Stress Busting

Jenny Cadman and Josie Bannon (Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner)

Helping yourself to

Reduce your Stress!
It can be hard to ask for help when you are feeling stressed. Well done in taking the first step towards trying to tackle the problem.

This booklet is aimed at any student who struggles with stress. It includes a number of student examples to illustrate different ideas and techniques. All the techniques in the booklet are based on the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy approach. We will talk more about what that is later in the booklet. CBT has a lot of research to show that it can be very helpful for improving mood. You may be working through the booklet on your own, or with the support of a practitioner from the Wellbeing Centre. It can also be helpful to talk to someone you trust such as a family member or a friend so you have their support through this process.

Tackling stress can be a difficult and challenging process and there may be times where you feel as though you aren't getting anywhere. Just remember that we all have good days and bad days so try not to let the bad days feel as though you have taken ‘two steps back’.

CBT techniques can seem difficult at first but much like exercise, the more you use them the easier they become, until they don’t seem like any effort at all. Again, like exercise it is also important to keep up with these techniques as much as possible so they become more of a habit and feel more natural to use.

The idea of this booklet is to give you the information you need to help yourself to tackle stress. This means that you need to have a go at all the techniques to find out which ones are the most helpful for you.
Beth...

Beth is a second year English Literature student, she is clever and attractive, she gets good grades and plays for the university netball team. All Beth’s friends think that her life is perfect, but is it? Beth is always thinking the worst of herself and comparing herself to her friends, she rushes from place to place and is overwhelmed by the thought that she can’t cope. She gets head aches and often has a cold, she has started to become irritable with her boyfriend then feels bad about herself for being that way.

Adam...

Adam is doing a PGCE, he moved to Exeter from London and was over the moon to be offered a place on the course, but the work load is massive and he is only getting paid enough to survive. He is having to put in more and more hours study to keep up. After taking classes Adam is not even sure that wants to be a teacher anymore, but he feels he has come too far to give up now. He has started to drink too much, is not cooking proper meals and his sleep is quite disrupted.
Signs of stress

Stress can affect us in a powerful way. It can affect the way we think, how we behave and how we feel physically. Once we start to feel stressed the changes that we notice in these areas can start to feed into the other areas and begin a stressful spiral that it can be hard to break out of.

The above diagram shows how you can get trapped in this vicious cycle. If you have thoughts that you can’t cope, you might start to feel your heart rate increasing and become more tense, this can then cause you to avoid situations that are causing stress, or to procrastinate, which can cause you to think more negatively about yourself and increase the pressure you’re under.
How does your stress affect you?

The techniques in this booklet are based on the idea of this vicious cycle. Because all of the areas together form the cycle it is possible to tackle stress by focusing on any one specific area. The booklet includes techniques focusing on thoughts and behaviour as a way of breaking the cycle. This is where the term ‘Cognitive Behavioural Therapy’ came from.

FYI — Cognitive refers to things such as thoughts, memories and attention.
What is stress?

The term stress is derived from a physicist who used it to describe how heavy a load a structure could carry. We feel stressed when we feel that we are unable to cope with the demands that are upon us. Our perception of the ‘stressor’ is important, what makes people stressed can vary from person to person. Some stressors are external, such as three assignments due on the same date, others are internal, such as beliefs that our work has to be perfect which can put us under a lot of pressure.
Myth Busting
- The facts about stress

Everyone gets stressed, thinking your weak is another thing to get stressed about on top of everything else.

Getting stressed means I’m weak...

People are very good at hiding how they feel, they may be really stressed on the inside, but we can’t see this. We tend to compare how we feel to how others look.

Everyone else is doing much better than me...

Life can be very stressful, but there are often things that you can do to help manage the situation and improve how you are feeling.

Life is just stressful, there is nothing I can do about it...
Why do we experience anxiety?

It is important to remember that all humans experience anxiety. It's the physical response to fear which has kept us safe over the course of evolution. These physical feelings can range from nervousness up to extreme panic/sheer terror.

