



Hampshire and Isle of Wight

Managing Stress toolkit





Stress

What is stress?

We all talk about stress and being stressed, but what is it?

A dictionary definition of stress is a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances.

We all have different levels of capacity to cope with adverse or demanding circumstances.



So we know what it is, but do you know why stress creates the physical symptoms we experience?

Our brains evolved when the world was very different. At the time us humans were nomadic hunter-gatherers, living in tribal communities. Our society and technology has evolved quickly - much quicker than the evolution of our bodies and brains.

Flashback to this scene, hundreds of thousands of years ago. Our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers in a world where the threat of becoming prey was a real concern.

Fight or Flight?

Just as they had done a hundred times before, they relaxed near the watering hole, enjoying the fruits of their recent forage. All of a sudden, a rustle in the bush nearby caught their attention. Their senses heightened, previous experience meant a saber-toothed tiger or something just as life threatening was about to pounce.

In order to live to tell the tale, our ancestors would have to be able to rapidly switch from a state of 'resting and digesting' to one of 'fighting or fleeing'.

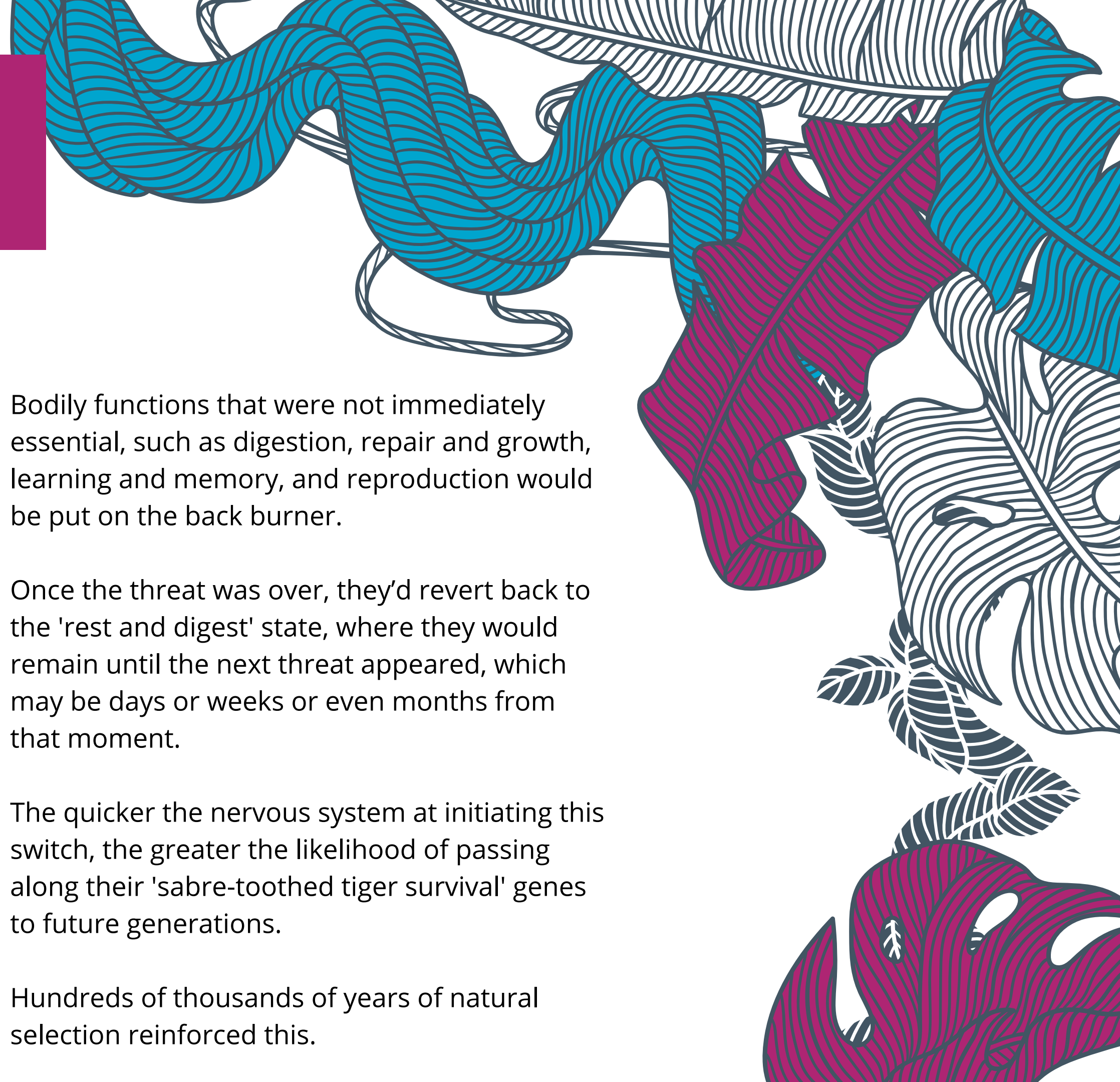
The bodily functions necessary to survive such an encounter, including increased heart rate and breathing, increased blood pressure, increased blood to muscles, and adrenaline release, all quickly kicking into gear to improve chances of escaping death.

