What is stress?

What stress is, what it does and when it becomes a problem.

Stress is what happens when the demands on you feel bigger than what you have to meet them with. Some pressure is helpful. It gets you up for an interview or through a deadline. The trouble comes when pressure is too high for too long, with no chance to recover.



What stress does

Body
Tense muscles, headaches, poor sleep, tiredness, stomach trouble, more colds and bugs.

Feelings
Irritable, anxious, overwhelmed, flat, tearful, quick to snap.

Thinking
Racing mind, forgetfulness, poor concentration, worry, seeing only problems.

Behaviour
Rushing, skipping breaks and meals, drinking or eating more, withdrawing, dropping the things that help.

Demands and resources

Stress is a balance between demands (work, money, caring, health, conflict, change) and resources (time, sleep, support, skills, money, a sense of control). You can reduce stress from either side: lower the load, or build up what you have to carry it.

Three questions

1. What can I change or remove?
2. What can I not change, but could handle differently?
3. What do I need more of to cope: rest, help, information, time to myself?

Note
Stress does the damage when there is no recovery from it. Short, regular breaks from pressure matter as much as reducing the pressure.

The pressure and performance curve is based on the Yerkes-Dodson law (1908).

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The stress bucket

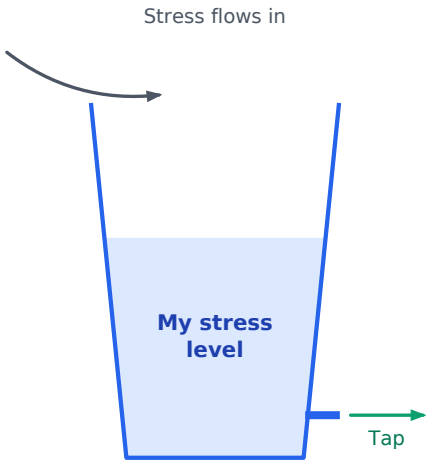
A picture of what adds to your stress and what lets it out.

Name _____ Date _____

Imagine your stress collecting in a bucket. Pressures pour in at the top. Helpful coping opens a tap at the bottom and lets some out. If more comes in than goes out, the bucket overflows: you snap, get ill, cannot sleep or feel you cannot cope. Tick what fits and add anything else.

What is filling my bucket

- [ ] Work
- [ ] Money
- [ ] Family
- [ ] Health
- [ ] Worries
- [ ] Change
- [ ] Poor sleep



What lets stress out

- [ ] Rest
- [ ] Sleep
- [ ] Movement
- [ ] Talking
- [ ] Outdoors
- [ ] Enjoyment

Signs my bucket is getting full

In my body, mood and behaviour

Taps that feel like relief but add to the load

- [ ] Drinking
- [ ] Overworking
- [ ] Avoiding
- [ ] Scrolling
- [ ] Comfort eating
- [ ] Snapping

What could I do to reduce what is flowing in?

Which tap will I open more this week, and when?

The stress bucket was described by Alison Brabban and Douglas Turkington (2002).

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My stress warning signs

Tick your signs of building stress and pick out the earliest ones.

Name _____ Date _____

Tick the signs you get when stress is building. Then pick out the earliest ones. Those are the ones to watch for.

Body

- [ ] Tight shoulders, neck or jaw
- [ ] Headaches
- [ ] Trouble sleeping
- [ ] Tired all the time
- [ ] Upset stomach
- [ ] Racing heart
- [ ] Getting ill more often
- [ ] Appetite changes

Feelings

- [ ] Irritable or snappy
- [ ] Anxious or on edge
- [ ] Overwhelmed
- [ ] Flat or low
- [ ] Tearful
- [ ] Guilty when resting

Thinking

- [ ] Mind racing
- [ ] Forgetful
- [ ] Cannot concentrate
- [ ] Cannot switch off
- [ ] Everything feels urgent
- [ ] Expecting the worst

Behaviour

- [ ] Skipping breaks or meals
- [ ] Working longer hours
- [ ] More alcohol, caffeine or food
- [ ] Avoiding people
- [ ] Putting things off
- [ ] Dropping exercise or hobbies

My earliest warning signs (the first two or three I notice)

What other people notice in me first

When I spot these signs, the first thing I will do

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Change it, accept it or let it go

Sort what is weighing on you into what you can change, what to accept and what to drop.