The Fight or Flight Response

When we are exposed to a threat (whether physical or psychological) we experience a fight/flight/freeze response where adrenalin is released into our bodies and causes a series of physiological changes.

Anxiety tells us that there is something dangerous to pay attention to. This is why it feels so unpleasant; it gets our attention. Often this is a helpful response - for example, if a car was speeding towards us. If we felt no anxiety we are likely to get injured or killed. Anxiety can also help improve performance, for example it can help athletes to perform better during a race.

In some situations this anxiety response can be out of proportion to the event and is less helpful, for example, freezing during an exam or in a social situation. It can be helpful to imagine the graph below - some anxiety will improve your performance, however too much anxiety will impair your performance.
Physiological response to stress

When the fight/flight/freeze response is activated we experience an increase in adrenalin which caused a number of physiological responses. Whilst these can feel unpleasant, they all serve a specific protective purpose and are signs that your body is preparing to fight, to run away or to freeze until the threat passes.

1. Glucose is released into our blood stream to give us a surge of energy
2. Heart beats faster to carry extra oxygen in the blood to our muscles and our brain. It may feel like your heart is pounding
3. Breathing faster to increase our oxygen intake which is needed to convert the glucose into energy. You may start to yawn, notice breathlessness, tightness in your chest or dizziness
4. Tingling or feeling cold where blood is diverted away from areas that are not so vital such as vital organs, skin, fingers and toes
5. Dry mouth and churning stomach where blood is diverted from the digestive system to the muscles
6. Muscles tense for action and can result in aches and pains, trembling or shaking
7. Sweating originally to make us more slippery to escape from predators. Today it is also the body’s way of cooling
8. Changed vision or spots before your eyes pupils dilate to give clearer vision
About caffeine and stress

Caffeine mimics anxiety symptoms and can therefore exacerbate any stress you feel. Lots of things contain caffeine such as coffee, tea, green tea, cola and chocolate. It’s very addictive and you can get withdrawal effects when you cut it out.

There is no nutritional need for caffeine in the diet. Moderate caffeine intake, however, is not associated with any recognized health risk. Three 8 oz. cups of coffee (250 milligrams of caffeine) per day is considered a moderate amount of caffeine. Six or more 8 oz. cups of coffee per day is considered excessive intake of caffeine. Caffeine enters the bloodstream through the stomach and small intestine and can have a stimulating effect as soon as 15 minutes after it is consumed. Once in the body, caffeine will persist for several hours: it takes about 6 hours for one half of the caffeine to be eliminated. This means if you are having problems with stress or sleep, you should avoid caffeine all together.

How caffeine works

- During the day the chemical Adenosine, accumulates in the brain. This binds to receptors and slows down brain activity. The higher the level of adenosine, the more tired you will feel.
- Caffeine competes with the adenosine and combines with the adenosine receptors. This stops the adenosine binding and stops you feeling tired.
- To compensate for this the body will create more receptors which means that you will need more caffeine to get the same effect.
- Caffeine also increases adrenaline and dopamine.

How much caffeine is in what?

Here is a guideline of how much caffeine is in some different food and drinks. Try to work out how much caffeine you are currently consuming.

- One mug of instant coffee: 100mg.
- One mug of filter coffee: 140mg.
- One mug of tea: 75mg.
- One can of cola: 40mg.
- One can of energy drink: 80mg.
- One 50g bar of plain (dark) chocolate: around 50mg.
- One 50g bar of milk chocolate: around 25mg.

http://www.barnsleyhospital.nhs.uk/
Reducing the physical symptoms of stress

As we saw in the vicious cycle that how you feel physically can have a big impact on both your thoughts and what you do. Reducing these physical reactions can help to improve how you are feeling.

Stress/Anxiety and breathing...

