

Breaking the stress cycle

Step 1 Recognise you are stressed

1 People don't often recognise their own stress because they are too focused on the problems. Listen to others who may see you more clearly than you see yourself.

Step 2 Recognise when you are in a stress cycle

2 If stress has been ongoing, a pattern of stress may form. Stress reactions can cause more stress. This is called the stress cycle, and may become a lifestyle.

Step 3 Recognise that you can choose to break your pattern of stress

3 Although there are lots of things about your life you cannot change, there may be some that you can.

Step 4 Reduce stressful activities

4 Check your lifestyle and routines to see where you can reduce the stress. Where possible stop doing things that keep stress high.

Step 5 Increase relaxation and positive activities

5 Build activities into your day that give you a reward or good feeling, even if only a small one. Take time to enjoy yourself.

Taking care of yourself

There are many things that you can do that will help to break the stress cycle. Simple enjoyment can be the best antidote to stress. Small pleasures will make a big difference to stress.

Physical

- do regular exercise such as walking, swimming, cycling
- try to reduce your intake of alcohol, tobacco and sugar—these can keep the stress cycle going
- eat regular, well balanced meals even if they are small.

Relationships

- keep regular contact with people you like to be with
- ask for help when you need it—many people enjoy giving help
- make time to be with your family or friends
- talk to people you trust about yourself and what is happening so you can get things into perspective.

Relaxation

- do regular relaxation exercises such as deep breathing, listening to quiet music, meditation
- consider massage or simple exercises to help with bodily tension
- rest regularly, even if you can only do it for a short time
- try to find something that will make you laugh sometimes.



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After an emergency

a guide to help you recognise and manage stress symptoms after crisis or emergency situations



When people experience an emergency or traumatic situation, they can use up more emotional energy than they realise. In a 'state of stress', a person goes into survival mode to deal with problems and cope with fears, frustrations and other feelings. Children can also be affected by a traumatic event.

In a 'state of stress' a person can focus on the important things; concentrate and work hard for long periods; put aside feelings to get the necessary things done, can carry lots of details in their mind, not feel hungry or tired when others need help, can think quickly and clearly and are able to keep a step ahead of what is happening.

Eventually however, people in a 'state of stress' begin to feel the effects of the stress—they cannot maintain their energy level and come off the 'high' they have been on. This is when normal 'stress symptoms' may begin to show. Normal stress symptoms can affect our thinking, our body, our feelings and our relationships.

What you might experience following a crisis situation

Normal physical reactions can include

- body tension
- loss of energy and enthusiasm
- headaches
- trembling
- sweating
- nausea, aches and pains
- a lack of appetite
- an increased desire for stimulants like coffee, sugar, alcohol, tobacco or tea, and
- experiencing sleep disturbance, dreams or nightmares.

Normal effects on thinking can include

- trouble thinking clearly, planning or decision-making
- reduced concentration
- forgetting details
- shorter attention span
- flashbacks of the event
- not speaking clearly, slurring words,
- forgetting names

Where to seek assistance

For information and help in managing stress contact:

- Your general practitioner
- LifeLine 13 11 14 (24 hours)

For other information about ACT Community Recovery contact Canberra Connect on 13 22 81 or visit www.dhcs.act.gov.au

Stress can affect our relationships too

Feelings or responses might include

- feeling that others are to blame for stress
- overreacting to situations
- being unable to feel happiness, affection or enjoyment with our loved ones
- changed relationships with those close to you
- not wanting to be with family or friends, or always needing them around
- having to talk about the emergency all the time
- feeling others don't understand or don't seem to care.

Normal emotional reactions include

- crying more
- sadness
- anxiety
- fear
- guilt
- shock
- irritability
- anger
- numbness
- social withdrawal
- grief
- easily upset or hurt
- restless or unable to relax or keep still
- feeling overwhelmed
- oversensitive to what others say

It is normal for many of these reactions to appear after an emergency or traumatic event. If the symptoms continue then this becomes what is called a 'stress cycle' and once established stress can become a lifestyle.