Bodily functions that were not immediately essential, such as digestion, repair and growth, learning and memory, and reproduction would be put on the back burner.

Once the threat was over, they'd revert back to the 'rest and digest' state, where they would remain until the next threat appeared, which may be days or weeks or even months from that moment.

The quicker the nervous system at initiating this switch, the greater the likelihood of passing along their 'sabre-toothed tiger survival' genes to future generations.

Hundreds of thousands of years of natural selection reinforced this.



Today

Fast-forward to today, our genetics mean that we still have super sharp 'sabre-toothed tiger survival' genes that our ancestors would be proud of, switching on at super speed,

Yet modern humans live in an environment completely different from the one we evolved in, and our automatic responses from our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system hasn't yet caught up.

Instead of spending the majority of our life in a "rest and digest" state as our ancestors did, we are constantly experiencing low-level stressors that shift us into 'fight or flight'.

Most of us do not have to fear becoming prey, but milder threats such as work demands, bills, constant rushing, non-stop emails, and strained relationships create the same response in our body as a sabre-toothed tiger ready to pounce.

Our blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing rate increase. Digestion, learning and memory, repair and growth, and reproductive function, which aren't essential for fighting or fleeing, decrease.

Although these changes in physiology are essential to survive a rare saber-toothed tiger attack, they become detrimental to our health if we never shift back out of this stressed state.



Physical Symptoms

A prolonged increase in blood pressure and heart rate puts stress on the cardiovascular system, leading to the build up of fats, cholesterol and other substances in and on your artery walls, leading to heart disease, and stroke.

An extended decrease in digestive enzyme production and gut motility leads to heartburn, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome.

Altered blood flow to the reproductive organs can result in infertility, erectile dysfunction, and a host of other gynaecological issues. In fact, many of the leading causes of death can be linked to the effects of constant low-level stress.

To our ancestors and to us, stress really is a matter of life or death.

The body is unable to distinguish between physical danger and psychological distress and so therefore the human reaction is the same whether the threat is real or imagined!

Busy day? Feeling stressed? Wondering why you are finding it difficult to complete simple tasks or to think clearly?

Well, based on brain science it's no wonder. During times of stress our frontal lobe temporarily goes 'offline', It doesn't matter if you can translate 20 languages or that you are an expert in quantum physics, if your brain perceives - and that is the important word - that you are in danger, then the energy that your frontal lobe would normally use to process all that clever stuff is sent to other parts of the brain and body systems as a priority to help you through this 'life-threatening' incident.

The Good News

The good news is, once our brains recognise that we are safe all the systems return to normal.

Too busy to relax is no longer a viable objection because brain science says prioritising relaxation lifts us out of survival mode and speeds up the return of our higher functioning, our creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

So what do we do? Unfortunately escaping modern life and becoming a cave dweller isn't a realistic stress-reducing option. But protecting our nervous system from constant high alert is.

We have evolved into intelligent beings who are able to respond rather than react to stressors. We can sense-check our thoughts and ground ourselves in reality. We can burn off those stress hormones and look after our sleep and nutrition, doing all we can to turn on our 'rest and digest state'.

Doing this allows us to be able to focus on mind and body repair, growth, learning and memory, rather than keeping the wolf (tiger) from the door

Two ideas to help manage stress

- 1 Self care affirmations
- 2 Journalling for Sleep

YOU CAN
DO IT!

