

Stress Management

‘To equip people affected by CFS / ME with the skills for self-management towards a better quality of life’.



Pride in our older people's and adult community services

Stress and the HPA Axis

The Hypothalamic Pituitary Adrenal axis is the classical neuroendocrine system that responds to stress and whose final product, corticosteroids, targets components of the Limbic System (our emotional brain), particularly the hippocampus. Research is beginning to show that the HPA axis should instead be thought of as the body's energy regulator, as it is ultimately responsible for controlling virtually all of our hormones, nervous system activity and energy expenditure as well as modulating the immune system.

Allostasis: The process by which the body responds to stressors in order to regain homeostasis

Allostatic load or overload: This is the result of the wear and tear your body experiences as it continually adapts to psychological and physical challenges.

The HPA is the key to allostasis. Too much or too little cortisol will affect how you look, how you sleep, your energy levels, your emotions and the function of your immune system and often adrenal fatigue.

It is generally accepted that physical illnesses are often made worse by undue levels of stress. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME is no exception to this and many patients and practitioners recognise that stress can heighten the symptoms of CFS/ME, and chronic or long term stressors, either consciously or unconsciously generated may actually have been a predisposing factor or may continue to be a perpetuating factor inhibiting recovery. Symptoms experienced as a result of increased stress can often be similar to those of CFS/ME due to Sympathetic Nervous System arousal response. Over time it can be difficult to distinguish between symptoms that be may the result of increased stressors in your life and the symptoms of CFS/ME. Learning to manage stress and stressors (both internal and external) better can be a very positive step towards managing CFS/ME.

This information is intended to help you to start considering what is meant by stress and how we respond to it. Having more of an understanding of the effects of stress on your body, mind and actions may help you to consider how to develop healthy ways of responding to stressful situations in your lives.

What is stress?

Feeling stressed can mean anything from feeling a bit uneasy or awkward to feeling panic stricken. What provokes these feelings can be anything from illness to everyday situations like meeting new people or going shopping.

Stress is often determined by our **perception** of a situation and if our brain sees it as a **threat**. It is normal to be a little anxious or stressed in everyday situations but sometimes you can feel highly stressed towards things that you believe are important but others do not. This can make you feel embarrassed to talk about how you feel, which simply makes you more inclined to get 'worked up' and you may end up avoiding the stressful situation all together.

What causes stress to occur varies from person to person, but people who are having to face a chronic and disabling condition such as CFS/ME are understandably having to face more stress than the average person, and therefore we believe it is very important that you are made aware of what the symptoms of stress are so that you do not confuse them with the symptoms of CFS/ME and believe that your condition is deteriorating and therefore creating more stress!

Signs of stress

The following is a list of symptoms which can be part of a stress reaction which are a direct result of our Limbic Centre in our brain interpreting a "threat message coming in. This threat may be either real or imaginedif you think a threat thought your body reacts in the same way as if you were actually dealing with a threatening situation. You may have experienced these symptoms at some time.

Physical Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Mood Related Symptoms	Behavioural Symptoms
Increased heart rate	Anxiety and Depression	Negative thinking	Withdrawal
Increased blood pressure	Irritability	Forgetfulness	Sleep difficulties

Tightening of chest	Jealousy	Decreased concentration	Avoidance of activities
Breathing difficulty	Blaming others	Increased fantasy life	Couldn't care less attitude
Headaches or migraine	Suspicious	Slower thinking	Restlessness
Fatigue, exhaustion	Self-deprecating	Decreased creativity	Crying tendencies
Aches and pains	Job dissatisfaction		Angry outbursts/ hostility
Vague physical complaints			Change in appetite (increase or decrease)
Backaches			Prone to accidents
Shakiness/ trembling			Sex drive reduced
Needing to urinate frequently			Increase in drugs/ smoking/ alcohol
Weight gain or loss			
Gastro-intestinal problems (nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting,			

constipation etc.),			
Frequent or prolonged colds/flu			

Not everyone has the same pattern of symptoms and even within an individual the symptoms might vary in severity and variety depending on the overall circumstances at the time. It is important to know that stress may not always be easy to recognise - it may be 'hidden' and have subtle effects on you. It is also important to recognise that these symptoms can be primarily caused by other things besides stress. However as some stress factors are usually involved it is always important to manage stress first, preferably through professional guidance such as this treatment programme. This will help your GP to assess whether you need any further medical assessment.

