

Tips to Avoid and Reduce Stress

Having a healthy lifestyle can help to reduce stress levels and make difficult tasks feel more manageable. If you are healthier, you will feel more energetic, motivated and be better able to concentrate.

Here are some top tips for a healthy lifestyle:

Reduce your alcohol intake

Alcohol affects your ability to control your behaviour and to concentrate and focus on tasks. It can also have a negative impact in your mood and the quality of your sleep.



Some people use the effects of alcohol to try to avoid or escape from their problems, but this can often make things worse and can also be very bad for your health.

Stopping or reducing your alcohol intake can improve your mood and ability to face tasks and problems.

If you do choose to drink alcohol, you should do so in moderation.

The NHS recommends:

- Men should not regularly drink more than 3-4 units of alcohol a day.
- Women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day.
- If you've had a heavy drinking session, avoid alcohol for 48 hours.

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'Regularly' means drinking this amount every day or most days of the week.

The chart below shows how many units are in different types of alcohol.

1 UNIT	1.5 UNITS	2 UNITS	3 UNITS	9 UNITS	30 UNITS
 Normal beer half pint (284ml) 4%	 Small glass of wine (125ml) 12.5%	 Strong beer half pint (284ml) 6.5%	 Strong beer Large bottle/can (440ml) 6.5%	 Bottle of wine (750ml) 12.5%	 Bottle of spirits (750ml) 40%
 Single spirit shot (25ml) 40%	 Alcopops bottle (275ml) 5.5%	 Normal beer Large bottle/can (440ml) 4.5%	 Large glass of wine (250ml) 12.5%	Government advises alcohol consumption should not regularly exceed:  Men 3-4 units daily  Women 2-3 units daily	
		 Medium glass of wine (175ml) 12.5%			

Source: ONS, NHS

If you are worried that you are consuming too much alcohol and are finding it hard to reduce your alcohol intake, you can talk to you GP about this and they will be able to recommend organisations or services that can help and support you to reduce or stop drinking.

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Drugs

Drugs can have a sedative or stimulant effect and this can affect your sleep and mood. While this might make you feel better in the short term, in the long term they can do serious harm and



cause you to become dependent on them. Using drugs to distract yourself from or avoid your problems could simply lead to your problems getting worse and out of control. Using drugs can be very bad for your health.

If you are using drugs and are finding it hard to stop, speak to your GP or to a specialist organisation as they will be able to help you to stop taking drugs.



Smoking

The chemicals in cigarettes can have a stimulant effect, which may be why some people tend to smoke more when they are under stress. However, smoking can cause a variety of severe health problems including cancer and it is therefore very important that, if you smoke, you try to reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke, or try to stop smoking completely.

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Caffeine

Caffeine has a stimulant effect, but in some people it can cause symptoms of anxiety and affect your ability to sleep well. It is best not to have anything caffeinated within four hours of bedtime. Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, energy drinks, and some fizzy drinks contain caffeine.



Eat Well

Eating a healthy, balanced diet can improve energy levels, helping you feel more alert and able to cope with stress. Try to avoid sugary foods as, although this may initially make you feel more energetic, they will soon cause you to ‘crash’ and feel more tired.

When you are very busy or when times are difficult, you may find that you forget to eat well or that you feel that you don’t have the time. It is important to make time to eat well and regularly and to consume healthy foods. You should also try not to rush when you are eating as this can lead to discomfort and indigestion.

It is important to eat a diet that contains a variety of different foods, including protein, carbohydrate, oily fat and fibre, including plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Keeping hydrated is also important. Drinking water, herbal or fruit teas and no-added-sugar fruit juices is preferable to sugary or fizzy drinks.

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Exercise

Exercise improves your physical health and also helps use up the hormones which are released when you feel stressed. It will also help to strengthen the heart and improve blood circulation. Exercise also



stimulates the body to release endorphins. These are natural brain chemicals that give you a sense of wellbeing.

Exercise can also help with sleep, although it is important not to exercise too close to the time you go to bed as this might delay your ability to fall asleep.

You don't have to do anything too difficult, strenuous or competitive. Getting some gentle exercise each week such as going for a walk, doing gardening or joining an exercise class will help.

If you are worried about fitting exercise into your lifestyle, try simple steps such as getting off the bus a stop earlier so that you have to walk further, or cycling or walking rather than getting the bus or train.



Get enough sleep

Getting adequate sleep can be difficult if you are feeling stressed as you may find it hard to fall asleep or feel that you have too much to

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do to get a good night's sleep. It is, however, important to get enough sleep as this will help you feel calmer and wake up refreshed and better able to concentrate and focus on tackling your problems. You should aim to get at least 7 hours of sleep each night.

If you are having difficulty getting to sleep, try writing down your worries on a list before you go to bed. You may also find it helpful to try the relaxation techniques listed in the *Anxiety* chapter.

Routine

Having a consistent routine can help give structure to your life. For example, you could try to go to bed and get up at the same times each day and also be consistent about mealtimes.

Surroundings

Your environment can affect your mood. Many people with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism have hyper acute or under sensitive senses. This means that your surroundings can have a real impact on your mood if they are not tailored to suit your needs.

Think about your immediate environment; is it too noisy, are the lights too bright? Try using noise cancelling headphones and lampshades or a lower wattage bulb. If you are under-sensitive, you may find your surroundings too quiet and under-stimulating. If so, try listening to music,

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using additional lights, such as desk lamps, and adding fragrance such as burning incense or essential oils in a specially made oil-burner.

Talking to someone

Talking to someone else about your problems can help you to feel less burdened. Speaking to a trusted friend, relative, advocate or Support Worker can make you feel better and they may be able to offer valuable advice and support.

Look after yourself

Allocate some time each week to look after yourself. For example, you could rest, try a relaxation technique, go to a yoga class, take a long hot bath, read an enjoyable book or treat yourself to something special.

Set realistic goals

Managing your time effectively can help reduce stress and help you tackle your problems. Prioritise, do what is most important first and leave the least important tasks until last.

These steps might help:

- **Identify your best time of day** (you may be a morning person or an evening person, for example) and do the important tasks that need the most energy and concentration at that time.
- **Make a list of things you have to do.** Arrange them in order of importance, and try to do the most urgent ones first.

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- **Try to vary your tasks in a day.** Vary dull jobs with interesting ones, tiring jobs with easier ones.
- **Practise being straightforward and assertive in communicating with others.** If other people are making unrealistic or unreasonable demands on you, be prepared to tell them how you feel and to say “no”.

Accept the things you can't change

Changing a difficult situation isn't always possible. If this is the case, try to recognise this and accept the situation rather than worrying about things you can't possibly have any control over.

In situations when you can't change things, the one thing you do have control over is your attitude, so that you don't build up feelings of resentment or worry.