



# bodily stress



This material has been produced as part of the Ultra-brief intervention study (Stress in Primary Care).

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*Ultra-brief intervention patient materials: Bodily Stress.*

## Bodily Stress

If you have a condition like irritable bowel syndrome, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia or some chronic pain conditions, then this booklet is for you. These conditions may be affecting your daily living, work, sleep or relationships. You may be frustrated and scared that there might be something going on that doctors have missed. You may feel that medical professionals are not taking you seriously. Because the tests come back negative you may be worried that people think the symptoms are not real.

**THE SYMPTOMS ARE REAL  
YOU ARE NOT MAKING THEM UP**

### DO I HAVE BODILY STRESS?

#### Doctors diagnose bodily stress conditions after:

- Taking a history and doing a thorough physical examination
- Doing diagnostic tests to rule out disease or illness
- Considering if symptoms may be medication-related
- Assessing for anxiety and depression (though it is possible to also have body stress)

...and the symptoms must have been going on for at least 3 months and be affecting your functioning.

### THE GOOD NEWS

Life-threatening illness or disease has not been found. You are not alone. These conditions are common.

## So **what's** going on?

### *Our minds and bodies are linked:*

- High blood pressure and stomach ulcers often develop after a particularly stressful event, such as the death of a loved one
- A happy memory can make your body feel lighter and more relaxed
- Fire walkers can step on hot coals and not get burned
- Athletes can improve their sporting performance by mentally practicing what their body needs to do
- People who are given sugar pills who think they are taking pain medication actually feel less pain. This is called 'the placebo effect'

## Our mind can affect our health

When you are stressed *your body tries to tell you that something isn't right*. Your central nervous system goes onto high alert, like a car alarm that goes off in the wind. It pumps out adrenalin which is a normal biological response to stress, known as the fight or flight response. Over time, if the fight or flight goes on, your body gets tired and this can affect your body in these ways:

- Aches and pains
- Change in appetite
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Extreme tiredness
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Trouble sleeping
- Heart racing
- Sexual problems
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Weight gain or loss

## The mind and body are connected: they are not two separate things

### *'Stress can make us sick'*

To find out more about stress, ask your doctor or nurse for the 'Stress' or 'Breaking Habits' booklets.

#### **DOES THAT FIT MY EXPERIENCE?**

Keep a diary for 2-3 weeks of your symptoms to see what affects you.

Date	Cause of stress	Stress level today /10	Your main symptom	Severity of main symptom/10

*(10 = worst symptoms; 0= no symptoms at all)*

***Once you have completed this: Is there a pattern?***

***‘Sometimes **not**  
doing further  
testing may be  
the best course  
of action’***

***‘There is always  
some uncertainty  
in life’***

## **But what if there’s something else going on?**

With these conditions, doctors cannot be 100% sure whether there is something else going on. They need to keep an open mind. Tests can have their own risks. Doctors have to balance up the risks and benefits of further testing against the benefits of helping you to find other ways to manage stress.

It would be great if having a test gave you an answer, but there are a number of conditions where it doesn’t.

***Giving up having tests doesn’t  
mean you have given up...it  
just means you are taking a  
different approach.***

## Could I be making it worse?

### Inactivity

Scientists from the U.S. space programme have found that even a week of rest can result in a measurable loss of physical condition. Muscles, joints and bone density are all affected, the heart works less efficiently and there is less circulation to the brain, which leads to feeling tired and less alert.

If you worry about making your symptoms worse, you do less activity. Then, when you do use your body, it gets tired or sore (just as it would with anyone who has been inactive). Then you might stop activity again, because you think you have made your symptoms worse.

*It is a vicious circle.*



### Focussing on symptoms

You may focus on your symptoms because you are worried they might get worse. The problem with this is that you notice symptoms when you watch out for them. Then they seem worse, like itchy bites. This can get you more worried and may lead to you avoiding activities.

*Test out whether this is true for you:*

(Do this on a day when the symptoms are strong)

Focus on your symptoms for 5-10 minutes: Then rate the severity of your symptoms out of 10.

Focus on outside sounds for 5-10 minutes: Then rate the severity of your symptoms out of 10.

## What do you conclude?

*If you think focussing on symptoms may affect your symptoms, write a list of things you could do instead of focussing on your symptoms.*

Watch a movie  
Listen to the radio  
Go for a walk  
Talk to Sue

## Security blankets

We all do things to make us feel safe. Carrying cell phones at all times and carrying medication are common in people with bodily stress. This can keep you focussed on your symptoms and can make you worry if your security blanket is not available. Unless your doctor says you **need** to do these things, try giving them up. This will be uncomfortable at the start, but most people find it gets easier with practice.