The majority of people with CFS/ME acknowledge that stress can worsen or prolong their symptoms. For some people, stress is the most common factor which provokes or feeds their symptoms. It is therefore important to understand stress, identify how it impacts on you and your symptoms and learn stress management strategies.

What causes stress?

Stress is a subjective response to a perceived threat and what causes this reaction and to what degree can vary from person to person. Stress can be caused by a major event, for example bereavement, job loss, trauma or moving home and experiencing unpleasant symptoms and ill health. Minor events can also be stressful, for example, small frequent irritations. Stress, however, is not just caused by the event itself but what our thoughts are about it and how we feel and behave in response to it. This is because stress is caused by an **imbalance** between the **demands** placed on a person and his/her **perceived ability** to cope with these demands. This is what we may see as the weighing scales of life **SUPPLY v DEMAND**. Often our life can feel so out of balance and we can become very stressed because we perceive we do not have the supply (energy) to meet the demands we either perceive or are being placed upon us. Equally we can feel just as stressed when we have the supply but maybe do

not have enough demands upon us and we are under stimulated or bored with many aspects of our lives, or are not following the path we want in life.

Someone who is feeling physically well and fairly positive, if they were to experience a stressful event, they may be better able to problem solve what to do about it. However, if someone is feeling fatigued and low in mood, it can be harder to do this. Instead of being proactive in dealing with the stressful event or problem solving the situation we may get into unhelpful ways of coping, such as procrastinating, ruminating, avoiding or isolating ourselves.

Stress therefore is not simply an inevitable reaction to a difficult experience and we do have some control over our levels of stress.

The stress response

When you are under stress (internally or externally), in order to deal with the extra demands being placed on you, your body reacts automatically with what we call the 'stress response'. To help you to understand this response think what happens when you are faced with an emergency situation.

Imagine that you are travelling in a car; you might be the driver or a passenger. There is a child cycling along the pavement, and just as you are about to pass them they ride into the road just in front of you.

Before you have time to even think about it your body has reacted and you brake sharply and swerve away to avoid an accident. Your body has reacted quickly to the potential danger, but imagine how you will be feeling.

You will be aware of your heart racing, as it speeds the blood to your muscles and brain. You may even be feeling frightened by how your heart is pounding away.

Your breathing will have become rapid and shallow to provide the extra oxygen that your body needs to respond to the emergency situation.

You may even feel breathless, and a little dizzy.

Because your body has diverted blood to your muscles and brain, less blood flows to your digestive system, and you may well notice a “butterflies” sensation in your tummy or nausea.

Your muscles will be tense and ready for action.

You will sweat more to help your body keep cool, and feel either hot and flushed or cold and clammy.

You may even notice you feel angry with the child for their thoughtless behaviour or with the parents for not teaching the child to be more responsible.

