

# Understanding & Managing Stress

## Quick Reference Guide

CLIENT RESOURCE

Stress is your body's natural response to demands and challenges. While some stress can be motivating, excessive amounts can be debilitating. This guide provides quick evidence-based techniques to help you recognise, manage, and build resilience against stress.

### What is Stress?

Stress involves both a **thinking component** ("I can't cope with this") and a **feeling component** (the body's fight-or-flight activation). *It is not a mental illness* — it is a normal physiological response to perceived demands exceeding your available resources.

A manageable amount of stress — **eustress** — improves performance. When intense and prolonged — **distress** — it can trigger structural changes in the brain, suppress immune function, and increase inflammation.

The goal isn't to eliminate stress. It's **calibration**: staying within your optimal zone.

### The Stress Response Cycle

When stress triggers, your body follows a predictable sequence. Understanding it helps you **intervene at the right moment**.



When your brain perceives demands exceeding available resources, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis triggers cortisol and adrenaline release — activating fight-or-flight. This is adaptive for short-term threats but harmful when chronically activated, increasing allostatic load on the body.

#### Adaptive Stress

Challenge → Action → Recovery. The system resets within a healthy window. Heart rate rises briefly, then returns to baseline. Resilience strengthens.

#### Chronic Stress

Unresolved pressure → Allostatic load accumulates. Cortisol suppresses immunity, mood and cognition — increasing systemic inflammation and long-term health risk.

### Recognise Your Warning Signs

#### Physical

- Headaches or muscle tension
- Fatigue and low energy
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Digestive issues or nausea
- Elevated heart rate

#### Emotional

- Irritability or anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anxiety or restlessness
- Low mood or tearfulness
- Loss of motivation

#### Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating
- Racing or negative thoughts
- Poor decision-making
- Forgetfulness
- Catastrophic thinking

#### Behavioural

- Social withdrawal
- Changes in appetite
- Increased substance use
- Procrastination
- Neglecting responsibilities

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### How Much Is Too Much?

The Yerkes-Dodson Law suggests that performance peaks at moderate arousal, then declines rapidly beyond a tipping point — leading to fatigue, exhaustion, and eventual breakdown. Stress tolerance is *deeply personal*; what overwhelms one person may energise another.



### Factors Affecting Your Stress Response

**Individual:** Genetics · personality · resilience · mental health history · lifestyle

**Environmental:** Work demands · relationships · financial pressures · life changes

**Protective:** Social support · coping skills · physical exercise · sleep quality

## Micro-Interventions for Stress Recovery

Build resilience through brief, frequent parasympathetic activation. Choose techniques that fit your available time.

### 30 SECONDS



#### The Physiological Sigh

Two quick inhales through nose, one long exhale through mouth. Reinflates collapsed air sacs, rapidly reducing acute stress.

#### Cold Water Reset



Splash face or run cold water over inner wrists for 15–30s. Triggers mammalian dive reflex or cools blood via the radial artery.



#### The Shoulder Drop

Raise shoulders to ears (5s), then drop completely. Unclench jaw to break the tension loop.

### 1 MINUTE

#### Box Breathing



Inhale 4 counts, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4. Directly stimulates the vagus nerve to lower heart rate. Used by Navy SEALs.



#### Name It to Tame It

Pause and label your emotion aloud. Verbalising feelings quiets the amygdala by up to 50%.



#### The Reset Breath

Inhale 6 counts, exhale slowly for 10 counts. Extended exhale signals safety to the brainstem, engaging rest-and-digest.

### 5 MINUTES

#### Walk Around the Block



Movement metabolises stress hormones and breaks tunnel vision. Rhythmic activity is inherently calming.

#### Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Systematically tense (5–10s) and release each muscle group from feet to face. Reduces physiological arousal.



#### Body Scan Meditation

Quietly notice where you hold tension – head to toe. Awareness alone begins to release held tension without force.

## Recognise & Respond: The 4-Step Method

1

### EVENT

Describe one stressful event this week.  
Where, when, who, what?

2

### RATE

On a scale of 1–5,  
how stressful was it?

3

### THINK

What thoughts arose?  
Were you catastrophising?

4

### FEEL

Where did you feel it?  
Physical, emotional, cognitive?

## Building Daily Resilience

Four evidence-based habits that build long-term stress resilience and maintain your optimal zone.

### Nature



120 min/week

Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) reduces cortisol, lowers blood pressure, boosts immune function. Even 20 mins in a local park helps.

### Exercise



150 min/week

Metabolises stress hormones, releases endorphins, increases BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), and improves sleep quality.

### Sleep



7-9 hrs/day

Bidirectional relationship with stress. Sleep is foundational for prefrontal cortex function, emotional regulation, and stress recovery.

### Connection



1-2 hrs/day

Meaningful social interaction releases oxytocin (buffering effect), provides a sense of belonging, and strengthens coping capacity.



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## When to Seek Professional Support

- Stress persists for more than two weeks
- You feel unable to cope or function daily
- Sleep, appetite, or concentration are severely disrupted
- Relying on alcohol or substances to manage
- Relationships, work, or daily life deteriorating
- Persistent feelings of hopelessness



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