- Stress can cause your breathing rate to increase
- Often taking deeper breaths in
- This disturbs the balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body
- It can lead to feeling dizzy, light headed, and feeling like it’s difficult to breathe
- Sometimes you might try to breathe more, which increases these symptoms and the feelings of stress

Over breathing is not dangerous! But it can make you feel more on edge!

Relaxation: Controlling your Breathing

By controlling your breathing and slowing down you can re-balance the oxygen/carbon dioxide levels and can help yourself to feel calmer.

- Make sure you are sitting comfortably
- Breath from the abdomen not the chest (check with a hand on both...which one rises)
- Take a breath in for 4 seconds
- Hold it for 2 seconds
- Then breath out for 6 seconds
- If this is too hard to start with try (in 2, hold 1, out 4)
Stress and tension...

We often tense our muscles when we feel stressed which can make us feel more ‘on edge’. It can cause our muscles to ache and feel sore which leads us to feel drained and exhausted. Having tense muscles throughout the day uses up energy which can mean we have less energy for other things. When the tiny muscles in our heads tense up it can lead to head aches (tension headaches). All in all, feeling tense and on edge means that we are more ‘reactive’ to things which may cause stress. Below is a technique to reduce muscle tension. Its called progressive muscle relaxation.

PMR sequence:

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to “make a muscle”.
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you’re yawning.
8. **Neck.** !!! Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg.** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

**Practice means progress.** Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.
Relaxing 'safe place' imagery

The effect that mental images can have on our physiology is amazing. Just take a minute to imaging your favourite meal, imaging how it would look, the aroma, the texture as you take the first mouthful and the delicious flavours. Now, what do you notice happening? Do you have increased saliva in your mouth, or a rumbling in you stomach? The images we have in our minds have a direct impact on how we feel and our physiology. With this in mind, practicing relaxing imagery exercises can be really helpful at calming the body and mind.

- Start by getting comfortable in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed, and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing, close your eyes, become aware of any tension in your body, and let that tension go with each out-breath.
- Imagine a place where you can feel calm, peaceful and safe. It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamed about going to, somewhere you've seen a picture of, or just a peaceful place you can create in your mind’s eye.
- Look around you in that place, notice the colours and shapes. What else do you notice?
- Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence. Sounds far away and those nearer to you. Those that are more noticeable, and those that are more subtle.
- Think about any smells you notice there.
- Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you or whatever is supporting you in that place, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can touch.
- Notice the pleasant physical sensations in your body whilst you enjoy this safe place.
- Now whilst you're in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to.
- You can choose to linger there a while, just enjoying the peacefulness and serenity. You can leave whenever you want to, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now, and bringing yourself back to alertness in the 'here and now'.

www.getselfhelp.co.uk/imagery.htm www.get.gg © Carol Vivyan 2009, permission to use for therapy purposes
When feeling stressed negative thoughts are very common. We may think negatively about ourselves, others, current situations, as well as the future, these negative thoughts only makes us feel worse. It’s part of the vicious cycle that we can get trapped into. Challenging these thoughts is one way of breaking the cycle.

**Characteristics of Unhelpful Thoughts:**

**Automatic:** We don’t think them on purpose; they come into our minds involuntarily. **Believable:** They seem real at the time. **Unhelpful:** They are the kind of thoughts that would be upsetting to anybody. **Distorted:** They are not accurate reflections of reality but based on how we feel at the time.
Cognitive Restructuring: Challenging your thoughts

Cognitive Restructuring is a technique that aims to change unhelpful thoughts by identifying and challenging them. The idea behind this technique is that it can help you start thinking in a more balanced way, and take all factors into consideration, rather than only paying attention to certain pieces of information.

Cognitive Restructuring can help you to see situations more objectively by lifting the veil of subjective, negative thinking. The technique reduces stress by targeting the unhelpful thinking styles that maintain it. It does this by using questions to help you consider different perspectives and generate factual evidence to challenge your unhelpful thoughts.