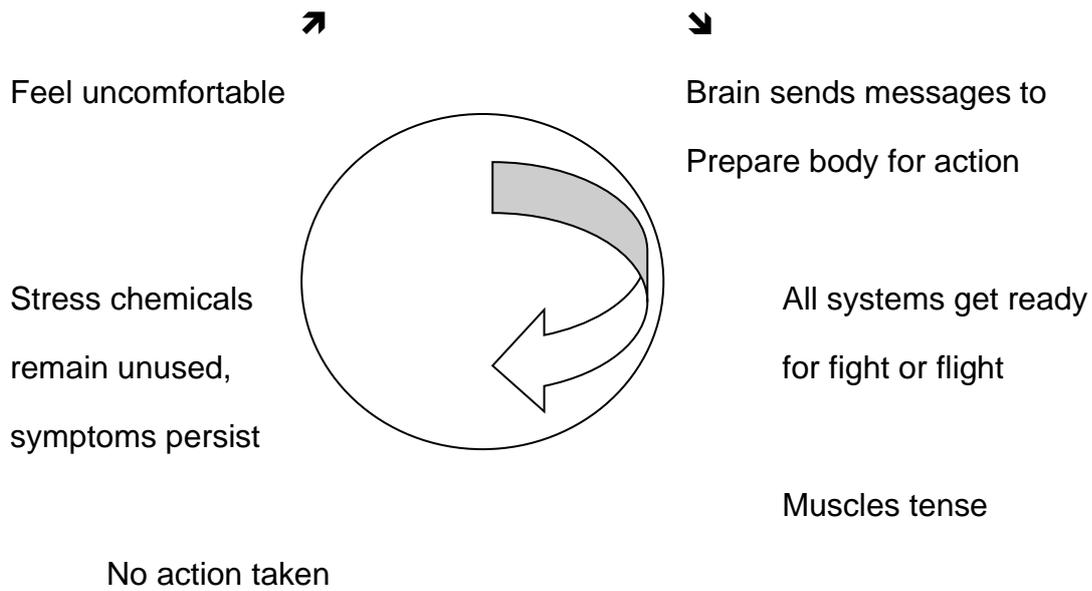
Or you may feel the need to go to the toilet after the event.

All these physical reactions coupled with your anger or general emotional arousal are the stress response. It is often referred to as the “fight, flight or freeze” response, and in an emergency situation it can be a lifesaver, providing extra energy for anticipated physical activity. It is an in-built and natural response that arises sub-consciously.

However the stress response can become a problem when it starts to occur in response to the non-emergency situations within everyday life, when it has been activated over a long period of time and when it is happening on a regular basis. It can almost feel like the body is reacting in permanent stress mode, creating increased tension, pain and fatigue, lowering our immune response as well as many other symptoms. The brain has almost re set itself in default stress mode and this is how your body has adapted and is now accepted as the “norm”. We therefore stop recognising the “dis ease” in our body and mind and a vicious cycle starts to perpetuate. We don’t necessarily need to be “stressed” it can be more to do with the way your body is unconsciously reacting.

You can get caught in a vicious cycle with stress actually causing an increase in your symptoms.

PERCEIVED THREAT (internal or external)



[Action taken, systems return to normal]

(Adapted from Madders)

You might even have been worried by the sensations you have been experiencing. Although the Stress Response is an automatic response, we can learn to control it when it is not needed.

When you have CFS/ME, coupled with the demands of a busy world that does not always show much consideration for your problem, it is not surprising that you may suffer the effects of the stress response on a routine daily basis. Couple this with the extra muscle tension stress causes and it is hardly surprising that stress can make you feel a whole lot worse.

Types of stress

Stress can be thought of in three different but related ways:

The normal stress response

Stress can be defined in terms of the different symptoms (e.g. anxiety, faster heartbeat etc.) that are triggered when you experience or anticipate an unpleasant/ threatening event or situation. This type of stress is usually temporary and your body returns to a more comfortable state once the source of stress (the 'stressor') has gone or as you gradually come to terms with the stress event over time. It is often possible to identify the exact cause of the stress.

Performance stress

This is similar to the normal stress response and is positive in the sense that your performance on a task or activity can be enhanced as the stress increases to a certain level (e.g. some anxiety can help you prepare more for an examination). Below this 'optimal' level of stress you may be too relaxed and not alert enough for the task in hand while above this optimal level, the stress becomes disproportionate and interferes with your performance.

