

Stress Management

Tools for building resilience and restoring balance

Stress is an unavoidable part of life, but chronic, unmanaged stress causes measurable harm. Symptoms are emotional (anxiety, irritability, overwhelm), cognitive (poor concentration, memory problems), physical (fatigue, muscle tension, headaches, sleep disruption, lowered immunity), and behavioural (substance use, withdrawal, reduced productivity). Recognizing and responding to stress early is one of the most powerful things you can do for your health.

The Stress Response and the Recovery System

Stress activates the sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight). Your body was designed for this to be temporary → a spike, then recovery. Modern life often keeps the system activated chronically. The parasympathetic nervous system (rest-and-digest) is your built-in recovery mechanism. Every tool in this handout activates it.

Evidence-Based Strategies

01 Diaphragmatic Breathing

Slow, belly-based breathing directly activates the vagus nerve and calms the nervous system in minutes. Breathe in for 5 seconds (belly rises, chest stays still), out for 5–7 seconds. Practice for 5 minutes, twice daily. This is your fastest and most portable stress tool.

02 Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Systematically tense and release muscle groups from feet to face. 15–20 minutes reduces cortisol, muscle tension, and subjective stress. Best practiced before bed or during lunch break.

03 Cognitive Reframing

Identify stress-amplifying thoughts ("I have to be perfect," "I can't handle this"). Ask: Is this thought accurate? What evidence challenges it? What would I say to a friend? Replace catastrophic predictions with realistic appraisals.

04 Values-Based Problem Solving

Distinguish what you can and cannot control. Direct energy toward what is in your sphere of influence. For problems you can change, take one concrete step this week. For what you cannot control, practice acceptance — resistance to unchangeable things is its own stressor.

05 Mindfulness and Present-Moment Awareness

Much stress is generated by reliving the past or anticipating the future. Mindfulness, deliberate, non-judgmental attention to the present moment, interrupts this cycle. Formal practice (10 minutes of breath-focused meditation) and informal practice (fully engaging in a meal, walk, or conversation) both reduce cortisol and improve emotional regulation.

06 Physical Exercise

Exercise metabolizes stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol) and releases endorphins. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate activity most days. Consistency matters more than intensity.

Lifestyle Levers: High Impact & Often Overlooked

- **Sleep:** Chronic sleep loss amplifies the stress response and impairs recovery. 7–9 hours is the evidence-based target.
- **Caffeine and alcohol:** Caffeine activates the stress response; alcohol disrupts sleep and mood regulation. Both worsen chronic stress.
- **Social support:** Co-regulation through safe relationships is one of the most powerful buffers against stress. Use your support system.
- **Saying no:** Overcommitment is a primary driver of chronic stress. Setting limits is not selfishness, it is sustainability.
- **Scheduled restoration:** Build non-negotiable rest into your week → activities that replenish rather than deplete.

Keeping a Stress Log

Track your daily stress triggers, intensity (1–10), and which strategies you used. Over 2–3 weeks, patterns emerge — both in what raises stress and in what genuinely brings it down. This data helps you make intentional changes rather than operating on autopilot.

When Stress Becomes Something More

When stress persists despite lifestyle changes, or when it is accompanied by significant anxiety, depression, physical symptoms, or relationship strain, professional support can make a substantial difference. You do not need to be in crisis to benefit from therapy.