The three steps of Cognitive Restructuring

1. Recording your thoughts in a Thought Diary
2. Looking at evidence for and against your thoughts
3. Revise your initial thought
1. Recording your thoughts

Firstly, you need to identify the content of your unhelpful thoughts. Each time you notice yourself feeling stressed, complete the first three columns of the Thought Diary sheet. For the time being, ignore the last two columns.

1. In the first column write down a brief description of the situation you were in when the thought occurred i.e. where you were and what you were doing.

2. In the second column write down one emotional word to describe the feeling you had as a result of the thought e.g. sad, anxious, stressed or angry. Also rate how bad that feeling was on a scale of 0-100%.

3. In the third column write down exactly what the thought was i.e. the words that went through your mind or the image that occurred. Then rate how much you believe that thought to be true, where 0 is not at all and 100% is totally believe the thought.

Beth spent a week noting down unhelpful thoughts as they arose. An example of one of her thoughts is detailed below...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Revised Thought</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At home studying</td>
<td>Worried (80%), anxious (80%)</td>
<td>“I’m not going to do well enough on this piece of coursework and it will ruin my overall grade.” (65%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Worksheet A - Thought Diary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Situation</strong></th>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Revised Thought</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where you were and what you were doing</td>
<td>Emotion experienced and rating of how bad it was (0-100%)</td>
<td>Words that went through your mind and rating of how much you believe this thought (0-100%)</td>
<td>Words of new thought and rating of how much you believe this thought (0-100%)</td>
<td>Emotion experienced and rating of how strong it is (0-100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Unhelpful thinking styles

Have a look through the thoughts you have recorded and see if any of these thinking styles apply, these can be helpful to refer to when trying to generate evidence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All or nothing thinking (sometimes called 'black and white thinking')</th>
<th>Jumping to conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing only one extreme or the other. There are no in-betweens or shades of grey.</td>
<td>Mind-reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assuming we know what someone else is thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fortune telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Predicting what’s going to happen in the future.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over-generalising</th>
<th>Emotional reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing a pattern based upon a single event or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw. Tends to involve the words always, everyone, never.</td>
<td>Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magnification and minimisation</th>
<th>Shoulds and musts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophising), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important.</td>
<td>Putting unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself or others. Using critical words which make us feel guilty or like we have failed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental filter</th>
<th>Personalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only paying attention to certain types of information such as noticing failures but not successes.</td>
<td>Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault or blaming other people for something that was your fault.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disqualifying the positive</th>
<th>Labelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done.</td>
<td>Assigning labels to ourselves or other people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compare and despair</th>
<th>Memories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing only the good points in others compared with the bad ones in yourself.</td>
<td>Current situations triggering memories of past upsetting events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After you have recorded your thoughts in the thought diary the next stage is to evaluate each individual thought using the evidence table (worksheet B). We do this by collecting evidence for and against a particular thought to see whether it is accurate or not.

Choose a frequent thought from the ones you have noted on your diary sheet. Write the thought down in the top left corner of the Evidence Table sheet and note the percentage belief rating in the top right box.

It can help to imagine that you are the judge in a court where the evidence for and against the truth of your thought is being examined. Write down the evidence for each side in the table. Remember that the evidence should be factual and that you need to present the full picture so that a fair decision can be made. Generating the ‘Evidence Against’ can be difficult as it is something you a probably not used to doing. Some questions to help you to do this are given on the next page.

Next Beth chose one of her thoughts and considered the evidence for and against it...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>% Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I’m not going to do well enough on this piece of coursework and it will ruin my overall grade.”</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence For</th>
<th>Evidence Against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I find this module more difficult than the others</td>
<td>I’ve made a plan which covers the key relevant points from the lectures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve done well on my other modules</td>
<td>I’ve booked an appointment with the study skills team to get guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My tutor is available to book a tutorial with if I need one</td>
<td>The module is only worth 10 credits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generating evidence against your thoughts

Coming up with evidence against negative thoughts can be very difficult if you are not familiar with doing it. Below are a list of questions that you can ask yourself to help with generating evidence against negative thoughts.

