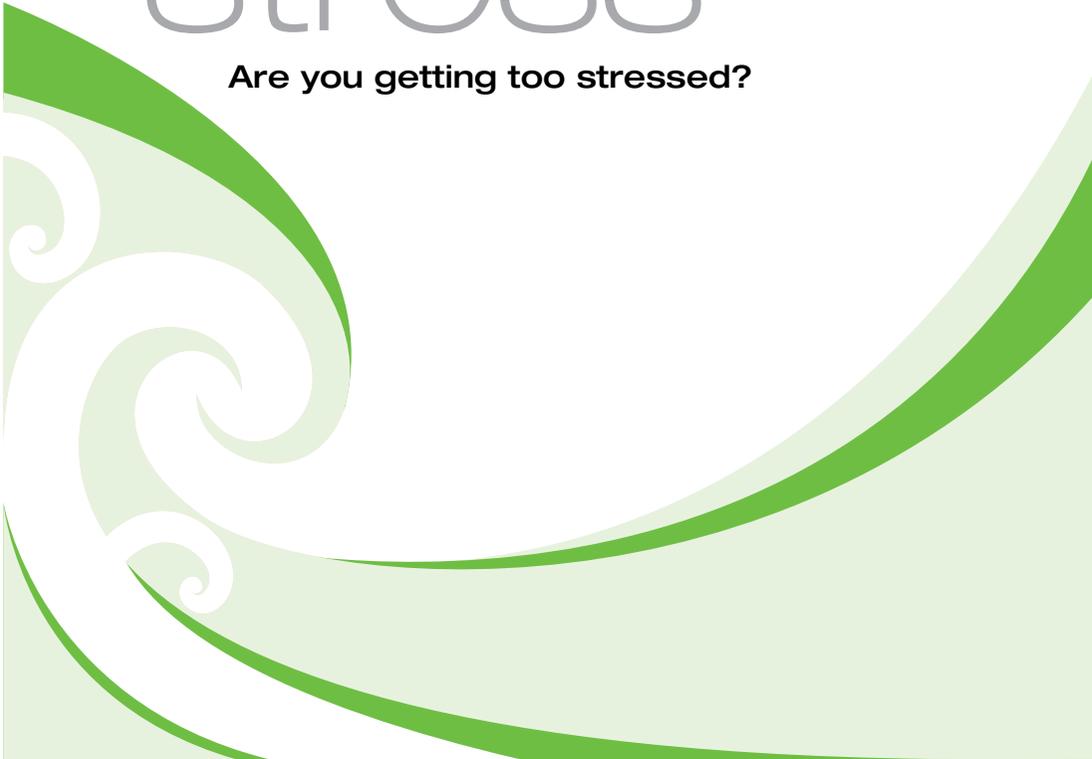




# stress

**Are you getting too stressed?**



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

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*Ultra-brief intervention patient materials: Stress.*

# Are you getting too stressed?

## Changes that may be signs of stress

- Feeling anxious or panicky
- Feeling irritable
- Feeling miserable
- Feeling apathetic or agitated
- Lowered self esteem
- Being more forgetful/making mistakes
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Feeling muddled or indecisive
- Working longer and longer hours
- Doing less fun things
- Using drink/drugs/tranquilizers to cope
- Aches and pains
- Tension
- Frequent minor sickness
- Disturbed sleep/needng sleeping pills
- Appetite for food increased/decreased
- Flare up of stress-related illness, such as asthma or psoriasis

**Does this sound like you? Read on...**

## The effects of stress

Everyone gets stressed at times. We feel stressed when we have changes, losses and pressures in our lives that are greater than our ability to cope. Even positive changes like getting married, buying a house, or getting promoted, can be stressful.

### Stress is a reaction

- The body changes (for example, muscles get tense)
- Feelings change (for example, we start feeling anxious)
- Thinking changes (for example, 'I'll never get all this done')
- Behaviour changes (for example, we work faster and miss breaks).