BELIEVE IN
YOURSELF

DON'T
QUIT

Self care affirmations for NHS staff

Begin by thinking about a positive message that you might need to hear. It can be helpful to think of a negative thought you often have about yourself or about a situation.

Now, try to imagine the opposite of that thought and put it into a sentence. There are some examples below to help you get started.

Feel free to pick a few of these that you connect with or create your own! The key is to repeat your personal affirmation(s) to yourself a few times each day to keep them present in your mind.

You can write them in a journal, write them on your bathroom mirror, write them on a post-it note, write them on your hand, make them the background on your phone, say them out loud to yourself, say them out loud to your pet, send them to your friend – the options are endless.

Whatever it is you do, make it work for you and make sure you receive the messages multiple times a day to reap the benefits.

Affirmation Examples

- I am in charge of how I feel today.
- I can do this
- I believe in my ability to get through tough times.
- I will not stress over things I cannot control.
- The feelings in my body are normal and I fully accept them.
- I have everything I need within me.
- I am a loving human being.
- It's ok that yesterday felt like a hard day.
- I am worthy of good things.
- I have an inner sense of calm.
- My life is full of love.
- I can cultivate the life experiences I want.
- I will be present and calm today.
- All of my feelings are ok.
- I get angry sometimes, but I am full of love.
- I can take things one day, or one hour, at a time.
- When I go with the flow, my life is easy and filled with joy.
- I appreciate my life and find things to be grateful for.
- I have been through hard things before and have survived them.
- This will not break me.
- I let go of what I can't change and do my best with what I can.
- I am going to focus on things I love to get me through this.
- This is hard, and I can do hard things.
- I am allowed to express pain.
- I have the ability to overcome anxiety.
- I matter
- I am important
- I look after myself so I can look after others
- I am doing the best I can with what I have available
- I am able to get through tough times
- This too shall pass
- I am proud of myself and the work I do
- I have inner strength and resources
- I make wise decisions based on what I know

Journalling for Sleep

Writing your thoughts in a journal can be a very effective way of processing your feelings.



Not only that, but journaling can help you recognize unproductive or negative thoughts and behaviours, and can help you respond to these behaviours in a more constructive way. And when you can handle life's stresses in a positive way, it's much easier to sleep well at night.

- take time to figure out what works best for you
- what epiphany's you get from the journaling session and how you can use that information
- a quick review of how journaling makes you feel. If you deliberately acknowledge that you feel good doing it you are more likely to repeat it, compared to just rushing to the next thing on your to-do list.

You can follow these prompts as much or as little as you want— the important thing is that you are writing.

Vent your day's worries and frustrations

Anger, worry, and frustration are natural and healthy responses to life's stresses, but it's important to release them in a healthy way.

Journaling is an excellent way to blow off steam and let go of some of the anger you may be feeling. Writing down your angry or unpleasant thoughts can help you make sense of them, as well as provide a sense of catharsis you can't get from bottling up your emotions.

It's also worth documenting troubling experiences here so that you can examine why they're affecting you, and how you can respond to or move past them.



Keep a Gratitude Journal

On the opposite side of the coin, you can keep track of things that make you happy.

Reflecting on what brings you joy can help put you in a more positive mood, which can also benefit your physical health, your mental health and lead to better sleep.

Consider a positive experience or event that has happened recently, and be sure to note why it brings you happiness. Some extra positivity in your life can really go a long way in helping you get a better night's sleep.

Make a Ta-Da List

Unlike a traditional to-do list, where your contentment with your day depends on how much you've crossed off the list, it also serves to remind us of what we still have yet to do.

Your ta-da list is always reflecting on your day which helps us visualise what is taking up our time and to make changes if necessary yet affirms and celebrates our actual progress and activities keeping us motivated and inspired to keep going.

Make a To-Do List

Writing out a to-do list may seem overwhelming if you've got a lot on your plate, but it really is helpful for quieting anxious thoughts and helping you clear your head each night.

Begin by compiling the unfinished tasks you need to address tomorrow, big or small.

Not only does this provide you a clear list of intentions for the following day, but it also helps you keep track of your progress and removes the anxiety of pondering all these tasks as you're trying to wind down for bed.