What alternative views are there?

- If you rate the belief in your thought as 75%, what makes up the remaining 25%?
- How would a friend or someone who cares about you view this situation?
- How would I have viewed this situation before I felt anxious?
- How would I view someone else in my situation?

Does this thought fit with any of the thinking styles on the previous page?

- If it does then this means you are only looking at this from one perspective, what is the other perspective?
- E.g. if you notice the thought fits into a ‘self blaming’ style of thinking then write down all of the other external factors which might have been involved in this.

What action could I take?

- Am I assuming I can do nothing to change my situation?
- Am I overlooking solutions to problems on the assumption they won’t work?

Are there any good reasons to be so worried?

- Have you been wrong about similar things in the past?
- Will this problem matter in a week/month year?
## Worksheet B - Evidence Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>% Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence For</th>
<th>Evidence Against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Finally, you reconsider the original thought taking all the evidence into consideration to put it into perspective. Try to come up with a revised thought based on both sides of the argument.

Write down the new thought in the fourth column of the Thought Diary and rate how much you believe it.

In the final column re-rate your feeling using the same 0-100% scale. Notice if your emotion has changed as a result of changing your thought.

Remember, unhelpful thinking takes time to change; it may often be necessary to challenge your thoughts several times before you notice a difference in how you feel. As you become more expert in this approach you will start to find that the process becomes more automatic and you are able to catch the thoughts and judge them as they actually happen.

Finally Beth looked back at her initial thought and, considering all the evidence she had noted both for and against the thought, came up with the following alternative thought...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revised Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your new more balanced thought?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This coursework is only worth a small proportion of my overall grade and I am doing all I can to get a good result”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can think about thoughts like pathways in a field: the more you have a thought the more entrenched the path becomes, until it becomes the automatic route you take. By challenging these thoughts, you are stopping yourself going down that automatic path and instead creating a new path. This might feel weird at first because you have not used this ‘path’ before (or thought in this way), but the more you use it and the less you use the ‘old’ path (or thought), the more entrenched it will become and the more ‘overgrown’ the old path will feel. Eventually the new way of thinking will be the one which you automatically go down.
Worrying and stress

It can be very difficult to stop or control worries. When we worry we tend to dwell on any stressful things that are currently happening, or we worry about potential problems in the future, this worrying uses up a lot of energy which can tire us out, make us feel more on edge and make it difficult to concentrate on what we are doing.

We are now going to look at a technique that you can use to help you to control your worries. This can feel difficult to do at first, but should become easier the more you practice it.

**Worry Time**

- Whenever you notice a worry write it down (make a list).
- Give yourself a set amount of undisturbed time each day to go through your list of worries.
- Separate practical worries (e.g. problems that you can do something about) from hypothetical worries (e.g. ‘What ifs’).
- Write an action for all practical worries (what; when; where and who?).
- Give yourself time to think about the hypothetical worries (Not right before going to bed).
- Once the time is up you need to stop worrying and focus on something else.
- You might want to screw the paper up.
- Try and do something engaging and get a change of scenery.
- Any worries that you have outside of your worry time; write them down and think e.g. “I will think about that tomorrow at 5:00. There is no need to worry about it now”.

Centre for Clinical Interventions
Managing workload

When you have lots of work to do or deadlines to meet it can feel overwhelming. Below are some tips that can help you to manage your workload and help you to reduce your stress.

- Be clear about your priorities and values
- Remember rest and relaxation are very important
- Review how you use your time; note down activities you do, for how long and consider if they were priorities/necessities
- Use lists and tick off tasks when they are completed
- Prioritise important and necessary tasks – question if you are putting things off which seem difficult or pretending easy things are important
- Do one thing at a time - when revising only revise

It is really helpful to create a study time table for what you need to do so that you can look at the big picture (helicopter vision) and work out the best way to meet the demands.