A bit of stress can keep us alert and give us energy and motivation. If we don't do something about the stress, we eventually get tired and run down, we may develop aches and pains, stomach upsets and other physical problems. We may start to worry about our health. This makes us even more stressed.

### Fight or flight

When faced with danger, your heart speeds up, you start breathing fast, and you become very alert. It can be very frightening. But all that's happening is that your body is preparing in case it needs to take action (to fight or to run).

This is normal and it is not harmful. It's just the way our bodies react to danger.

However, our body isn't designed to stay like this for long periods, so we need to think about ways of reducing stress.

**He manga wai koia kia kore e whitikia.**

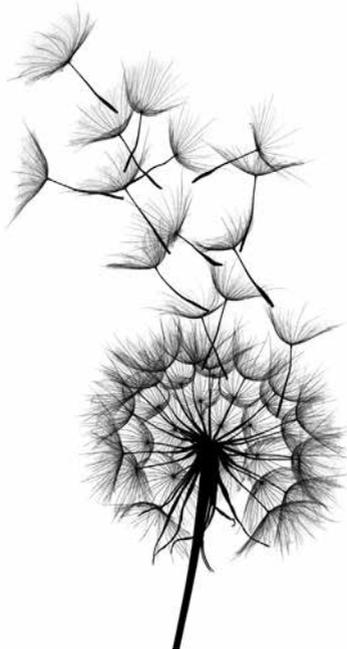
*It is a big river indeed that cannot be crossed.*

## Ways to cope with stressful situations

Reduce the demands or change situation in some way. For example:

- Say no (that is, stop doing some things you would normally say yes to)
- Make a list of what needs doing
- Work out which you'll do first (number them)
- Share the load with others
- Plan ahead (to make sure you don't take on too much)
- Start each day with a few minutes of planning (what will I try to get done today)
- Write things down so you won't forget.

Karen invited the whole family over for Christmas day. She was up till 2am wrapping presents and then spent the whole day cooking. It was so stressful that she got sick and spent her summer holiday sick in bed. She vowed to do it differently next year.



- Solve problems like this:
  - ~ Write down your problem: **Got too stressed at Christmas.**
  - ~ Work out what your goal is and write it down: **Don't get so stressed this time**
  - ~ Write down lots of possible options (even if they seem a bit silly)
    1. Cancel Christmas!
    2. Get presents from the \$2 shop
    3. Buy presents in sales, starting now
    4. Ask Jim to have Christmas dinner at his place
    5. Have a picnic and get everyone to bring some food
  - ~ Beside each option, write down all the good and bad points you can think of:
 

<b>Good</b>	<b>Bad</b>
1. Easy	All feel sad
2. Cheap	Some of it is junk
3. Cheap, but good presents	Have to think about it now
4. Easy	His place is too small
5. Easy & fun	Might rain (but could shift to our place)
  - ~ Pick the 'best' option (remember there is usually no perfect option)
  - ~ Write down what you need to do to make it happen
  - ~ Do It
  - ~ Review it. (Did it solve the problem? If not, think it all through again)

**Protecting yourself against stress:** Eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, build supportive relationships, have regular activities and structure in your life and limit caffeine. Keep it to 4 drinks of tea, cola or coffee per day. Get some exercise (even just 10 minutes a day).

**Think about it differently:** Separate out the situation itself, from what you are thinking about it. Remember that thoughts are just that, thoughts. They may not be facts.

### *Why do I feel stressed when other people don't?*

The difference may be in how you think about things. Compare these reactions to hearing a bump in the night: *The key is often in the thinking:*

Thought: It's a burglar!

Feeling: Fear

Behaviour: Hide under the bed

Thought: It's probably just the wind

Feeling: Calm

Behaviour: listen for a short time, then go back to sleep

*... the same situation, but very different reactions.*

We often think the worst will happen and that we won't be able to cope. They seem like facts, but often they are not.