## Special diets

Special diets can appeal when medical treatment is not fixing the problem. They are something you can **do** to try to control you symptoms. Many alternative therapists will encourage you to avoid various foods or take supplements (some of which have side effects). This can be costly, time-consuming, and can limit your social life. For most bodily stress conditions a healthy balanced diet, with plenty of fruit, vegetables and water is all that is required. If you want to try a special diet, you could rate your symptoms for a week, try the diet for a month, and then re-rate your symptoms, to find out if this has worked. Remember that there may be a 'placebo effect', where you feel better because you expect it to work. You can ask your doctor to refer you to a dietician for advice if you want to explore ways to change your diet.

***'You can take control in other ways'***

## Looking on the internet

You may be looking online to try to work out what is going on. The problem with looking online when you have a bodily stress condition, is that it can keep you focussed on the symptoms. It can also make you anxious and can keep you going back for more tests, medications and alternative remedies or special diets.

## What about anxiety and depression?

You may have become depressed or anxious as a result of dealing with the condition. Also, people with problems with anxiety and depression will sometimes develop bodily stress conditions.

Anxiety and Depression are often missed in people with these conditions. Signs you may have an anxiety or depression problem:

- Feeling sad most of the time
- Loss of enjoyment of things you usually enjoy
- Avoiding activities due to anxiety
- Feeling tense or agitated most of the time

Tell your doctor if you think you might be experiencing anxiety or depression. You may benefit from medication. Because of the mind-body link, medication may also help reduce your body stress condition. Treatment can make a big difference for a lot of people with anxiety or depression. If you are diagnosed with anxiety or depression, your bodily stress symptoms are still real!

## How do I get better?

***Basically the approach is to accept your symptoms and reclaim your life***

With these conditions, the focus is on learning to live as normally as possible. Just like people do with diabetes, you need to manage the symptoms as well as you can.

You can work with your doctor to reduce stress and improve your functioning. Remember quick fixes are rare. Your doctor will try to help as much as possible, but don't expect doctors to have all the answers. Your task is to get your body functioning as well as you can, using the strategies below.

## Stress Management

### Exercise (Graded activity)

This means doing a little more exercise each day, such as walking a little further. Whatever exercise you decide to do, start from where you are. Make sure you do it consistently. For example you could start with two five minute walks per day, even if you feel very bad and it is hard. Don't increase your activity level until you have managed your initial goal at least 75% in the past fortnight. Don't increase your activity level more than about 10% at a time.

***If you have been inactive, expect your muscles to complain as you start using them again***

Even top athletes feel sore & stiff when starting back training after an injury. When you have been less active for a while you get used to a lower level of external stress. As you get back into life you will meet stressful situations leading to an increase in your body stress symptoms. This is normal. Remember that exercise will help you cope with stress. Keeping active also leaves less time for worrying about your symptoms and you tend to sleep better.

You may fear that you will have a 'crash' in your symptoms. Avoid 'boom and bust' by not doing more activity than you have planned, even if you feel like it. Test it out over several weeks: Don't jump to conclusions after one or two attempts. Keep at it every day, even on the 'bad days'. Like most good things, it takes hard work.

You can also talk to a physiotherapist about useful stretching exercises.

*Angie was not keen to get back into exercise. She just didn't feel up to it. But spending lots of time resting hadn't worked. Although she wished for a miracle cure, she decided to give it a go. The first day she made it to the front gate. It was really hard. It seemed like her body was telling her to rest. She felt tired and sore the next day. She realised she would have to keep at it, on both good days and bad days if she wanted to work out whether this would help. Every day she would go a little further, even if it was raining. After 3 weeks she could get to her local shops. It was great to do her own shopping again.*

## *Walking is man's best medicine*

Hippocrates

### Have some fun

Plan enjoyable, relaxing, activities to help your body to relax and distract you from discomfort.

### Social activities

Social isolation is very common. Regular social activity is an important part of being as well as you can.

Work with your doctor to find groups to get involved with in your area. Libraries and community centres are good places to find out what is available.

You may have some views of other people or of yourself that get in the way of joining community groups. You can test these views by going along a few times and making sure you are friendly to people while you are there.

### *I'm embarrassed about my symptoms*

Sometimes people with bodily stress conditions worry about people judging them negatively, so they avoid other people. You can experiment with getting back into spending time with others and testing out whether people really judge you for having the symptoms.

If you do have good support, make sure others aren't doing too much, always asking you how you are, or constantly commenting on how tired, sick or ill you look. These behaviours keep you focussed on your symptoms.

*Lorraine was avoiding seeing her friends because she found it hard to explain why she was not working full time now. She felt embarrassed, and thought they would not understand. She rang her friends up and asked them to meet for coffee. She explained that she had an ongoing condition and that she needed encouragement to not let it take over her life. Her friends were keen to meet for coffee regularly and one of them agreed to walk with her once a week.*

## Change your situation

It may be time to make changes to your work situation or living situation. You can use your time with your doctor to discuss your options and make a plan for change. See the 'stress' booklet for ideas.

