

# WHAT IS LONG TERM STRESS?

When we experience stress over a long period of time it can have a really damaging effect on our physical and mental health. In order to feel better we have to have a plan of action. This plan has two parts: Relaxation that works and dealing with the stress itself.



What's important with **relaxation** is that it leaves you feeling well afterwards. This could be satisfied, calmer, energised or something similar. See it as putting fuel in your emotional tank. You may not find the same things relaxing as other people do and that's OK. The only rule is 'would doing this long term have negative side effects or consequences?' If so, it's worth finding a different method, so you're not storing up trouble for yourself down the line.

When it comes to stress, relaxation is only half the battle. We also need to deal with the **stress** itself. This means working out where it comes from and then what we can do about it. There are three main sources of stress; ourselves, others and the situation.

The difficulty is this, which of those sources do we have any meaningful control over? We cannot control other people and we all know that there are sadly large parts of life outside our control. We can only control ourselves, so we have to ask 'what is my responsibility and in my control in this situation?' If we try to manage things we have no control over we'll just end up exhausted.



## Stress in situations

*We are not responsible for what happens to us, but we are responsible for how we deal with that.*

Try asking 'what can I do something about right now?' Try to think about specific steps that you can take, because if we try to do everything at once it's really easy to get lost or overwhelmed. If you need to, think about who you can ask for help. It may be that you will end up having to accept that certain parts of the situation are true, no matter how much you wish they aren't. Accepting this doesn't mean you're saying that it's OK, only that you're dealing with life how it is instead of how you wish it was. Then you can plan effectively. For example, if you break your leg it's frustrating that recovery takes time. But, since that's a fact, bearing it in mind when making plans will prevent further stress.

## Stress from others

People can be a huge source of stress and this is often tricky to navigate. The best guidelines are to remember to communicate assertively instead of passively or aggressively. Remember you have a right to ask for your wishes to be respected and they have the right to say no. Remember not to make things personal, keep it progress focused. Remember to ask for help if needed. You might need to accept that some people just will not work with you right now. If so, you may need to be practical and minimise contact until both parties are showing willing to be productive.



## Stress from within

This requires a lot of honesty about the things in your control and the unsustainable patterns of behaviour that come from this. One example is volunteering to take on extra work, another might be turning disagreements into a personal attack, another might be setting unrealistic expectations of yourself or others.

Honest questions include; am I procrastinating? Am I being realistic about what can be achieved here? Am I asking for useful help? Do I want things to change? Will there need to be a compromise here? Am I on a guilt trip and is this causing me to discard positive evidence? Am I exhausted from putting my focus on things I can't control? Do my responses have long term consequences that are coming round to bite me?

These are all questions that, if we are honest with ourselves, everyone on Earth has done at some point or other, most of us do them pretty frequently. There's no shame or judgement in having done so. We're just asking how we can make the most progress possible.



*Stress is ultimately a good thing because it tells us that something is wrong. Once we notice this message, we have to do something about it by focusing on what is our responsibility and what is in our control.*

A lot of us experience guilt when we feel like we aren't doing well at handling our situations. Whilst guilt is a huge topic which can be given the space it needs during therapy sessions, as a rule of thumb, we never deserve to receive personal attacks and we never deserve to be called harsh names. This applies to the things we call our self and means that things like 'idiot', 'soft', 'weak', 'you're such a screw up' or 'why would you do that' are off the table. Commit to not calling yourself names or using personal attacks, while you work on the other parts of the stress plan.