



STRESS MANAGEMENT

Why is it important? Life can be stressful, and it can be difficult to find balance. The best way to stay healthy during times of stress, is to prioritise your overall health; eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of water, exercise regularly, get enough sleep and make time for self-care, whatever that looks like for you.

Aim. This resource has been developed to help you recognise the signs of stress, and to offer some ideas for you to try out during times of increased stress.

Signs. Listed below are some of the key signs you might be experiencing during times of stress¹:

- ❖ Feeling constantly worried or anxious.
- ❖ Feeling overwhelmed.
- ❖ Feeling depressed.
- ❖ Mood swings or irritability.
- ❖ Low self-esteem or mood.
- ❖ Eating more/less than usual.
- ❖ Difficulty concentrating.
- ❖ Difficulty relaxing.
- ❖ Using alcohol/tobacco/drugs to relax.
- ❖ Aches and pains (muscle tension).
- ❖ Diarrhoea or constipation.
- ❖ Nausea or dizziness.
- ❖ Loss of sex drive.
- ❖ Changes to your sleep patterns.

Top Tips. If your symptoms of stress are more acute, the following 4C's might be useful:

- ❖ **Control.** When you are feeling overwhelmed, it can feel like the things are spiralling out of control, and that can be scary. Take control of the given situation and take time out to get active. Go for a walk; run, swim or just dance in your kitchen – but do something physical that you enjoy for as long as you can. A change of scenery will also do you good, whether it is just for 5 minutes or 2 hours, and if you really cannot spare more than a minute, try a quick breathing exercise like 'Square Breathing' (see the diagram overleaf for more information).
- ❖ **Compassion.** When times are tough, self-care can feature at the very bottom of a never-ending to-do list. Be kind to yourself. Talk to yourself the way you would talk to someone you love. Try to accept "good enough" instead of perfect, and make time for something that brings you joy, whether that is a bath, a nice meal, a walk with a podcast, a movie night, gardening, something creative or anything else that helps you to relax or feel good.
- ❖ **Contact.** When you are in the thick of a stressful period, it can feel lonely. Take a moment to direct your focus away from your stressors and towards someone that will take your mind off it all, even if it is only for a couple of minutes. As humans, we generally thrive on interactions, so give a friend a call, or send that text you have been meaning to send. Better still, arrange to meet a friend in person if possible.
- ❖ **Compose.** A stressful situation can turn into a downward spiral of negativity. Switch up your mindset by finding some positivity and composing a list of three things that are going well, or that you are grateful for. Sometimes that is all it takes to lift your mood.

Support. For more advice on managing stress and looking after your overall health, follow me on Instagram @onacroftnurse or Facebook @OnaCroftNurse. You can also check out my website www.onacroftnurse.co.uk.

¹ If you experience any of these symptoms for a prolonged period of time and/or they are affecting your daily life, please consider seeking support from your GP.

THE SQUARE BREATHING TECHNIQUE

Introduction. Thought to originate from Pranayama, the practice of breath control in yoga, 'Square Breathing' or 'Box Breathing' is a relaxation technique famously used by US Navy SEALs.

Theory. It is a useful tool to help manage stress levels, especially when they are high and causing physical symptoms such as headaches, fast heart rate or muscle tension/pain.

Practice. To use the technique, get comfortable (sitting or lying) in a spot which is free from distractions, and use the diagram below to guide your breathing around the square.

Tip. If you're new to this technique, try counting to 2 or 3 along each side of the square.

Aim. Use this technique to encourage deep and slow breathing, which has a calming effect on the body.

