

CiC – People in Aid Guide

How-to: Better Manage Your Stress Levels

When it comes to wellbeing advice, one of the most common recommendations from our colleagues, managers, friends and family is probably to manage our stress levels. Whilst it's good advice, it's not always the easiest thing to do in practice, especially when you're caught up in a stress cycle. Yet with a little thought and small, positive steps, it's possible to break the cycle and significantly reduce your stress levels.

First things first. Do you know what the symptoms of stress are that you should be looking out for in yourself and your work colleagues? Here are a few that you should be able to identify:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Tearfulness
- Exhaustion
- Irritability
- Neck or back pain
- Obsessive behaviour
- Heart palpitations
- Panic attacks
- Feelings of pointlessness or futility
- Struggling to focus or concentrate
- Increased eating, smoking or drinking

If you have identified that you may be suffering from stress, you're in a great position to be able to do something about it. One strategy to better manage your stress levels is to learn from those who are already succeeding at doing this. Here are some of the characteristics and coping mechanisms of people who are resilient to stress; think about how these could apply to your work and your working environment to manage the impact of stress on you, your team and your family and friends.

1. **Build up supportive networks** – actively use the support networks that are available to you and face up to the fact that it's ok to ask for support.
2. **Be transparent** – it's also ok to let others know when things are difficult. Everyone feels vulnerable at some point so avoid getting trapped in a persona of someone who always copes.
3. **Don't put all your eggs in one basket** – this includes putting all your focus on work and neglecting your personal life and priorities.
4. **Think about how you manage your time** – which includes taking regular breaks for rest and relaxation. Just because you may be working away from home, don't be tempted to work 24-hours every day. This will only result in stress and burnout!
5. **Establish realistic expectations of yourself** – it's important not to be a perfectionist. Give yourself a break and accept that mistakes will happen. It's about how you learn and recover from them that will shape your experience and your future.

6. **Take care of yourself** – do something positive to look after yourself. For example, eat well, exercise, get enough sleep and watch your alcohol intake. Make self-care an essential part of your routine.
7. **Keep in touch with home** – make a concerted effort to maintain contact with friends and family at home when you're on assignment. This will help stop any feelings of homesickness, as well as give you a positive balance to the hard work you're doing while you're away.
8. **Deal with problems effectively** – changing your perception of a problem may help you find a solution. For example, think about what you can change about a situation or the way others perceive it or talk through strategies for handling difficult problems with someone you trust.
9. **Communicate assertively** – try to find a balance between not bottling up feelings and not over-reacting. Try to communicate clearly in a way that is respectful of yourself and others, which includes saying 'no' when you need to.
10. **Remain calm under pressure** – think about what you can realistically do to change a situation. If there's nothing you can do, step back, remain calm and co-operate when and if you're asked to assist.
11. **Get some perspective** – smaller irritations may feel irrelevant if you compare them with larger and more complex issues and situations. The saying goes, 'don't sweat the small stuff' and it's not bad advice to remember this from time to time.
12. **Create positive experiences** – do something to put positive experiences into your daily life and routine. It's a good exercise to think what your ideal or perfect day would include – what can you do to make this dream a reality? What do you need to change to make this happen?

It only takes one small change to make a massive difference when it comes to managing stress. The list here represents a toolkit that you can use to make positive changes in your life. Don't try and do everything here; do what feels achievable and applicable to your circumstances. Small, positive steps will make a lasting difference and ensure that you can have a long-lasting impact on your personal stress levels.