Prolonged or recurrent stress

Although we all have some 'spare capacity' to deal with periods of sustained stress this can only be kept up for so long. If a number of stress events are experienced in quick succession or if you do not deal with on-going stressors your body does not get the chance to recuperate and stress will build up over the long term. In other words you will frequently and regularly be in the stress-response mode without enjoying any real respite. This is what people mean when they say that they are 'stressed'. The stress 'overload' may mean that even a minor setback which you coped with previously, can now cause you stress.

It is primarily this type of stress which is problematic over the longer term in that it fuels physiological changes which in turn maintain or worsen poor health. As time goes on and the stress persists it becomes increasingly difficult to identify and deal with the cause of your stress. It is as if the stress has a 'life of its own' and seems to persist for no apparent reason.

When persistent stress sets in you can get caught in a vicious cycle such that you don't have the energy or motivation to tackle the mounting stress. This leaves you vulnerable to further stress. Problems and hassles which you were previously able to deal with quite easily before suddenly become major hurdles.

Reactions to stress

People react to persistent stress in a number of ways. They may ignore or deny the stress saying that this is just 'part of their lifestyle' and they continue their life as before - attributing unpleasant symptoms to medical illness or other factors. They may feel that the situation is hopeless and beyond their control while hoping that the stress will diminish by itself. They may give up lots of activities in the hope of beating the stress.

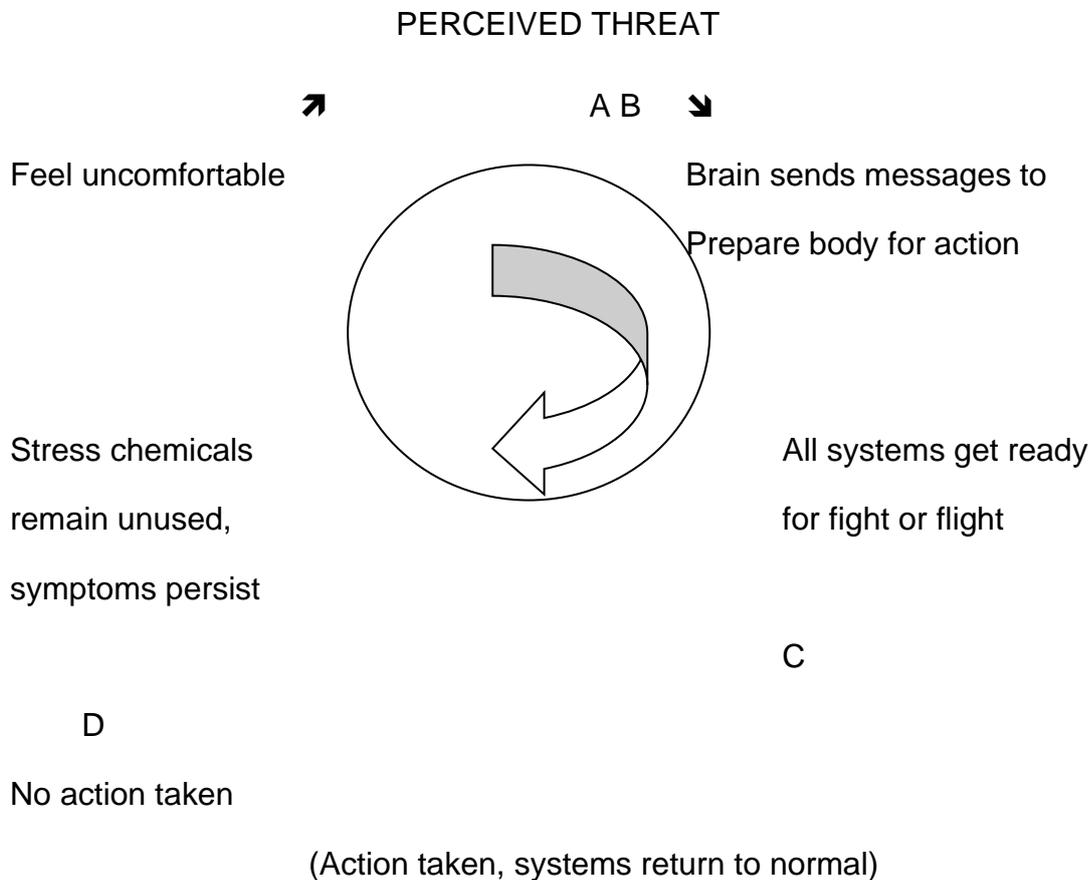
While all of the above reactions are understandable they can unwittingly perpetuate stress. A more effective strategy is to take a planned, systematic and step-by-step approach to dealing with stress. As with other aspects to this treatment programme there need not be any mystery in controlling stress.

