling stressed or anxious, your muscles become tense. When your muscles remain tense for long periods of time, you can start to develop aches and pains, fatigue, headaches and difficulty breathing.

Take a few minutes to do this exercise, which shows how muscle tension can cause pain and tiredness:

1. Hold a piece of paper in your hand and stretch your arm out in front of you.
2. Keep holding the paper for a few minutes without moving your arm.

You will probably notice that your arm feels tired after only a few minutes, and may even start to ache in some places. Imagine how your arm would feel if you continued to hold that piece of paper for a number of hours. Although the paper is not heavy, keeping your muscles tense for any length of time can cause pain – which is why they may ache when you become stressed.

Try the exercise below to relax your muscles. It is useful to practice this exercise and do it at the first sign that your muscles are becoming tense.

1. Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room.
2. Put your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands in your lap.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Do the slow breathing exercise for 3 minutes.
5. After 3 minutes of slow breathing, start the muscle relaxation exercise below
6. Tense each of your muscle groups for 10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds in the following order:
 - **Hands:** clench your hands into fists, then relax
 - **Lower arms:** bend your hands up at the wrists, then relax
 - **Upper arms:** bend your arms up at the elbow, then relax
 - **Shoulders:** lift your shoulders up towards your ears, then relax
 - **Neck:** stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then back in a slow rolling motion, then relax
 - **Forehead and scalp:** raise your eyebrows, then relax
 - **Eyes:** close your eyes tightly, then relax
 - **Jaw:** clench your teeth, then relax
 - **Chest:** breathe in deeply, then breathe out and relax
 - **Stomach:** pull your tummy in, then relax
 - **Upper back:** pull your shoulders forward, then relax
 - **Lower back:** while sitting, roll your back into a smooth arc, then relax
 - **Buttocks:** tighten your buttocks, then relax
 - **Thighs:** push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax
 - **Calves:** lift your heel off the ground, then relax
 - **Feet:** gently curl your toes down, then relax.
7. Continue slow breathing for 5 more minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation.
8. As you become better at relaxation, it can be more interesting to combine these exercises with memories of relaxing situations (eg. lying on a beach or doing a favourite activity).

A full session of relaxation takes about 15 to 20 minutes. Once you are good at relaxing your muscles, start relaxing tense parts of your body during the day while you are going about your activities.

Source

Hickie et al. (2000). *Educational Health Solutions*. Reproduced with permission [www.spheregp.com.au].