*To check whether they're real facts, ask yourself:*

- Is there another explanation for what happened?
- How would someone else think about this?
- What would I say to a friend to point out that what they were thinking about this situation might not be completely true?
- Is there any evidence to suggest that what I'm thinking may not be completely true? What are the facts?
- What's the worst that can happen? What's the best that can happen? Which of these is the most likely?
- Is there a way of thinking about this that will make it less distressing for me?

*Men are not worried by things, but by their ideas about things – Epictetus*



## Stress reduction

### What to do when you are stressed:

#### The 3 R's:

- **Rest:** take proper breaks, learn to relax deeply, learn slow breathing.
- **Recreation:** have some fun – keep doing things you enjoy, get some exercise.
- **Relationships:** Other people can help you to think about the problem differently or suggest ways to solve problems. If we don't talk to others about our problems, we can end up 'taking it out' on them, or our stressed behaviour can be taken the wrong way. Tell someone who might help about your problems. Don't pull away from people.

#### Calm your body

Use slow breathing, deep muscle relaxation, yoga or exercise. Stop rushing around; give yourself short breaks: relax, stretch, go for a walk; adopt a relaxed posture: drop your shoulders, sit back in your chair.

#### How to slow your breathing

*Sit up straight. Put your fingertips together just below your ribcage. Breathe slowly down to your stomach and watch your fingertips pull apart. Breathe in your nose and out your mouth, to help your body to relax. Count each breath until you get to 10, then tell yourself to slow down your breathing. Repeat. You will need to do this for at least 5 minutes for it to make a difference. Make a regular time of day to practice it, such as when you are sitting at your desk or watching TV.*

*'The time to relax is when you don't have any time' – Sydney Harris*

**Balance:** Think about the important areas of your life, such as work, play, health and relationships. Does the way you spend your time fit with what matters to you?

**Spirituality (wairua)** can also play an important role in our wellbeing. It means different things to different people and it may involve cultural activities, religious beliefs, connection to your marae, whenua (land), maunga (mountain), and awa (river), and connection to your tipuna/ancestors. The important thing is that they are activities that enhance the way you feel.

**Is spirituality important to your wellbeing? Think of some ways that you can nourish it. Here are some ideas to get you started:**

- Spending time with your whānau (family) or friends
- Reading a book
- Spending time on your marae or in a place of worship or in nature
- Listening to music
- Learning your whakapapa
- Going for a swim in the sea or river
- Prayer (karakia)

**Beliefs and stress:** While there can be all sorts of outside stresses, such as work, family and money pressures, our beliefs can stress us too. For example believing that:

- We must make other people happy all the time
- We must do things perfectly
- It is awful to make mistakes
- Success in life is measured by success at work.

There is nothing 'wrong' with these beliefs, but testing out being more laid back may lower your stress levels.

Remember, it's normal to feel a bit anxious at first, when you test your beliefs.

*Aroha has moved into a new home and wants to keep it perfect, but her boys keep messing it up. She gets stressed and starts shouting at the boys. Her belief was that the house had to be kept very tidy all the time, but she decided to try out believing that it only had to be tidy at the start of each day. So she experimented with tidying each morning for just one hour. And she went even further with the boys bedroom, tidying it only once a week (and she got the boys to help). She felt very uncomfortable about this at first, but enjoyed feeling better and getting on better with her boys.*

**Beliefs that put the pressure on:**

This mistake is a disaster  
I can't let people see how I feel  
I have to get this done  
I shouldn't ask for help  
This is really important  
I must do things well  
I can't do anything  
I have to put others first

**Beliefs that take the pressure off:**

Everyone makes mistakes  
It might help to talk to someone  
I'll do what I can in the time I have  
Everyone asks for help sometimes  
In 5 years time this won't matter  
I can only do my best  
I'll sort out some small problems first  
I need to look after me, too

My beliefs: \_\_\_\_\_

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How I will try out my new beliefs: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Avoidance

*Feel the fear...and do it anyway*

People avoid lots of things because of fear, such as dogs, social situations, supermarkets, heights and public transport. You might avoid less obvious things, such as putting off dealing with important problems, avoiding being on your own, avoiding sex because of anxiety about your 'performance' or not being assertive with people.