Stress management

As stress itself is quite variable and complex it is no surprise that there is no single strategy that by itself is going to be effective. As with the overall CFS/ME management programme you need to learn and apply a number of different strategies over a period of time. That jigsaw puzzle of strategies that all need to interlink to start putting your life into better balance and then over time will help you to feel and cope better start improving. Many of these strategies are in fact strategies which you have been introduced to already such as relaxation training and managing your moods, pacing your days, learning to make the right choices for your life.

What can help?

Thinking back to the stress cycle illustrated previously, it is possible to intervene at different points in the cycle.



(Adapted from Madders)

- A - Is it possible to change the situation?
 - E.g. reduce work load/delegate tasks
- B - Explore thinking patterns – are you using any thinking errors?
 - E.g. putting pressure on self by using ‘should’ and ‘ought’ statements
- C – Relaxation
 - E.g. How are you going to recognise tension if you don’t know how to relax you mind and body? Equally giving yourself permission to stop and reflect can free up your mind to start dealing with stressors more effectively.

■ D – Exercise

- E.g. This can also be a positive tool to de stress and help rebalance the nervous system, as long as you follow the advice given and don't do too much too soon!

The following things are vital in overall stress management:

- Understand how stress works.
- Identify the different ways in which stress affects you.
- Learn to relax more and engage in a variety of leisure/fun activities to a find balance.
- Adopt a more proactive and positive approach to living the life you truly want.
- Use and build support from others.
- Ensure there are more radiators than drains in your life!
- Take a problem solving approach to difficulties. Break stress into things you can do something about and things you can't, as the latter often causes the most stress because we get into rumination cycles about it which effectively creates more threat messages and triggers more stress reactions. Try the funnelling method we used in the session.
- Improve your exercise levels, diet and sleep quality using the strategies you are being taught in the rehabilitation programme.
- Equally remember that symptoms such as fatigue, pain, memory difficulties can over time, also start to be perceived as a threat message by the brain and our attention and reaction to them can inadvertently trigger the stress response. So remember to try and self soothe when your symptoms increase and use the tools and strategies you have been taught to calm your response down.

In addition to the above it is clear that to manage stress effectively you need to be proactive and be prepared to take more control over your lifestyle whilst maintaining a patient, realistic and step-by-step approach.

Dealing with excessive worry

- ***Learn to live with uncertainty:***

Think about how worry has limited your life. For example don't ask for reassurance on a decision you have made, challenge yourself to "feel the fear and do it anyway". The more you do this the lower your anxiety will become.

- ***Deal with real worries properly:***

Start to notice when your worry moves from real to hypotheticals. Useful worry v useless worry. Even though we think worrying about a problem somehow solves it, it rarely does and just exacerbates worrying as a way of life. Learn to develop more problem solving skills to dealing with worry.

- ***Hypothetical or imagined worries:***

At the heart of these worries lie our dreams and aspirations and our fears about losing them i.e. loss of a relationship, financial security, health and our belief around not being able to cope. So to deal with this we need to face the fear head on, avoidance doesn't work.

