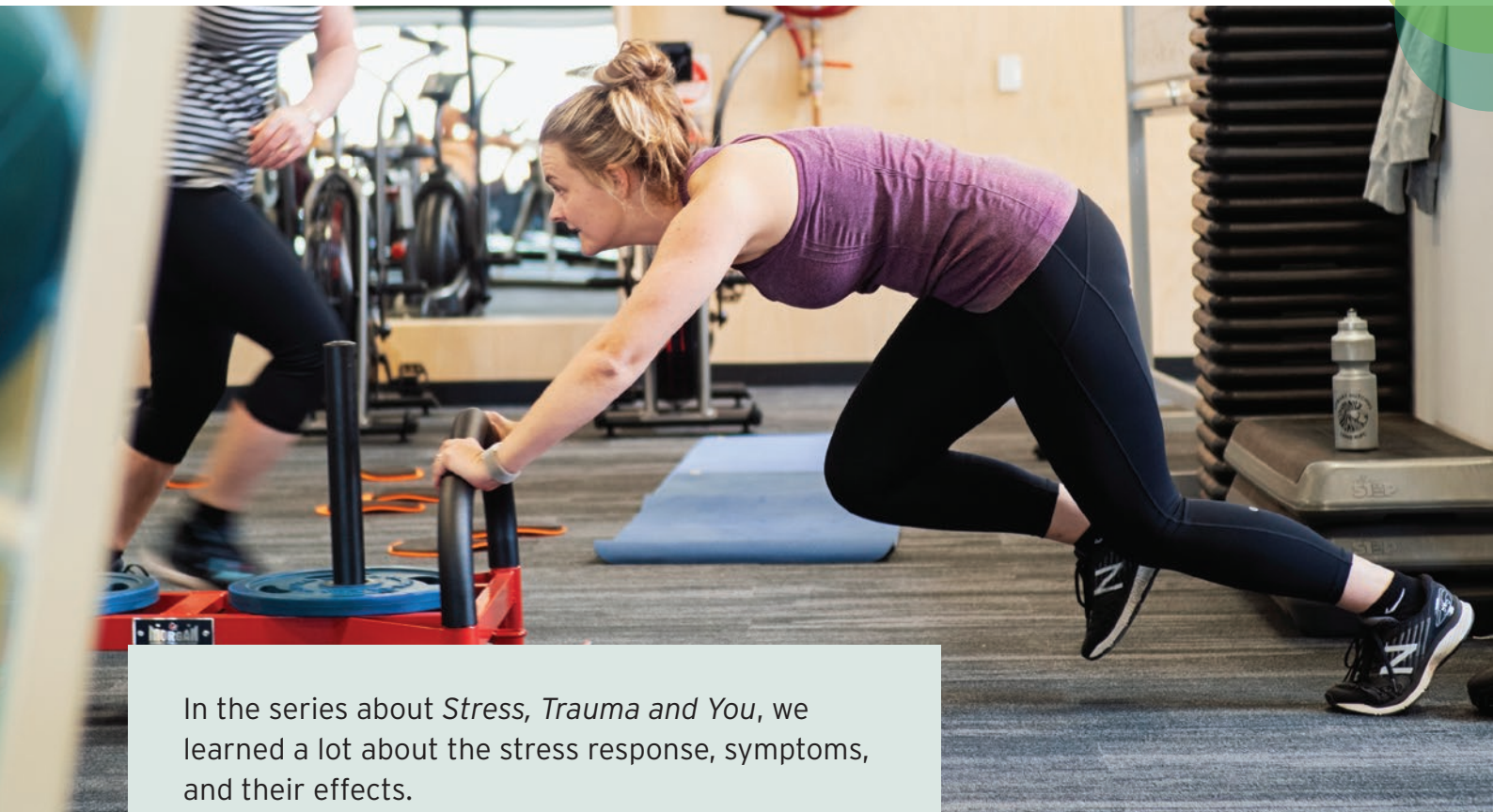


# Tactics for stress and coping:

## Strategies you can use to manage stress and symptoms of poor mental health and wellbeing



In the series about *Stress, Trauma and You*, we learned a lot about the stress response, symptoms, and their effects.

Stress, whether in response to a demanding workload, or in response to a traumatic operational event, produces many of the same psychological and physiological responses. So while the stressor may be different, and the way we interpret it may also differ, they cause similar processes to occur - ie our brains and bodies act in ways to help us respond, adjust and recover.

