

When Life Is Always in a Rush

How constant pressure can affect your physical and mental health

Physical & Mental Health Series - Resource 1 of 10

Why this guide matters

Rushing can become so familiar that we stop noticing it. We move quickly, think ahead, answer while doing something else, squeeze meals between tasks and carry tomorrow in our heads before today has finished. The mind may call this 'keeping up'. The body can experience it as repeated pressure.

Stress is a normal human response. In short bursts it can sharpen attention and help us respond to a challenge. Problems can develop when demands are frequent, recovery is limited, and the body's stress response is repeatedly activated. Stress can affect both mind and body, and long-term stress can contribute to physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

The NHS lists physical signs such as headaches, dizziness, muscle tension, stomach problems, chest discomfort or a faster heartbeat. Mental signs can include difficulty concentrating, indecision, feeling overwhelmed, worry and forgetfulness. Sleep, appetite, irritability and avoidance can also change.

This does not mean every symptom is 'just stress'. New, severe, persistent or worrying physical symptoms deserve appropriate medical assessment.

The rush cycle

1. Demand	2. Body alarm	3. Push through	4. Less recovery
Deadlines, responsibilities, noise, interruptions	Adrenaline/cortisol, faster heart rate	Make tasks seem simpler, push through	Stop quickly, fatigue mentally, reduced capacity

Pause. Reflect. Reclaim a calmer you.

What happens inside the body?

The nervous system is designed to respond quickly when something feels demanding or threatening. Stress hormones including adrenaline and cortisol help mobilise energy. Heart rate can increase, muscles tense and attention narrows toward what needs to happen next.

That response is useful when it has a beginning and an end. Constant rushing can create repeated activation without enough opportunity to settle. The American Psychological Association notes that chronic stress can affect multiple body systems, including musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal and nervous-system functioning.

Heart and circulation

During a stress response, heart rate and blood pressure can rise temporarily. Repeated or prolonged stress is associated with cardiovascular strain and may contribute to longer-term health risk alongside many other factors. Chest pain, fainting, severe breathlessness or symptoms suggesting a medical emergency should never simply be assumed to be stress.

Muscles, jaw and headaches

Muscle tension is a common stress response. Shoulders may creep upward, the jaw may clench, breathing may become shallower and headaches or general aches can appear. When the body rarely receives a clear 'all done' signal, tension can become part of the background of the day.

Digestion and appetite

Stress and the digestive system communicate in both directions. Some people notice nausea, indigestion, stomach discomfort or bowel changes. Appetite may decrease or increase. Rushing can add another layer: eating quickly, delaying meals, relying on whatever is easiest, or barely noticing hunger until the body is depleted.

Sleep and recovery

A tired body does not always produce a quiet mind. People can reach bedtime exhausted while their thoughts remain fast. Poor sleep then reduces emotional and physical reserves the following day, making ordinary demands feel harder and potentially feeding the rush cycle.

A different way to notice pressure

A useful question is not only 'How stressed am I?' but also 'How much genuine recovery does my body get between demands?'

What constant rushing can feel like mentally

Rushing is not only about moving quickly. It can become a mental pace: anticipating the next task, scanning for what has been forgotten, replaying conversations, checking the time and feeling behind even when a great deal has already been achieved.

Attention and memory

Under pressure, attention can become narrower and more reactive. Concentration, working memory and decision-making may feel harder. This can lead to mistakes or forgotten tasks, which create more urgency and self-criticism.

Irritability and emotional sensitivity

When reserves are low, tolerance can shrink. Noise, delays, questions or small changes may feel disproportionately difficult. Irritability can be a sign of overload rather than a reflection of how much we care about the people around us.

Anxiety and the sense that something is always unfinished

A rushed mind can struggle to experience completion. Finishing one task simply reveals the next. This can create a persistent sense of being behind, even without an immediate crisis. WHO notes that excessive stress can make it difficult to relax and can be associated with anxiety, irritability and concentration difficulties.

Burnout and depletion

The NHS describes long-term or severe stress as potentially leading to physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, often called burnout. Burnout is not simply 'being tired after a busy week'. It can involve profound depletion, reduced motivation, detachment and difficulty recovering.

Important

Slowing down is not the same as giving up. Recovery is part of functioning. A nervous system cannot remain mobilised indefinitely without cost.