- Create a hierarchy of subjects from easiest to the most difficult and rate how important they are
- Aim to get a mix of these subjects when scheduling them in, may need longer for harder subjects
- Each day schedule four, two hour blocks for revision
- Leave slack time in your time table
- Make sure you take a 10 minute break each hour!
- Make sure you schedule in enjoyable/relaxing activities each day as well as physical activities!
Setting yourself goals to work towards...

Setting goals helps us to think about what we need or want to do; to make a plan to achieve it and then move into action—If we don’t know where we are trying to get to we won’t arrive!

Making your goals SMART will make them easier for you to achieve.

**Specific** – Be as clear as you can, you may want to ‘feel better’ but ask yourself what ‘feeling better’ means you will be able to do e.g. go for more walks

**Measurable** – How will you know when you have achieved this goal?

**Achievable** – it needs to be something we really want or need to do so that we feel more motivated. Is it a small enough step?

**Relevant** - It needs to be relevant to you, it should match your values

**Time bound** - You should have a clear idea of when you want to achieve this goal by

What are your SMART goals?
The importance of saying no

Often a key reason for us feeling stressed is that we have too many things to do and not enough time to do them. It is important not to load up your tasks to a point where you feel you can’t cope. Sometimes others may ask us to do things when we do not have time. Saying ‘no’ may seem challenging but be necessary to protect time for yourself.

How to say no...

- Remember you have the right to say ‘no’
- Explain clearly that you’re not able to help and give short reasons why
- If the other person is unwilling to accept your refusal, try the broken record technique—repeat your point in a calm and clear way in response to anything the other person says
- Practice different ways of saying ‘no’

- It is tempting to say ‘yes’ to things we really want to do
- Ensure you are fully aware of what’s involved before agreeing to tasks a long way in the future that initially seem attractive
- Give yourself chance to consider if you have time and to plan what less important activity you will give up
Work environment

It is really important to think about your work environment to make sure that it is conducive with being productive. It is key to have a separate place for work and rest even if these are two places in the same room. Always try and avoid studying on your bed, this should be kept as a place of relaxation.

De-clutter!

An accumulation of bits and pieces, together can cause large amount of stress. It can mean that we spend longer trying to do things, as we can’t find what we need. Or it might even mean that we can’t bear to look for things or put off doing work as we can’t find what we need?

- Even if you feel you don’t have time, schedule in some time to go through Uni notes and file them in order.
- Sort out your room so you know where things are.
- Throw away anything that you won’t use again.
Food and mood

Research has found a link between what we eat and how we feel. It's like using the ‘right fuel’ for a car, imagine what would happen if you put diesel into a petrol car! If we eat the wrong foods a similar effect happens to our bodies. What we eat can have an impact on our mood, concentration, memory, attention, energy levels, motivation and stress.

Concentration, attention and memory

- Eat whole grain (brown, bread, rice and pasta), this means that you will more longer lasting energy.
- Eat a variety of vegetables, try and get a mix of colours, green vegetables are generally good for stress due to Folic acid.
- Fruit: Oranges are good for stress and bananas for energy.
- Eat a variety of nuts and seeds, they contain important oils and give slow releasing energy.
- Eat oily fish (Omega 3).

‘Crash and Burn’...

Certain foods get converted to glucose very quickly in the body, this means that we get a burst of energy, but then experience the crash and burn effect, where after the immediate burst of energy we feel even more burnt out than before.

- Foods that are high in sugar (sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cakes)
- White bread, rice and pasta
- Processed food (e.g. Pizza)
Sleep problems

Sleep problems are really common, particularly when we are stressed. Most people will have problems with their sleep some point in their lives. Being at University can also make sleep more difficult, the student life style can mean its harder to keep a routine and stick to healthy sleeping habits. When we feel stressed we often tend to worry when we go to bed, a time when there are no other distractions.

There are 4 main types of sleep problem:

- Falling asleep
- Staying asleep
- Non restorative/light sleep
- Waking up to early

Problems with sleep can form part of the vicious cycle of stress, if we are feeling tired or tense then we are more likely to think negatively and less likely to want to do any activities.