Are you avoiding situations because of fear?

We avoid things if we think they will harm us. The trouble is:

- sometimes our fear is not realistic
- the more things we avoid, the more we get frightened.

Sometimes we have been avoiding things for so long we are not even sure what we are scared of. Try to work out what you fear will happen by imagining yourself in the situation or even going into the situation just a tiny bit (for example, go up a few stairs if you have a fear of heights).

My fear: if I \_\_\_\_\_ I will \_\_\_\_\_

Make a list of the ways avoidance is getting in the way of your life:

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Now have a look at your list and make a decision about whether it is time to change.

## One step at a time

Overcoming fear takes courage, because it is scary. But you can make a ladder and start with the easier things before you try the harder ones. Remember the ways avoidance is affecting your life. It is time to find out whether it really is dangerous.

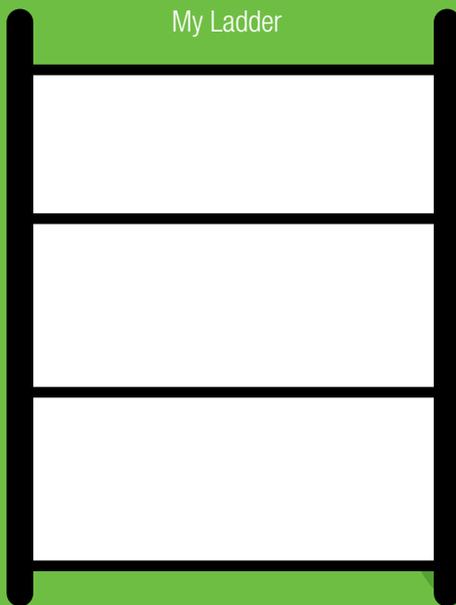
Start small:

Like saying hi at the dairy

Like being assertive about something small

Like going to a party without getting drunk first

My Ladder



Climb up your ladder and reclaim your life

Practice frequently

Reward yourself for progress

*To feel brave, act as if you were brave – William James*

## Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are common and very scary.

*Physical symptoms can include:* Heart thumping, choking feelings, feeling faint or dizzy, sweating or hot flushes, numbness or tingling in hands or feet, breathlessness, trembling, nausea, feeling unreal, tightness in the chest.

You feel like something terrible is happening like a heart attack, being unable to breathe or as if you will lose control, go mad or collapse.

Often people live in fear of another attack and try to make sure that they don't happen again, by avoiding activities they think make them happen, but this just keeps the problem going. They never find out that what is happening is not actually dangerous.

### Panic is not dangerous

Your heart can cope with beating rapidly, just as it does during exercise. Your body is very good at getting the air it needs. You're most unlikely to actually fall down. This is because low blood pressure causes fainting, but panic actually raises your blood pressure!

### Panic attacks are like a car alarm going off in the wind

Panic attacks occur when there is no real danger. Panic attacks often feel like they come out of the blue, they start with a mild sensation, which can be caused by hunger, tiredness, illness or stress. You then worry that something is wrong and start to feel frightened. The physical sensations of fear increase very quickly until you worry that something terrible might happen, like collapsing, losing control, having a heart attack, or even dying. The more you worry, the more intense your symptoms become. It's a vicious cycle.

If this happens to you, you do not need to do anything. The symptoms will reach a peak and then die down, just as car alarms eventually turn themselves off.

### Coping with panic

- *There is no real danger. This is only a panic attack.*
- *The feelings in my body are just a fear reaction. They are not harmful.*
- *Stay where you are. Don't run away or sit down. Let the panic peak and pass.*
- *Slowly move on to focusing on other things.*

## Don't worry, be happy

One worry can feed on another, until it becomes difficult to think of anything other than the threats and risks ahead of you. The more you worry, the worse you feel. The worse you feel, the more you worry.

While a little bit of worry can help get you going, like when you have an exam to study for, worry mostly wastes time and energy.

