

Stress Management

Five ways to support your brain

Stress can affect thoughts, feelings, the body and everyday tasks. Support does not have to be perfect or complicated; small, repeatable actions can give you more options.

Stress is information, not a personal failing

Stress is a common response to pressure, uncertainty or change. For a short time, it can sharpen attention and help us respond. When demands keep piling up, it may become harder to think clearly, rest, make decisions or feel connected to other people. A stress response is not proof that you are weak or doing something wrong.

These ideas are practical supports, not a promise that stress will disappear. They cannot remove an unsafe situation, unfair demands, illness, financial pressure or other causes of distress. Sometimes the helpful next step is to reduce a demand, ask for a reasonable adjustment, share the load, talk with someone or seek professional support.

The five approaches in this guide

1 Strengthen the basics

Support rest, movement, nourishment, connection and enjoyable activity in ways that fit your life.

2 Shift from thinking to sensing

Gently notice what is around you through sight, sound, touch or another sense that feels comfortable.

3 Notice points of contact

If it feels okay, notice where your body is supported by a chair, floor or cushion.

4 Zoom out for perspective

Separate what you know from what you fear, and look for a useful next step without forcing a positive spin.

5 Value process as well as outcome

Notice learning, effort, adaptation and skills, even when the result is unfinished or different from what you hoped.

Notice your own early signs

Stress may show up as tension, headaches, irritability, racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating, disrupted sleep, avoidance, feeling numb or needing to withdraw. Your signs may be different and can change over time. Noticing them is information that something may need attention; it is not a diagnosis.

One early sign I notice in myself:

Choose one idea to try, adapt or set aside. Different strategies work for different people and different moments.

Support the foundations

Everyday routines and sensory noticing can be adjusted to your needs.

1 Strengthen the basics

The image that inspired this guide mentions sleep, daily movement, food, balance and gratitude. These are not rules to meet perfectly. They are areas where gentle support may help some people feel steadier, and each one can look different depending on health, disability, neurotype, workload, caring responsibilities and access.

- Rest and sleep: a familiar wind-down cue or a more predictable rhythm may help. If sleep is difficult, try a small change that feels realistic rather than blaming yourself for not sleeping.
- Movement: choose movement that is safe and accessible for you. A stretch, a short walk, changing position or moving to music can count; activity does not need to last 20 minutes to be worthwhile.
- Food and drink: aim for nourishment and hydration that suit your body, culture, preferences and medical needs. There is no single food formula that manages stress for everyone. Avoid turning food into another test you can fail.
- Work, rest and pleasure: recovery time and enjoyable activity matter. A balance will change across days and seasons; rest is not something you have to earn.
- Gratitude or journaling: if it helps, note one thing you appreciated, noticed or got through. If gratitude feels forced, use a neutral check-in: "What happened today, and what do I need now?"

A small version still counts: one earlier bedtime cue, a glass of water, two minutes of movement, or asking someone to share one task.

2 Shift from thinking to sensing

When thoughts are looping, a brief outward-facing sensory task can give attention something concrete to do. Look around and name a few objects, notice two colours, listen for nearby and distant sounds, or describe the feel of a familiar object. You could sort objects by colour or shape, as the original poster suggests.

Keep it low-pressure. Bright lights, noise, textures, smells or body sensations can be uncomfortable or overwhelming, especially for people with sensory differences, migraine, trauma or pain. Choose a sense that feels safe, use aids if helpful, or skip the exercise.

Try a short orienting pause

- Name three things you can see, or notice one steady object.
- Notice one sound, or enjoy a moment of quiet.
- Ask: "What would help me feel a little more supported right now?"

Which foundation could I support in a small, realistic way?

Ground and widen the lens

Stay curious about what helps; you do not need to force calm or positivity.

3 Notice points of contact

If it feels comfortable, notice how a chair supports you, where your feet meet the floor, or the weight of a cushion beneath you. Let your attention rest there for a few moments. You might gently shift position or press your feet down and then release.

This is an option, not a requirement. Some people find body-focused attention unsettling, painful or inaccessible. You can instead notice a stable object in the room, hold something familiar, or ask another person to sit nearby. The aim is choice and orientation, not forcing your body to relax.

If a grounding exercise makes distress stronger, stop and switch to something more comfortable. You are allowed to adapt it or leave it.

4 Zoom out for perspective

When upsetting news or a difficult moment takes over, “zooming out” means widening the view enough to see more of the situation. It does not mean pretending something harmful is good, minimising your feelings or ignoring a real problem.

Try separating what has happened from what your mind fears may happen next. Look for context, support and options, while still taking the difficulty seriously. If there is a real problem to solve, a practical step, a boundary or help from someone else may be more useful than a calming exercise.

- What do I know for certain? What am I predicting or fearing?
- What else is happening around this problem? What support or strengths are already present?
- Which parts can I influence, and which parts need help, time or acceptance?
- What is one next step that protects my wellbeing or moves the problem forward?

A quick facts-and-needs check

Write, speak or think through these prompts. One-word answers are enough:

The situation I am facing:

What I know / what I am unsure about:

One thing I can do, ask for, or set down for now:

Perspective can include asking for change. If stress comes from workload, relationships, discrimination, pain or unmet support needs, practical action and advocacy may matter more than another relaxation exercise.

Notice progress without pressure

A gentle plan can help you decide what to try, what to change and when to reach for support.

5 Value process as well as outcome

A result matters, but it is not the only information worth noticing. You might have learned a skill, asked for help, practised saying no, tried again after a pause or discovered that a particular approach does not work for you. Those details can help shape a more realistic plan.

The original poster suggests looking back to see how skills develop over time. Try comparing yourself with your own starting point rather than someone else's pace. The goal is not to praise every difficult situation; it is to recognise what you have learned and what needs to change.

My small stress-support plan

A sign that stress is building for me:

One sensory or grounding option I could try:

One basic need or practical demand I can support:

Someone I can talk to or ask for help:

I will review this plan when / after:

When extra support may help

If stress is persistent, worsening or affecting daily life, consider speaking with your GP or another health professional. If you need urgent mental health support in England, use NHS 111 online or call 111 and select the mental health option. If someone is in immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E. Samaritans can be called free on 116 123.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy: You do not have to manage every pressure on your own. Start with what feels possible, notice what your mind and body are telling you, and let support be part of the plan.

Further information

NHS: Get help with stress: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/>
NHS: 5 steps to mental wellbeing: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>
NHS: Mindfulness: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>
NHS: Urgent help for mental health: <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/>