Worries are thoughts based on what is important to us but they are not predictions or premonitions...they are simply thoughts. Learn to sit with the feeling and see it for what it is...just a thought....Just a feeling, and it isn't necessarily true and more importantly ***IT WILL PASS.....***

- ***Controlled worrying***

As soon as you know you are worrying, tell yourself that you are going to postpone worrying until later...control it not the other way round. Choose a time in the day when you will give yourself 10 minutes to worry (not just before bed!) but ideally before you do some activity.

Set a timer and let yourself think about everything that is worrying you. Only spend time worrying if you feel it is necessary, if the problem doesn't seem that important anymore stop worrying about it!

- ***Dealing with beliefs about worry***

For example you may think: “I worry to prepare me for bad things happening” ...but maybe challenge this by thinking “if bad things did actually happen, can you really prepare for all eventualities?”

How many times have the bad things you worried about actually happened in the way you imagined?

If you worried about winning the lottery do you think this would make it happen?

What does this suggest about bad things? Have there been times when you have not worried and the bad thing happened anyway?

Points to remember:

- Stress is determined by our perception of a situation, rather than the situation itself. So can you change how you are thinking about a situation to make it feel less stressful?
- Where is this issue on a scale of 1-10 (10 being equal to death)?
- How important will this be in 12 month's time?
- Is my response appropriate and effective?
- How can I influence or improve the situation?
- What can I learn from this?
- What will I do differently next time?
- What can I find that's positive in this situation?
- You can control your bodies responses, if the sympathetic nervous system is over aroused then takes proactive steps to calm your body as best you can through a mindful walk, relaxation exercises, talking to a good friend to get a different perspective, a relaxing bath.....whatever calms you down☺.
- The more balanced your stress system is the better you will feel and it will help towards regaining homeostasis in the body.

- Please refer to our Relaxation Booklet to learn about the value of relaxation.

Content in Stress Management Booklet from Lincolnshire CFS/ME Service.

Apps

- Beat Panic (helps with panic attacks or anxiety) - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/beat-panic/>
- Catch it (helps manage feelings like anxiety and depression) - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/catch-it/>
- My Possible Self (manage fear, anxiety and stress and tackle unhelpful thinking) - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/my-possible-self/>
- SilverCloud (manage stress, anxiety and depression) - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/silvercloud/>
- Stress and Anxiety Companion (helps you to manage stress and anxiety on-the-go) - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/stress---anxiety-companion/>
- Thrive: Feel Stress Free - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/thrive-feel-stress-free/>

Helpful Resources

- Get Self Help (therapy resources, including worksheets and information sheets and self help mp3s) - <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/problems.htm>
- Centre for Clinical Interventions (information sheets and worksheets) - <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself>
- Every Mind Matters – (helps with stress, sleep problems, low mood, anxiety) - <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>
- Big White Wall (online community for people who are stressed, anxious or feeling low) - <https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/big-white-wall/>

Adult CFS / ME Service

Tel: 0330 7260077

Press 2 for Huntingdon area
Press 3 for East Cambs and Fenland area
Press 4 for Peterborough area
Press 5 for Cambridge area

Email: cpm-tr.cfsme@nhs.net

*Leaflet published: May 2019
Leaflet review date: May 2020*

Patient Advice and Liaison Service

For information about CPFT services or to raise an issue, contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on Freephone 0800 376 0775, or e-mail pals@cpft.nhs.uk

Out-of-hours service for CPFT mental health service users

Please call **NHS 111** for health advice and support.

If you require this information in another format such as braille, large print or another language, please let us know.

CPFT supports the **HeadtoToe Charity** – visit www.HeadToToeCharity.org for details on how you can help



HQ Elizabeth House, Fulbourn Hospital, Cambridge CB21 5EF
T 01223 219400 **F** 01480 398501 www.cpft.nhs.uk



A member of Cambridge University Health Partners