Because of this, many strategies for managing reactions and coping are the same, whether you are dealing with a short term work issue or a more

acute post trauma response. Some strategies are aimed at re-balancing your nervous system, and switching off the "fight or flight" response, while others are cognitive or mental strategies to help you gain perspective or challenge ways of thinking.

You may find some strategies are easier at particular times or with particular symptoms. What we have done is presented you with as many evidence-based strategies as possible so you can try the hat on and see if it fits - try them and see what works for you. Keep in mind though, some

such as abdominal breathing or mindfulness involve learning a skill and practice, so they might not work the first or second time you use them. This doesn't mean it isn't valuable or won't work, but like exercising your body, you need to train your mind.

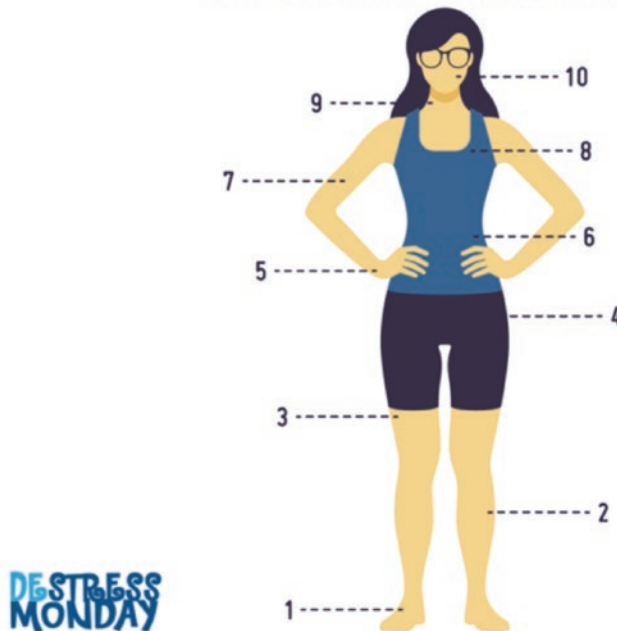
There are phone apps for a number of these strategies, and we have provided a couple of recommendations at the end of this Fact Sheet. The important thing is to find one you like - that you understand, is easy to use, and where the accent is tolerable!

## Ways to settle your nervous system and manage the impacts of stress

- **Cap the coffee.** Watch your caffeine intake as it can cause increases in adrenalin and cortisol (the hormones associated with the “fight or flight” response), which is why some people feel jittery after drinking coffee. Recent research has also shown that three or more caffeinated drinks per day was linked with the onset of a headache that day or the following day in people who experience episodic migraines (Mostofsky et al., 2019).
- **Schedule your sleep.** Pay particular attention to your sleep routines - while chronic stress and cortisol can disrupt sleep, ensuring you have good sleep routines can encourage better rest.
- **Exercise in moderation.** While exercising is a healthy way to deal with stress, endurance training or vigorous exercise may actually cause increases in cortisol. If you enjoy vigorous training or train for events such as triathlons or marathons, try and ensure you balance this with more gentle activities too.
- **Balance mind and body.** Relaxation training is designed to lower physiological arousal. Progressive muscle relaxation is one example that is easy to learn and do, as is body scanning. Other mind/body exercises such as yoga, tai chi and qi gong are also good stress relief exercises.
- **Mind your mind.** Learning mindfulness helps you to connect to the present moment, preventing worry and rumination about the past and present, helping you to focus and be aware of your body and mind.
- **Breathe better.** Breathing exercises have a tangible impact on the nervous system. Learning the techniques for abdominal breathing (also variously known as box breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, yoga breathing or yoga

## RELAX YOUR MUSCLES GRADUALLY TO RELIEVE STRESS THIS MONDAY

Progressive muscle relaxation helps you ease tension in every part of your body, one muscle group at a time. Tense up each muscle group for a few seconds, then release the tension and feel yourself let go.



nidra, or tactical breathing) help to switch off the parasympathetic nervous system that triggers the fight or flight response and switch on the sympathetic nervous system responsible for the relaxation response.