You can interrupt worry by distracting yourself. Keep your mind occupied with a different activity.

Things I could do instead of worrying:

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## Trying not to think about it doesn't work

Distracting yourself by thinking about something else usually doesn't work. Try this example: Imagine a white fluffy rabbit. Now try as hard as you can NOT to think about it, for 30 seconds. What do you notice? Most people find the rabbit keeps hopping back in to their mind. Don't just try to stop thinking about it; distract yourself with other activities instead.

## Ban night time worry

Night time worries go round and round in your head and keep you awake, but most of this worry turns out to be totally unnecessary. We worry about things that never happen, or don't turn out as bad as we think. Train worries to stay out of your bedroom, like training a dog to keep out of the kitchen. Firmly say yourself, 'This is not the time'. Then imagine a pleasant image, such as a relaxing place you have been to. Use all your senses to help you focus on it, and breathe slowly, right down to your stomach (see page 6).

**'My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened'**  
(Montaigne, French philosopher)

## Dealing with worry

### Ask yourself:

Will this matter 100 years from now?

How likely is this really?

If this happened would it really be a total disaster?

Is this a problem that I need to solve right now?

How much worry is this worth?

Trust in your ability to cope if the worst really does happen.

Dealing with here and now problems is enough: don't waste energy and happiness on problems which don't exist.

Some worries **are** about things you can do something about. They are about a here and now problem. Turn worries into actions using problem solving (see page 3).

### Worry time

if you still have lots of worries, try setting aside a worry time at a regular time each day. Take half an hour to worry at this time. During the day, when a worry comes up, put it off until your worry time, and focus on something else.

### Stop asking for reassurance

While other people can help you to be realistic when you are worried, asking reassurance too often can become a habit, which only makes you feel better for a little bit. Find your own ways of answering your questions, by thinking what you would advise a friend with a similar worry.

When you are in an uncertain situation, like facing possible job loss, find some certainties to hang on to, such as usual activities or relationships.

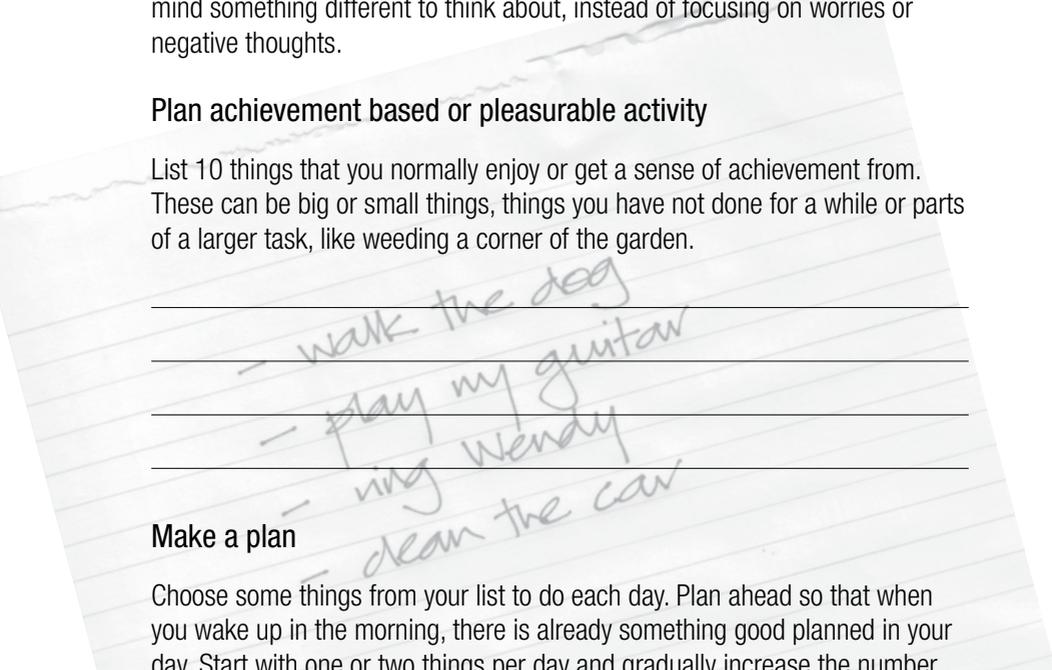
Do the normal things you do as far as possible, and use the stress reduction strategies on page 6. It can also help to think what good might come of this in the end. Although change can be difficult, it can also lead to you adapting in creative ways, developing new skills or overcoming old fears.