Journal Prompts

Write down one word to describe your day

Emotions I felt today

How are you feeling now that the day is over? How were you feeling earlier today? Why did you feel those things? Good or bad, let it all out. Happy emotions will put you in a positive place, and letting the negative emotions out will give you some closure on the day.

Good or awesome things that have happened today:

Note down any good or awesome situations that have happened today! Started a new book? Bought new clothes? Went to the gym? Whatever it is, write it down!

Self-Care

You can use this space to write your self-care activities you already did or you could note down some of the selfcare ideas that you would like to try.

Journal Prompts

My biggest challenge of today was...

What was the most difficult challenge you faced? How did it feel? What did it make you realise?
How did you approach it? How did you find the resources to get through it? What did you learn?

I'm proud of the way I... today.

Fill in the blank with this bedtime journal prompt. What did you deal with? What did you work through? Is there something you accomplished? What are you proud of yourself for? If there's more than one... write them all down! The more the better!

Beautiful moments that stand out to me from today are...

Write them down, in detail!

Journal Prompts

Something that bothered me today was...

Just because you may be lucky in the grand scheme of things and perhaps your feelings feel like 'first world problems' – it doesn't mean your feelings aren't valid.

You are allowed to be bothered, disappointed or upset by things, big or small. Get it all out on paper. Why did it bother you? Is there anything you can do to change this situation? If yes, what can you do to help yourself with these feelings tomorrow. If not, note it, feel it, acknowledge it, and let it go.

Allow yourself to grieve things that you missed or felt sad about today, and forgive yourself for something that didn't go to plan. All emotions are valid.

This bedtime journal prompt is all about showing gratitude from the day. Don't feel guilty for having things to celebrate. What was the highlight of your day? It could be something really big that you achieved or experienced, or something as simple as taking the time to enjoy a cup of tea without distractions. Even if you had a bad day, it wasn't all bad was it?

Today I'm grateful for...

It may be an object, a practice, an activity, the sunshine, a cup of coffee that you really needed, a fluffy friend of yours or a human being that stood by your side and listened when you really needed it. What or who couldn't you have done today without?

Take a minute with this bedtime journal prompt to write down the things and the people you are most grateful for. The people that have helped you get where you are this evening.

Go the extra mile and, if its a human you're grateful for, send them a message to express your gratitude for their presence. Kindness is the most beautiful thing to spread.



Health & Wellbeing Support Service



I hope to give my NHS colleagues a safe space and listening ear...

When we are overwhelmed it gets harder for us to step back and really think about what is going on and work out what we need to do to better support ourselves.

— **LYNSEY BERWICK**

Health & Wellbeing Advisor, Health & Wellbeing Support Service



Lynsey wrote the information in this toolkit. Her specific area of expertise is burnout, stress management, bereavement and change.

She worked in an IT company for 17 years before pursuing her dream job as a Counsellor.

She is in the later stages of completing a Level 5 counselling qualification, alongside supporting corporate workplace wellbeing, Connect 5 (wellbeing) Training for Mind and is a counsellor at a bereavement charity and Anxiety UK.

Where to go for support

The last two years have been hard for everyone – especially those working in healthcare.

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight (HIOW) Health & Wellbeing programme provides enhanced support to NHS and primary care colleagues across the region to ensure you can stay healthy and well.

Visit the People Portal today:

- Get help for a range of issues such as anxiety, stress, sleep, diet, back or neck pain.
- No need to log in to your work's intranet – available on your mobile or desktop.
- Easy access to ongoing support with links to national and local services.

Contact the Health & Wellbeing Support Service for 1-2-1 support with:

- Weight Management and Nutrition
- Fitness and Exercise
- Stress Management
- Sleep Management
- General Wellbeing and Self-Care

Call: 0300 772 7099 (available Mon-Fri: 9am-4.30pm)
email: HWSS@hhft.nhs.uk

Scan here to access the self referral form:



www.hiowpeople.nhs.uk/ccc/hiow

Feeling stressed or burnt out?

We can help.



Visit the People Portal – a new online resource packed full of health and wellbeing advice to help you stay healthy and well in work.

www.hiowpeople.nhs.uk/ccc/hiow
#justforyou