- **Hydrate for health.** Staying hydrated ensures you are supporting your body to function well.
- **Healthy food.** Feed your body healthy nutrients as sugar and processed foods can rev up an already overloaded nervous system.
- **Green time.** The term *Shinrin-yoku* was developed by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 1982, and refers to taking in the forest atmosphere, or “forest bathing”. Park and his colleagues (2010) found that spending time in the forest environment resulted in lower cortisol levels, lower pulse rate, and lower blood pressure than being in city environments. They also found that it had positive psychological

effects, reducing tension, depression, anger, fatigue and confusion. Spend time in green spaces or activities such as gardening, hiking or going to the local park with kids or a pet.

- **Laugh out loud.** Laughter reduces cortisol and adrenalin (Bains et al., 2014), so find something that makes you laugh - maybe watch a comedy or play with your pet. There are also lots of internet memes that are designed to make you laugh.
- **Get creative.** Music and creative pursuits can help people express their feelings, and provide a sense of achievement. Engaging in such activities can boost your mood and reduce stress by lowering cortisol (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Music can also be used to rev you up or calm you down, as the heart rate tends to move in the direction of the music.
- **Have a massage** - it is not just relaxing, but reduces cortisol and helps with various forms of physical and psychological stress (Field et al 2005).

- **Switch off – literally.** Take time to disconnect from devices. Aside from giving you a break from the constant demands of technology and the latest social media post, it gives you a break from the blue light that can disrupt sleep.

You can also try techniques such as keeping a journal, or talking to others to help express your feelings and decrease the psychological impacts of stress.

## Cognitive and Psychological strategies to Manage Stress

Sometimes we need additional strategies to help quieten our mind. Settling our nervous system is the first step, but if you find this isn't enough, or that you are struggling with mindfulness because of your internal chatter, try some of the suggestions below.

The first step in any cognitive strategy however, is becoming aware, and self-monitoring helps with this. There are a range of ways you can self-monitor, for example through writing things down, however many of the following strategies aim to create awareness as well as provide relief through coping.

- **Use your routine as an anchor.** An effective way to manage the disorganisation or scattiness that comes with stress and anxiety is to stick to a routine. You'll notice this is also recommended following exposure to trauma because of its grounding effects. Do you have a routine?
  - **Scheduling “worry time”.** If you find yourself constantly or regularly worrying, you can try and set parameters and schedule it in. For some people this can have a containing effect – knowing they have half an hour of free “worry time” at 6pm, where they can let their mind go, can help them redirect and refocus at other times.
- Schedule 15 minutes or half an hour a couple of times a day. Outside of

these times, remind yourself you have “worry time” scheduled and redirect yourself. During your “worry time” you can acknowledge the worries and anxiety, but try to remain aware – perhaps try writing down your main concerns paying attention to your thoughts during this time.

- **Writing things down.** Similar to worry time, if you find you have trouble quietening your mind before bed, spend ten minutes writing down your thoughts and concerns. Limit it to ten minutes though, as this is not supposed to be about obsessing over those worries.
- **Behavioural Activation.** Also known as activity scheduling, behavioural activation aims to increase your contact with positive or rewarding activities, and is commonly used with depression and low mood. Although it is a pretty simple skill, doing it can be difficult, especially when you aren't feeling motivated.

## How do I do it?

- Identify activities that are uniquely important or enjoyable to you – not activities you *should* be doing but activities you *want* to do
- Try to include a range that are small and easy – for example playing with the dog, gardening or listening to music for example, rather than activities that require preparation, travel or money, as this can be a barrier
- Come up with specific activities rather than general ideas
- Create a list – rank them from easiest to hardest. It is important that this doesn't become overwhelming and set off avoidance behaviour, so it helps to identify those that are easy to do if your stress or anxiety is high
- **Control the Controllables.** When stressed, we often assume lots of things are going wrong at once. It is important to actually identify just what it is that is causing the stress. We also tend to use a lot of

emotional energy worrying about the things outside our control, which saps our energy to attend to the things within our control.

What parts of the stressor are within your control? What is outside your control? What can you influence? Try and redirect your efforts towards those things you can control.

- **Cognitive Reframing.** This is a fancy name for changing the way you think. And if you change the way you think about something, you can change the way you experience it. Given that our stress response is activated by our **perception** of stress, changing the way we think can be incredibly effective and an important stress management tool.

We all have well-worn scripts or ways of thinking that impact how we see and interpret different situations. These are often based on our previous experiences, our attitudes, beliefs and values, personality, and a range of other unique factors.