## Sleep problems

Avoid daytime naps and drinking caffeine before bed. Don't watch TV or use your laptop in bed. Train your brain to know that bed is a place for sleep (and sex). Don't 'clock watch' as this makes you anxious about sleep. Get a regular evening routine going. Get up at a regular time, rather than trying to 'catch up'. Use relaxation, slow breathing (down to the bottom of your lungs) and relaxing imagery (e.g. remembering a nice holiday, using all your senses). Get up and do something low key if you have been awake for more than 15 minutes, then go back to bed when you feel sleepy. If you are worrying in the night, ask yourself: Is this a problem I can solve right now? Is this the best time to solve it? You can make a time the next day to deal with the problem.

### ***3am is the worst time for solving problems***

Take a relaxed attitude to not sleeping. Although it is tiring, it is not as dangerous or harmful as you might think.

### ***Remember: If you are relaxing you are still getting rest***

## How often should I see my doctor?

Discuss with your doctor a plan for a regular check in so that you know the doctor is keeping an eye on your condition. An appointment once a month works well for a lot of bodily stress conditions.

## Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)

If you have CFS you are likely to be resting or sleeping a lot.

***Tiredness doesn't necessarily mean you need to sleep.***

Even though you feel tired, de-conditioning happens very fast when you take to your bed. Graded exercise is really important. You can take short rests in other ways: sit down for a bit. Have a cup of tea.

Write down the pros and cons of resting a lot, for you.

Good things about resting/ sleeping	Not so good things about resting/ sleeping
No energy, bed cosy	Miss lots of work
	still exhausted despite resting
	Hardly socialise now

***How well is this working for me?  
Is it worth experimenting with something different?***

## Sort out your sleep patterns

Keep a record of time you were actually asleep for 2 weeks. Divide that by 14. Spend **only** that much time in bed, at night. Don't spend time lying in bed awake. Have a routine, with a set getting up time. If you are sleeping more than 9 hours in 24, gradually reduce this. It is normal to feel more tired initially when you are adjusting your sleep time.



## Irritable Bowel (IBS)

### Eating

You may be avoiding particular foods, alcohol or caffeine or looking at your diet to work out whether certain foods cause symptoms. However, avoiding foods can result in increased sensitivity and make it more difficult to get a balanced diet. You need to eat regular meals three times a day. Have a healthy varied diet, which includes plenty of fruit and vegetables. Drink plenty of water (6-8 cups per day) and chew food slowly. If you haven't consulted a dietician, you can ask your doctor to refer you to one.



You may be avoiding:

- eating when you have symptoms, or when you want to avoid symptoms
- situations where no toilet is quickly available
- visiting other people's houses
- going out in public unless essential
- eating with people unless you feel comfortable/ safe with them

You are doing these things because you believe they help you cope, but they keep you focussed on the symptoms and can mean that you are not eating regularly. If you can reduce your avoidance, you will become more confident that you can cope, over time.

## Toileting

Frequent toileting is common in IBS. Nerves from the brain control bowel motions. Stress can cause bowel symptoms by affecting this nervous control. Many people spend a long time on the toilet straining or forcing. Go to the toilet when you get a strong urge (but don't strain).

***You do not need to have a bowel motion every day***

Everyone's bowel habits are different. Normal bowel movements may occur as often as three times a day to as few as three a week. You do not have to empty your bowels completely.

Many people work out the quickest route to the bathroom for fear they won't make it in time. However, this also keeps them anxiously focussed on their symptoms.

***Toilets really aren't that hard to find***

You could try an experiment of NOT working out where the toilets are in advance. See what happens. You may need to try it a number of times before you get confident.

## Pain

You can talk to your doctor about the pros and cons of different pain medications. Unfortunately there is no medication that 'cures' chronic pain. Local anaesthetics, steroid injections, drug pumps and phenol injections are sometimes used. Acupuncture and Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) are also sometimes used. Physiotherapy can also be a good way to get your body moving again. You can discuss these options with your doctor.

You may have had someone tell you that the pain is all in your mind. You may have worried that this might be true. Be reassured: All pain is real. Just as real as hunger or joy. Just because it is not clear why your pain has lasted so long, doesn't mean it is all in your mind.

If doctors have told you there is nothing more they can offer, you might keep seeking more doctors opinions. This can keep you in a downward spiral of frustration and disappointment. Some people ignore their pain and try to act as if it isn't there. This can work for a while, but you won't be able to kid yourself about it forever. Although it is hard to accept, it will be more helpful for you to accept that your pain may last a long time and that you have to learn to manage it and get back into life.