Name _____ Date _____

A lot of stress comes from fighting things we cannot change and neglecting the things we can. List what is weighing on you, then decide which group each one belongs to.

Change it
I have some control. There is something I can do, ask for or stop doing.

Accept it
I cannot change it, at least for now. I can change how I respond and look after myself around it.

Let it go
It is not my responsibility, it matters less than it feels, or worrying will make no difference.

What is stressing me	Change, accept or let go?	What I will do

The one thing that would make the biggest difference if I acted on it

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Urgent and important

When everything feels like a priority, sort it into four boxes.

Name _____ Date _____

Urgent tasks demand attention. Important ones can be put off until they become a crisis. Write each task on your mind into one of the boxes.

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	**Do it now** Deadlines, real emergencies	**Plan it** Health, relationships, planning, rest. Put it in the diary.
Not important	**Limit it** Interruptions, other people's priorities. Can I shorten, delay or hand it on?	**Drop it** Time fillers and things nobody will miss

Which box do I spend most of my time in?

One "plan it" item I will protect time for this week, and when

The idea of sorting by urgency and importance is often credited to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

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Energy audit

List what drains your energy and what gives it back.

Name _____ Date _____

Think through a typical week: the tasks, the people, the places, the habits. Some leave you with less energy than you started with. Some give energy back.

Drains	Chargers
What leaves me depleted?	What leaves me with more in the tank?

This week, how full is my battery overall?

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Empty Full

One drain I could reduce, limit or stop

One charger I will add or do more often, and when

What gets in the way of recharging, and what would help?

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Understanding burnout

The signs of burnout, what leads to it and how to recover.

Burnout builds slowly, from long-term stress that has not been managed, usually at work or in a caring role. It is not a weakness. It tends to happen to conscientious people who keep going long after they should have stopped.

The three signs

Exhaustion
Drained, physically and emotionally. Rest does not seem to refill the tank.

Distance
Feeling detached, cynical or numb about work or the people you look after. Going through the motions.

Feeling ineffective
Tasks take longer. Mistakes creep in. A sense that nothing you do makes a difference.

What leads to it

- [ ] Too much to do, for too long
- [ ] Little control over how I work
- [ ] Effort that goes unnoticed
- [ ] Conflict or lack of support
- [ ] Unfairness
- [ ] Work that clashes with my values
- [ ] No real time off
- [ ] Caring for others with little care for me

Is it burnout or depression?

They overlap, and one can lead to the other. Burnout is usually tied to one area of life and eases with distance from it. Depression affects all of it. If low mood, hopelessness or loss of interest have spread across your whole life, talk to your GP.

Recovering

1. **Take it seriously.** Burnout does not fix itself by pushing through.
2. **Rest properly.** Time off that is really off. Sleep, daylight, movement, food.
3. **Reduce the load.** What can be dropped, delayed, delegated or renegotiated?
4. **Put boundaries around work:** hours, email, breaks.
5. **Reconnect** with people and with things that have nothing to do with being useful.
6. **Look at the causes.** Without some change in the conditions, burnout comes back.

Recovery takes time
Usually months. Trying to rush it tends to set you back.

What needs to change for me, and who do I need to talk to about it?

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My self-care plan

What you will do to look after your body, your mind and your relationships.

Name _____ Date _____

Self-care is the ordinary upkeep that keeps you well: sleep, food, movement, rest, people and things that matter to you. It is the first thing to go when life gets busy, and that is when you need it most.

Body

Sleep, food, movement, medical care

Mind

Rest, breaks, things I enjoy, time offline

People

Who I spend time with, asking for help

Meaning

What matters to me, what I look forward to

Every day I will...

Every week I will...

Signs that I am neglecting myself

What gets in the way, and how I will handle it

A reminder to myself about why this matters

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