Signs your body may be asking for a pause

Body	Mind	Behaviour
Tight jaw/shoulders Headaches Palpitations Digestive upset Fatigue Poor sleep	Racing thoughts Forgetfulness Overwhelm Worry Reduced concentration Feeling permanently 'behind'	Skipping meals/breaks Doing several things at once Snapping at others Avoiding tasks Working into recovery time Unable to sit without checking something

A practical reset: reducing the pace without abandoning your life

The aim is not to create a perfectly calm life. Responsibilities, deadlines, caring roles and unexpected events are real. The aim is to give the body more moments in which it is not being asked to accelerate.

1. Create transitions

Build tiny boundaries between activities: sit for one minute after arriving home, take three slower breaths before opening the next email, or walk to the next room without using the journey to plan another task. Small transitions help mark endings.

2. Reduce unnecessary simultaneity

Where possible, do one thing at a time. Multitasking often means rapid task-switching. Choose the task that matters now, place the rest somewhere reliable, and return to it later.

3. Protect the basics

Regular food, fluids, movement, medication routines where prescribed, sleep and connection are not rewards for completing everything else. They are part of the system that allows us to function.

4. Notice urgency language

Listen for internal phrases such as 'quickly', 'I should already have...', 'I haven't got time', 'just one more thing' or 'I can't stop yet'. Ask: Is this genuinely urgent, important but not urgent, or simply uncomfortable to leave unfinished?

5. Give the body a physical signal of safety

Try unclenching the jaw, lowering the shoulders, lengthening the exhale, placing both feet on the floor, stretching, stepping outside, or allowing the eyes to look into the distance. Choose strategies that feel comfortable rather than forcing relaxation.

6. Make recovery visible

Put recovery into the diary. A blank space is easily consumed by another task. Even ten protected minutes can become a deliberate part of the day rather than something that happens only if everything else is finished.

Permission to pause

You do not need to earn a pause by reaching complete exhaustion. A pause can be preventative, not just restorative.

My Rush & Recovery Check-In

Use this page to notice patterns rather than judge yourself. Repeat it on different days if useful.

Question	My notes
How rushed does my body feel today, from 0-10?	
Where am I holding tension?	
What has my breathing been like?	
Have I eaten and drunk regularly enough for my needs?	
When did I last have five minutes with no task attached?	
What thought is creating the strongest sense of urgency?	
What actually needs doing today?	
What can wait, be delegated, simplified or dropped?	
What would help my body feel 5% less rushed?	
What is one recovery period I can protect today?	

When to get more support

Stress can produce real physical sensations, but it is important not to use stress as a catch-all explanation. Speak with a GP or appropriate health professional if symptoms are persistent, worsening, interfering with daily life, or causing concern. Seek urgent medical help for symptoms that could represent an emergency, including severe or new chest pain, severe breathing difficulty, collapse, or other acute symptoms.

If stress is affecting your ability to cope, sleep, work, eat, connect with others or function day to day, psychological support may also be helpful. Support can focus on the pressures themselves, boundaries, coping patterns, anxiety, perfectionism, trauma, neurodivergent overload or whatever is contributing to the pace.

A message from Maggie

Sometimes we do not realise how fast we have been living until our body begins to protest. We may have spent years being the person who copes, gets things done, keeps going and carries what needs carrying. Slowing down can then feel unfamiliar - even uncomfortable.

This guide is not asking you to remove every responsibility or become calm all of the time. It is an invitation to notice what your body has been trying to tell you. Your headaches, exhaustion, tight shoulders, racing thoughts or irritability are not inconveniences to push past without curiosity. They can be information.

You are allowed to build pauses into an ordinary day. You are allowed to finish one thing before beginning another. And you are allowed to recognise that looking after your physical health and looking after your mental health are not two separate jobs.

Books & further reading

Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers - Robert M. Sapolsky. An accessible exploration of stress physiology and the effects of prolonged stress.

Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski. Explores the difference between dealing with a stressor and completing the body's stress response.

The Stress Solution - Dr Rangan Chatterjee. Practical discussion of everyday stress and lifestyle factors.

Clinical notes & sources

World Health Organization (2026). Stress - Questions and answers. WHO describes stress as a natural response that affects mind and body; excessive stress can contribute to physical and mental health problems.

NHS (reviewed 2024; accessed 2026). Get help with stress and Every Mind Matters: Stress. NHS guidance lists physical, mental and behavioural symptoms and notes that long-term or severe stress can contribute to exhaustion/burnout.

American Psychological Association (reviewed 2024). Stress effects on the body and How stress affects your health. Reviews the effects of acute and chronic stress across multiple body systems.

Please remember

Educational resource only. It does not diagnose illness or replace individual medical or mental-health advice.