### Think helpfully

Thoughts can influence your pain. If you think 'This pain is terrible. I can't be expected to do anything when I am in this much pain' or 'This is hopeless, there is no point trying to manage my pain' then you may have increased pain, and feel helpless.

You can find other, more helpful ways to think about the pain. It might help to write down what you are thinking then practice replacing them with helpful thoughts as soon as they happen.

***I am in a lot of pain, but it will pass and I will manage.***

***I just need to keep doing my relaxation and exercise, and avoid extreme behaviour.***

***I have got through this before. I can calm myself.***

***I'll just take one step at a time.***

***Accepting  
your pain is a  
step toward  
ridding  
yourself of  
your suffering***

## Dealing with worry

You may be worrying that the pain is a sign of underlying illness or new damage occurring. The more you worry, the more your body will tense up and the more pain you will get. Worry is an activity. It can be interrupted. For example, when the phone rings and you get chatting, you often forget about the worry for a while. You can choose to interrupt worry by doing something else and have a set time when you will worry, perhaps 10 minutes a day, at a set time.

## Pace yourself

You may find that you have 'good days' when the pain is not so bad, and you tend to overdo things, but because of your lack of fitness you then strain your body and the pain gets worse and you spend the next few days resting and getting more unfit.

Try to maintain a fairly even level of activity during the day.

- Choose a goal that is important to you
- Work out what you can manage now
- Start just below your current level (in case you were having a good patch)
- Write your plan down and record progress
- Take frequent short breaks
- Gradually increase the amount you do
- Break up tasks into smaller bits



*Craig had not been working for several years due to his sore back. He was spending most of the day lying on the couch. His wife was grumpy with him for not helping more around the house. On good days, he would spend an hour in the garden, but would be sore for the next few days. He was in a rut and felt that the pain was controlling his life. He knew he could manage 15 minutes in the garden without pain. He decided to pace himself, by spending 10 minutes working in the garden then a 20 minute break, then another 10 minutes in the garden. He started with two 10 minute sessions. The next day he did two 11 minute sessions, and so on. He kept a careful record and was pleased to see the improvements in what he could manage.*

*It is normal to feel pain when you start exercising after a period of not exercising.*

*It will settle as you gain flexibility and strength.*

*You can do some gentle stretches and use relaxation techniques if you get some pain after exercising*

***I have two doctors, my left leg and my right leg - George Trevelyan***

## Relaxation

You can use deep muscle relaxation to calm yourself, help you cope with pain and help you sleep. You can be taught to do it by a trained therapist or by using a recording. It is a skill that takes practice, like playing rugby. Once you have got the hang of it, you can do it anywhere, to take the edge off the pain when it starts. You can buy relaxation CDs from some bookshops. Slow breathing techniques, yoga and meditation can also be helpful. Various biofeedback devices are available at appliance retailers. These give you feedback as to how relaxed your body is.

Google 'How to relax', for instructions if you want to teach yourself.

## Stretching

Stretching can loosen tight muscles that cause pain. You can ask your doctor to refer you to a physiotherapist to learn stretching and strengthening exercises.

Of course, stretching will only work if you actually do it!

## Distraction

Distraction can take the edge off pain.

- Imagine a relaxing scene, using all your senses.
- Plan, in detail, something to look forward to, like a holiday or changes to your house or garden.
- Create games from what is around you. On public transport you can guess people's jobs and personalities. In a traffic jam you can make up names of organisations from number plates.
- Concentrate on word or number puzzles.
- Recite poems or songs to yourself.
- Bring to mind someone important to you that you would like to see. Imagine having a nice chat.

***You can also ask your doctor for a referral to a specialist pain clinic***

## Preparation for my next session with my doctor:

You can talk with your doctor to identify 'red flags', which are symptoms that you should definitely arrange to get tests done on, if they occur. This can be discussed at your next appointment.

### My Red Flags

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What stresses have there been in my life?

How am I feeling at the moment?

What information in this booklet has been helpful to me?

Do we need to discuss regular appointments?

What one small step toward reclaiming my life could I try out?

## Self help books:

Many of these are available through the public library.

*Overcoming Chronic Fatigue* by Mary Burgess

*Coping with Chronic Fatigue* by Trudie Chalder

*Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness* by Gillian Butler

*The Pain Survival Guide: How to Reclaim Your Life* by Dennis C. Turk & Frits Winter (2006)

*Manage your Pain: Practical and Positive Ways of Adapting to Chronic Pain* by M. Nicholas (2006)

*Mindfulness Meditation for Pain Relief: Guided Practices for Reclaiming Your Body and Your Life* by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2009)

*Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* by Robert M. Sapolsky (2004)

*Explain Pain* by David Butler & Lorimer Mosely (2003)



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