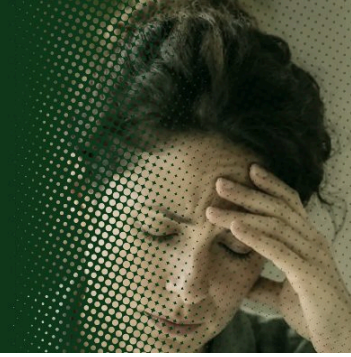
mindhealth QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

STRESS · CLIENT RESOURCE

Understanding & Managing Stress

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.



01 What is stress?

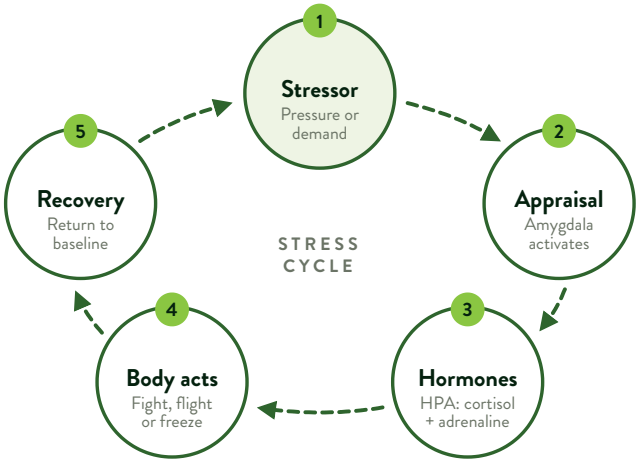
Stress involves both a **thinking component** ("I can't cope with this") and a **feeling component** (the body's fight-or-flight activation). ***It is not a mental illness***: it is a normal physiological response to perceived demands exceeding your available resources.

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.

02 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.

03 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

THE FULL GUIDE, FREE ONLINE

Explore full version with guided breathing, body scan, PMR, mindfulness exercises + more.

mindhealth.com.au/science-of-stress-management

04 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

This information is general in nature and not a substitute for professional advice.

Your stress management toolkit

05 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 your nose, one long exhale through your mouth. Repeat two or three times.

Cold Water Reset

Cool water on the face can slow the heart rate through the dive reflex. Skip it if you have a heart condition or an eating disorder.

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.

Name It to Tame It

Pause and name the feeling, aloud or in your head. Putting a feeling into words can help it settle.

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.

06 Recognise and respond: the 4-step method

1 EVENT	2 RATE	3 THINK	4 FEEL
Describe one stressful event this week. Where, when, who, what?	On a scale of 1–5, how stressful was it?	What thoughts arose? Were you catastrophising?	Where did you feel it? Physical, emotional, cognitive?

07 Building daily resilience

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

Nature — 120 min/week

Time in nature is linked with lower stress. Even 20 mins in a local park can help.

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.

08 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

DID YOU KNOW?

Stress was an engineering word, for the strain a load puts on a material, before the endocrinologist Hans Selye borrowed it to describe how the body responds to demands.

Need support right now? Lifeline 13 11 14 · Emergency 000 — available 24/7. More options: mindhealth.com.au/urgent-help

TALK TO US WHEN YOU'RE READY

Parramatta and online, Australia-wide · **Book at mindhealth.com.au**

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