## When stress gets you down

When we feel down we often do less of what we enjoy because we feel tired, and lack motivation. This makes us feel even worse. Being active gives your mind something different to think about, instead of focusing on worries or negative thoughts.

### Plan achievement based or pleasurable activity

List 10 things that you normally enjoy or get a sense of achievement from. These can be big or small things, things you have not done for a while or parts of a larger task, like weeding a corner of the garden.



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### Make a plan

Choose some things from your list to do each day. Plan ahead so that when you wake up in the morning, there is already something good planned in your day. Start with one or two things per day and gradually increase the number.

### Give yourself good advice

Think what you would say to a friend to encourage them to keep pushing themselves to do things that might help them feel better.

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*Action may not always bring happiness, but there is no happiness without action – Benjamin Disraeli*

## Get some exercise

Planned exercise helps your mood, reduces anxiety and helps self esteem, as well as getting you fitter. It has longer term benefits for your blood pressure, reduce the risk of diabetes and prevents the bone problem osteoporosis. It can also be fun and help your social life.

Tips for exercising:

- Choose something you have liked doing in the past.
- Plan things at your own pace.
- Warm your muscles up and use suitable footwear.
- Make a specific plan and start small. It works better to plan it into your diary rather than just trying to fit it in.
- If you are struggling with motivation, try an experiment: Score how sad or tense you are out of 10, where 10 is the worst. Do this before and after doing 10 minutes of exercise, such as walking around the block. What do you notice?
- 'Yes but... it's too hard...too boring...it takes too much time'. You are likely to get these thoughts when you are trying to change your habits. When you have a 'Yes but..', think about what advice you would give to a friend who was trying to change.



**Tama moe, tama mate. Tama tu, tama ora.**

*– The person who is active will live long and live well, but the person who sits still will not*

Lifestyle tips for when you're down:

- Eat a balanced diet, including fruit, vegetables and carbohydrates (like bread, rice, pasta, potatoes)
- Cut down (or stop using) alcohol and other recreational drugs. They can make you feel more depressed.
- Avoid sleeping during the day.
- See the 'Breaking Habits' booklet for ways to cut down or stop using alcohol or marijuana.
- See the 'Getting on Better' booklet for ways to improve relationships.
- If you have thoughts of harming yourself, tell someone else about your thoughts – either a friend, family member or a doctor.

## Coping with Loss

Grief is a process of adjusting to loss. Loss may be through death, but other losses can also lead to a grief reaction, such as a job loss.

You may feel shock, anger, sadness, guilt or fear at different times, or all at once.

You may feel confused and find it hard to organise yourself.

Tasks involved in grieving:

- Accept the loss.
- Let yourself feel the pain. Don't try to avoid it.
- Talk about it, over and over. Talk about regrets.
- Take one day at a time. Grieving takes the time it takes. Don't expect yourself to 'be over it by now'. Expect anniversaries to bring up sad feelings again.
- Look after yourself: rest, eat well, have some quiet time to yourself and time with others. Don't pull back from people.
- Problem-solve ways to meet the needs that were met by the lost person or situation, such as ways to have companionship, or meaningful structure to your day.

## Living with physical illness

When we get sick we expect ourselves to reduce what we are doing and stay at home. We eat different foods and expect others to help out. This works well for short-term illness, but not so well with long-term illness. With long-term illness, reduced activity can mean that you have less fun and less sense of achievement, or you may start to see yourself as 'weak'. This makes you feel worse.

