

SEVEN KEYS STEPS TO REDUCE STRESS

Often it's not that we don't know what to do, it's just that we don't get round to doing it. Let the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic be your prompt and seminal moment to change all that. Pick two or three of these tips or try them all and hopefully they will help you make a difference to your life and stress levels in these challenging times.

1. **Sleep Sleep Sleep!** - It's the single most impactful thing you can possibly do for yourself to improve your general wellbeing and your ability to cope and manage stress. A full eight hours of sober sleep with no phones, in a dark room, at an ambient temperature will be a game changer.
2. **Cut Down the Booze** - Today's world bombards us with offers for cheeky drinks and the constant narrative of 6 o'clock being wine o'clock. Now more than ever, being confined to home, it's easy to go from a light or moderate drinker to somewhere on the wrong side of the grey-zone where you self-soothe/medicate with a glass (or three) every night. But rather than reducing stress, becoming alcohol-dependent or reliant or just drinking too much too often, will reduce your sleep quality and consequently your ability to manage stress levels.
3. **Reduce Caffeine and Sugar** - There's no denying we live in a coffee culture. Sugary or energy drinks are another part of that. But like alcohol, caffeine and sugars don't help us manage stress and they can actually cause the release of stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol. If you can't do without your caffeine-fix, try cutting your intake and reduce the amount you consume from around mid-afternoon. Try herbal, fruit or green teas instead.
4. **Diet** - The classic expression 'food is fuel' is true, but bearing with that analogy, if you put junk into your engine, you can't expect optimal performance. Eating some key foods can have a huge impact on helping your body and mind to manage stress. A lot of the usual suspects are on the list - but this is a good base to work from:
 - Brassicas & green leafy veg that are rich in fibre
 - Omega-3 rich avocados
 - Citrus fruits and strawberries - full of anxiety reducing Vitamin C
 - Nuts and seeds, from chia to pistachios, almonds and walnuts, the Vitamin B is key
 - Wholegrains and unrefined carbohydrates like sweet potatoes
 - Fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, trout (if you don't like fish some eggs and milk are also rich in omega-3)
 - Probiotics can help boost your immune system and gut health, which in turn helps improve anxiety and fight off depression
 - And last, but very definitely not least, anti-oxidant rich dark chocolate
5. **Exercise** - We all know its importance, but too often it gets pushed down the priority list and we don't make time for it, while somehow there's always time for that extra Netflix episode. The adrenaline created by exercise is key to improving mood and managing stress especially when we're working from home. This is new for so many of us, so when you're creating your new normal ensure that you factor in regular exercise every day, whether that's an exercise app you can do first thing in the morning in your home, a walk or a run - look at options that can work with your lifestyle.
6. **Fresh Air** - the benefits of nature are well-documented. For as long as we are allowed to be out and about, try getting out each day - obviously adhering to all the government guidelines on social distancing. Creating a 'fake commute' to/from work or getting out at

lunch, even if it's just a short break to see the sky - will reduce stress levels and be great for your overall mental wellbeing.

7. **Ask for help!** - Life is complicated and it's even harder to manage its ups and downs alone. Create a network of support with friends, family or colleagues who you trust and feel able to call on when it most matters. Sometimes, asking for help is actually the bravest thing you can do, so don't be afraid - it's a sign of strength not weakness.

And do remember, learning to manage stress is a skill, it takes practice and often needs to be actively considered with mechanisms put into your life so you can unlearn your stress-triggers and develop the ability to manage stress better.

These are uncharted waters, so we are all learning new coping mechanisms to deal with the new ways of life and the challenges they present us. Be kind to yourself and recognise that it is normal to feel stressed by such a rapid change in the way we live our lives. For most of us, our stress levels will reflect this and there will undoubtedly be peaks and troughs.

Following these fundamental ways to improve your coping skills will hopefully help you get through.