Sometimes these are helpful, but sometimes they get in the way of us being able to see things with true perspective. When we have thinking patterns that are irrational, not based on fact, or generally unhelpful, these are known as “thinking errors”.

Some of the common “thinking errors” (or ways that reduce our ability to see perspective) are below, see if you can identify any that you use:

- **All or nothing/black and white thinking** – seeing things in two opposite categories rather than on a continuum (If I'm not a success then I must be a failure)
- **Overgeneralising** – making a broad negative conclusion based on one instance (I didn't get that right therefore I will never be able to do it, “everyone always”, “you never” statements)
- **Mental filter** – over-attending to one negative aspect instead of seeing the whole picture



- **Catastrophising** - predicting a negative outcome without considering more positive or other more likely outcomes (it won't work and I'll feel like such an idiot)
- **Jumping to conclusions** not supported by the facts
- **Mind reading** - assuming what others think
- **Magnification/minimisation** - either blowing things out of proportion, or minimising them
- **Disregarding the positive** - you discount your positive actions, qualities or experiences
- **Labelling** - putting a label on or making a global assessment (he's a loser, I'm a failure)
- **Fortune-telling** - predicting the future and that something will turn out badly
- **Emotional reasoning** - reasoning from your feelings instead of facts. You think something must be true because you "feel" it so strongly (I feel like an idiot therefore I must be one) ignoring evidence to the contrary.
- **Personalisation** - believing that negative events have something to do with you
- **Blaming** - blaming self or others
- **Shoulds, oughts and musts** - these put rigid rules on behaviour and don't allow for flexibility. Living up to these can cause significant stress.

In cognitive-behavioural therapy, a number of strategies can be used to challenge these thinking errors, including the following:

## Reality Testing - Examine the Evidence. Assess the validity of your thoughts:

- What is the evidence for and against this thought being true?
- How do you know it will turn out this way?
- What facts do you have to prove this?
- What are the facts of the situation?
- Are my thoughts factual or is this an interpretation?
- How can I check if my thoughts are true?

### The Double Standard Method.

You probably wouldn't speak to a friend or child the way you speak to yourself. If this was a friend talking to you, what would you say to them?

### Perspective taking - Shades of Grey

- What's the likelihood of this happening/that this is true?
- Think of an exception
- Find the in-between - very few situations are truly absolute
- Is there an alternative explanation/s?
- How else could someone interpret this?
- What is most likely to happen?
- Will this matter in 1 month/1 year/5 years?

### Goal directed thinking

- Cost-benefit analysis
- What are the pros and cons of thinking this way?
- Does it keep you stuck?
- Does it help me to feel good or achieve my goals?

These strategies are the cornerstone of cognitive-behavioural therapy, and can be worked through with a psychologist if you wish to explore them further.

## Want further help or resources?

For more information check out other posts and resources available through MyPulse [www.mypulse.com.au](http://www.mypulse.com.au).

### Other information and links:

<https://positivepsychology.com/stress-management-techniques-tips-burn-out/>

[https://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN\\_TCS.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_TCS.htm)

<https://bebrainfit.com/category/stress-relaxation/>

[www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org)

**Apps:** There are dozens of apps available to use, and these are just some that come recommended. It is important to find one that works for you.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

- PMR Progressive muscle relaxation
- Headspace

### Mindfulness:

- Smiling mind
- Calm
- Buddhify

### Breathing:

- Tactical Breather
- Breathe 2 Relax

### Sleep:

- Sleep cycle
- Sleep Stream - a range of sounds including waves, rain, and white noise
- Relax Melodies



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## GET HELP NOW

You can access a range of confidential services, which are designed specifically for the Tasmanian emergency services community from Wellbeing Support.

**Ambulance Tasmania Peer Support** 6166 1994

**CISM** 0427 181 207 | [manager@cism.tas.gov.au](mailto:manager@cism.tas.gov.au)

**Wellbeing Support Psychological Services**

Phone (office hours) 6173 2188 | [wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au](mailto:wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au)

**Wellbeing Support Officers:**

**South** 0429 453 689 or 0436 800 604 **North** 0436 812 038 **North West** 0419 126 551

Further general information is available at [mypulse.com.au](http://mypulse.com.au)

Printed fact sheets are available from [wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au](mailto:wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au)