

STRESS

and how to manage it



Mental Health Foundation
mauri tū, mauri ora OF NEW ZEALAND

***“It’s not the stress that kills us;
it is our reaction to it.”***

Hans Selye, stress researcher

What is stress?

‘Stress’ describes our physical, mental and emotional responses to a situation that we experience as a demand or pressure – called a ‘stressor’. Many stressors are external and arrive from our environment, such as work, finances, relationships, parenting and day-to-day inconveniences. However, stressors can also be internal, such as negative thoughts, beliefs or attitudes.

Not all stress is bad. Stress is a natural occurrence in life, and everyday stress is necessary for growth and development. Most people enjoy being stimulated or challenged, and stress can help with motivation, focus and energy. If we can unwind and recover afterwards, there are no harmful effects. The problem lies in too much stress or prolonged stress.


At first we may become tired and irritable, but if the stress continues and is not dealt with effectively, the result can be physical and mental ill-health. Sometimes we also respond to stress in ways that may seem helpful in the short term, but add more stress on our bodies, like smoking or drinking.

Of course, the stresses of daily life can be immense – financial worries, workload, child and whānau care responsibilities, long commutes and more. Stress levels are individual – what one person may experience as energising, another may find stressful. If you notice that you are not coping well, it’s time to take action. Support is available, and you can make changes yourself that will help.

How can work contribute to stress?

One of the major causes of stress in the workplace is feeling that things are beyond our control. Little say in how your work is organised and no real sense of personal achievement can make for a stressful workplace.

Being permanently online and connected to work can also make it hard to switch off, with little time to unwind away from work demands. People may also find travelling to and from work very stressful.



Other stressors in the workplace can include:

- High workload – too much work, too little time
- Conflicts between different parts of your role, and a lack of clarity
- Poor relationships or conflict with your colleagues or boss
- Juggling the balance between work and home life
- Long hours or shift work, which can put us out of sync with loved ones
- Complicated or difficult tasks, and not enough training or support to carry them out
- Feeling isolated, unsupported or undervalued
- Changes in role or organisation (e.g. restructuring) or a lack of communication between managers and workers or between departments
- Bullying or harassment, unwanted comments and being excluded
- A work environment which does not allow people to talk openly about stress, health or mental health challenges
- A physical environment with noise, dirt, dangers, lack of air, poor equipment or a messy workspace.

Take some time for exercise - walking, swimming, playing team sports or anything else you enjoy doing.



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What are some warning signs of stress?

Physical (in the body) signs include:

- Shortness of breath or shallow breathing
- Indigestion, stomach upsets
- Headaches and pains in the lower back, chest, shoulders or other parts of the body
- Skin itches or rashes for no clear reason
- Frequent colds or flu
- Nervous 'twitches' or muscle spasms
- Memory or concentration challenges
- Changes in your sleeping patterns.

Emotional (in your feelings) signs include:

- Feeling impatient or irritable
- Losing confidence
- Feeling anxious, tense or tearful
- Losing your joy and energy for life.

Behavioural (in your actions) signs include:

- Losing interest in whānau/family, friends or hobbies
- Poor self-care
- Relying on drugs, alcohol, caffeine or overeating to cope
- Finding it hard to make decisions.

Any persistent symptoms should be checked out by a GP or Māori health provider.

What can I do about stress?

One way to reduce stress is to change the stressor (cause). The most drastic way is to change your environment – where you live, where you work. Of course, this is not always possible. Instead, you can think of changes to those parts of your environment which are causing the most stress.

Another way is to cope differently with stress. Here are some ways to help you reduce and prevent too much stress and tension. But you have to practise!

- **Talk your worries over** with someone you trust – a friend, your partner, whānau, a counsellor or a helpline.
- **Set realistic goals.** Let go of unreasonable expectations. Be selective and use your energy to do the most important and possible tasks.
- **Eat well.** Eat a variety of fresh foods in a well-balanced diet. Some foods will increase nervous tension (e.g. coffee, tea, soft drinks). ->

- **Make time to exercise.** Be active at least three times a week – walking, swimming, dancing, doing waka ama or anything you enjoy. Start gently – follow an easy exercise video at home or dance a little in your kitchen. Exercising outdoors is especially helpful.
- **Take time out.** Some people find it hard to take time out for a holiday or weekend. Give yourself a breather every now and then – even just a short break during the day at mahi (work) or at home. Do something you really enjoy.
- **Practice relaxation and mindfulness.** Try yoga, meditation, mirimiri or massage. Listen to music, enjoy time in nature. Learn what works for you and practise it regularly.
- Use online tools or apps like **smallsteps.org.nz**, **aroawellbeing.co.nz**, **justathought.co.nz**, or **headstrong.org.nz**
- **Get good sleep.** A wind-down routine like a walk in the evening or practising meditation can help. If sleep is an issue for you, talk to your GP.
- **Organise your work habits.** Spend time at the end of the day preparing for the next day. Get up five to ten minutes earlier so you don't have to rush. Set aside time for processing emails. Break large projects down into small steps.
- **Solve problems.** Try to find solutions to conflict, rather than letting it fester. You can build communication skills (through books, workshops or online programmes) to become more assertive and able to say no. These skills will also help find suitable compromises, and reduce frustration and anger.
- **Learn to appreciate yourself.** Identify what you do well, and recognise and acknowledge your positive qualities and characteristics. Practise positive self-talk.
- Spend time on activities that bring you **joy and purpose**, such as being in nature, engaging in creative hobbies (like music, art or kapa haka). Focusing on creating something is an important part of wellbeing for many.

If you are experiencing high and persistent levels of stress and would like further information or support, talk to your doctor or health professional.

Five Ways to Wellbeing

The Five Ways to Wellbeing | Ētahi ara e rima ki te ngākau ora help people to regularly lift their wellbeing. Introduce these simple actions into your life to improve your overall wellbeing: **Connect – Give – Take notice – Keep learning – Be active.**

Find out more: [mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing)

Helplines

Talking through your concerns with a trained professional can help. These helplines are all free, confidential and available 24/7:

- Call or text **1737** to talk with a trained counsellor
- Lifeline call **0800 LIFELINE** (0800 543 354) or text **4357**
- Youthline call **0800 376 633** or text **234**





For more, visit www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of information on mental health and wellbeing including pamphlets, postcards and posters available to order for free: shop.mentalhealth.org.nz

Find us online

To find out more about our work, visit:

-  resource@mentalhealth.org.nz
-  www.mentalhealth.org.nz
-  [mhfnz](https://www.instagram.com/mhfnz)
-  [mentalhealthfoundationNZ](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ)

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The Mental Health Foundation is a charity, and we rely on donations to support our work.

Visit www.mentalhealth.org.nz to find out more.

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand 2021, last updated May 2025.

This resource was produced with input from many people. Special thanks go to Natasha de Faria (www.best-practice.co.nz).

Stay in conversation about mental health. For feedback on this resource, please email resource@mentalhealth.org.nz