

STRESS

and how to manage it



What is stress?

Stress is a natural reaction that happens when you face pressure (real or perceived) and feel unable to cope or overwhelmed.

Stress is your body's physical, mental and emotional response (sometimes called fight or flight) to situations that feel demanding or bring pressure, challenges or changes – also called stressors.

Everyone experiences stress from time to time, and not all stress is bad. Stress can help you adjust to new situations, keep you focused and motivated or give you a burst of energy, for example when you're in an exam, making a speech or at a job interview.

If you can unwind and recover after the stressor has passed, there are usually no harmful effects. Stress becomes a problem when it doesn't go away, and it starts affecting your mental and physical health and your behaviour.

If you have been under stress for a long time or feel stress is affecting your health or daily life, there are things you can do to help. And, if you need extra support, **help is available**.

What causes stress?

Everyone responds to stress differently. Stressors can be:

External pressures, such as:

- workplace issues – workload, unsupportive leadership, bullying or harassment, redundancy
- health issues
- bereavement
- life changes – a new baby, moving house, retiring
- relationship issues
- conflicts with friends or whānau
- financial pressures
- school or study demands or expectations
- daily pressures – your commute, childcare, being time-poor, household tasks, unexpected bills
- events in the wider world, such as global events, social conflict and severe weather.

Internal pressures, such as:

- negative thoughts or emotions
- worry about a loved one
- unrealistic expectations
- fear of failure
- conflicts with beliefs and values.

Stress can also be caused by seemingly small problems or worries that add up and take a toll on you. You might not know exactly what's causing you to feel stressed. That's okay, stress is still stress.

Signs and symptoms of stress

At first, you may feel tired and easily irritated. But if your stress continues and isn't managed well, it can affect your physical and mental health. Common symptoms of stress include:

Physical symptoms:

- shortness of breath or shallow breathing
- chest pain, increased heart rate, dizziness or palpitations
- high blood pressure
- digestive issues, stomach upsets
- headaches and body pains
- frequent colds, skin infections, rashes
- nervous twitches or muscle tension
- exhaustion, trouble sleeping.

Emotional symptoms:

- feeling anxious, fearful or overwhelmed
- memory or concentration challenges
- lack of motivation or focus
- anxiety or panic attacks
- sadness
- lack of joy and energy for life.

Behavioural symptoms:

- losing interest in whānau, work or study
- avoiding activities or hobbies or seeing friends
- increased drug, tobacco or alcohol use, gambling, or changes in eating habits
- feeling impatient, irritable or angry
- being unable to relax or unwind.

Recognising the early signs of stress is important.

When you notice how stress is affecting you, you're better able to manage it and reduce its impact.

The good news is there are simple, practical things you can do to help manage your stress and support your wellbeing.

Take time to be active. Exercise releases endorphins that help you to feel good, and it helps lower stress levels.

How to manage stress

Recognising what is causing your stress (your stressors) can be an important first step. Once identified, it will become easier to manage your stressors.

Here are tips to help reduce stress and feel calmer and more in control.

- **Talking helps.** Share your worries with someone you trust, like a friend, partner, whānau, manager or HR professional, counsellor or free helpline. Remember your feelings are real and valid.
- **Spend time with people you care about.** Connecting with others can help you feel happier and more secure. You could go for a walk or drive, play sports or find a shared hobby or interest.

"Even though I felt exhausted and wanted to stay home, I knew that a short walk or catching up with a friend always helps. That motivated me to get out the door."

- **Take time out for you.** Read a book, do an activity or hobby, watch a movie, sit outside with a hot drink. Even a short break helps.
- **Practise relaxation and mindfulness techniques.** Try yoga, meditation, mirimiri/massage or deep breathing exercises, or listen to music. Learn what works for you and practise it regularly. Try online tools or apps like smallsteps.org.nz.

"Be kind to yourself. Recognise what you can control and what you can't. Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can at this time."



- **Try to be physically active every day**, it's a great stress release. Walk, swim, dance, do waka ama, follow a fitness app, play a team sport – find a way to move your body that works for you. Exercising outdoors can be especially helpful.

Tip: If you haven't been active in a while, start slowly and build at your own pace. Even small steps make a difference.

- **Build skills to help you manage stress.** Find what you can control (no matter how small) and focus on that. Try to organise work or study habits, break down problems into manageable steps, practise time management, or challenge unhealthy thoughts. Tools like justathought.co.nz or headstrong.or.nz can help.
- **Aim to get a good sleep.** If you're having trouble sleeping, talk to your GP.

"I found that packing the kids' lunches and sorting their clothes and backpacks the night before school made mornings feel less rushed and calmer."

- **Learn to appreciate and be kind to yourself.** Identify what you do well. Acknowledge your positive qualities and characteristics. Talk to yourself as you would to a close friend.
- **Eat a healthy, balanced diet.** Try to reduce or avoid short-term stimulants like energy drinks or caffeine as these can increase nervous tension and disrupt sleep.

Five Ways to Wellbeing

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are simple, proven activities that can make a real difference to your life.

Practising the Five Ways to Wellbeing every day helps you feel more balanced and supports your mental health. For ideas and inspiration visit mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing



Reach out for support

If your stress is ongoing or it is affecting your health and wellbeing, it's important to talk to a general practitioner (GP), Māori health provider or counsellor, or contact a free helpline.

Helplines

Talking to 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 free support services, visit www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has information on everyday actions that lift mental wellbeing, and tools that support people through tough times.

Access free tools and resources at: 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)
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The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand 2021,
last updated May 2026.

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