### Ideas that may help:

#### Focus less on symptoms

When we start to pay close attention to physical symptoms it changes how they feel. For example when you have an itchy bite and you focus on it, it seems much more itchy than when you focus on something else.

#### Find out what makes your symptoms better or worse

Feeling stressed or tense may make your symptoms worse. Activity or relaxation may improve your symptoms.

Keep a record of your symptoms for 2-3 days to see if this is true for you.

Time	Activity	Intensity of the main symptom (0-10)
9am	Having a shower	1/10
10am	Seeing the doctor about scan	5/10

My conclusions: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Build up activity gradually

Muscles that are not used for a while waste and weaken which means that when you do use them they may be weak and painful. Instead of taking this as a sign that you should not be active, understand that this is a normal part of building the muscles up again. **Don't overdo it.** Take advice from your doctor about a step-by-step plan for your needs.

## Health anxiety

People can become anxious about their health even though they're not sick. They start to monitor and check their bodies for signs of illness. They worry that everyday aches and pains are serious. They visit their doctor a lot for reassurance, or read medical books and websites. They may avoid medical subjects and places because it makes them feel scared. They may protect their bodies from physical strain because of fears that it is bad for their health, and start behaving as though they ARE ill. They worry constantly that they have a very bad disease and that no-one is taking them seriously.

If your doctor has told you that there is no sign of disease or injury, then you can take control of your anxiety by:

- Reminding yourself that aches and pains are normal
- Not monitoring for signs of illness
- Not looking for information about illness
- Not seeking reassurance
- Not avoiding things to do with illness



# My plan for lowering my stress levels

**So now you have read the booklet, you might have some new ideas for change...**

Make sure your plan is realistic, practical and achievable. Remember it will take 2-3 weeks to become part of your routine.

**My plan:**

What I am going to do?

When am I going to do it?

What might get in the way?

What I will do to overcome this?

Who will I ask to support me with this plan?

When will I review this plan and see if it is working?

*If your symptoms continue for several months or get worse, see your doctor.*

**Useful websites:**

*glasgowsteps.com*

*beyondblue.org.au*

*livinglifetothefull.com*

*mentalhealth.org.nz*

*depression.org.nz*

*lifeline.co.nz*

*thelowdown.co.nz*

*moodgym.anu.edu.au*

*headspace.org.nz*

*likeminds.org.nz*

*thiswayup.org.au*

**Free Phone Helplines:**

*Depression Helpline 0800 111 757*

*Lifeline Freephone 0800 543354*

*Samaritans Freephone 0800 726666*

## Books

Many of these are available through the public library.

*Mind over Mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think.* Greenberger & Padesky (1995).

*Anxiety and Phobia Workbook.* Edmund J. Bourne (2000).

*Overcoming Anxiety: A five areas approach.* Chris Williams (2003).

*Overcoming Depression and Low Mood: A five areas approach.* Chris Williams (2006).

*Overcoming Depression.* Paul Gilbert (1997).

*It's Not All in Your Head: How worrying about your health could be making you sick – and what you can do about it.* Asmundson & Taylor (2005). Guilford Press.

*Manage your Pain: Practical and positive ways of adapting to chronic pain.* Nicholas, Molloy, Tonkin & Beeston (2006). ABC Books.

*The Good Sleep Guide: 10 steps to better sleep and how to break the worry cycle.* Timothy Sharp (2001). Penguin.

*Overcoming Insomnia: A cognitive-behavioural therapy approach workbook.* Edinger & Carney (2008)

*Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions: For ongoing physical and mental health conditions.* Halsted, Holman, Lorig & David (2007)

*Thoughts and Feelings: Taking control of your moods and your life.* McKay, Davis & Fanning (1997). New Harbinger.

*Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness.* Gillian Butler (1999). Robinson Publishing.

*Panic Attacks: What they are, why they happen and what you can do about them.* Ingram, C. (1993), Thorson.

*Overcoming Low Self-esteem.* Melanie Fennell (1999) Robinson.

This material was produced as part of the Ultra Brief Intervention Study (Stress in Primary Care).