Preparing for sleep...

It is really important to allow yourself time to ‘wind-down’ after each day. Otherwise your body and mind will still be active when you try and sleep. Without wind-down time you may end up lying in bed with loads of thoughts going through your head.

Wind-down time should last at least an hour. During this time try and do relaxing and enjoyable things, avoid all uni work or anything that makes you feel stressed. Doing the same thing each night can help your body to recognise triggers that suggest you will be sleeping in an hour.
How to improve your sleep:
Things in the environment

Another way to improve sleep is to look at what you might be able to change in your environment. Below are some examples of environmental factors that might influence your sleep.

What could you change in your bedroom that could help your sleep?

Ear plugs can be good for blocking out the noise.

Electronic screens are overly stimulating for the brain due to the visual stimulation. They can make it harder to fall asleep.

‘Topper’ mattresses are good for improving the comfort of your bed, they are usually quite cheap too.

You can buy ‘black out’ curtains that block a lot of light, or an eye patch. If it’s light then your brain is getting the message that it’s day time and that you should be

I’m going to Change:
How to improve your sleep: Lifestyle habits

Another way to improve sleep is to look at the things you could improve in your lifestyle. Below are some examples of different things that might influence your sleep.

Getting up at the same time each day is one of the most important things you can do to improve your sleep. Even if you haven’t slept much the night before!

Alcohol interrupts the quality of sleep a person has and can cause more waking in the night. It can also lead to tiredness in the day.

Going to bed full up or hungry can interfere with sleep, best to have an early dinner and a light snack before bed.

Physical activity is great for improving sleep; but avoid 4 hours before bed.

Nicotine and caffeine are both stimulants and can interfere with getting to sleep. Try to avoid 4-6 hours before going to bed.

How to improve your sleep:

- Getting up at the same time each day is one of the most important things you can do to improve your sleep. Even if you haven’t slept much the night before!
- Alcohol interrupts the quality of sleep a person has and can cause more waking in the night. It can also lead to tiredness in the day.
- Going to bed full up or hungry can interfere with sleep, best to have an early dinner and a light snack before bed.
- Physical activity is great for improving sleep; but avoid 4 hours before bed.
- Nicotine and caffeine are both stimulants and can interfere with getting to sleep. Try to avoid 4-6 hours before going to bed.

I'm going to Change:
4 Rules for better sleep

The association we have between our bed and sleep can make a big difference to how easily we fall asleep. If we often lie in bed worrying and struggle to get to sleep we might start to associate the bed with stress rather than calmness and sleep. The longer we spend in bed awake, the weaker the association will be with sleep. Below are 4 different rules to strengthen the association between bed and sleep which will help to improve sleep.

1 The bed is for sleep rule

Healthy sleepers generally fall asleep within twenty minutes. If you are lying in bed unable to get to sleep for longer than this then the association between bed and wakefulness/anxiety is strengthened. If your not asleep within 20 mins; get up, go into a different room if possible and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy again, then go back to bed.

2 The twenty minute rule

Feeling tired and feeling sleepy are different. You actually feel tired without feeling sleepy but you should only try and go to sleep when you feel sleepy. When you feel sleepy you might yawn a lot, have hot, heavy eyes that feel like they want to close and have heavy muscles.

3 The sleepy rule

Only sleep at night. Make sure not to nap in the day, no matter how much sleep you missed the night before. Napping in the day decreases the need to sleep at night and gets rid of the ‘sleepy’ feeling you need to fall asleep at night.

4 The night time rule

Everything else (except sex) is banned! So no reading; working; talking on the phone; looking at the internet; nothing in bed but sleep. Sometimes this might be difficult being a student; but its worth doing if sleep is a problem. Some people do find reading in bed helpful, however this is also about association. Good sleepers read to stay awake; poor sleepers read to get to sleep.
Problem solving

There may be specific problems that you are worrying about or that are making you feel low. These problems can feel overwhelming and it can feel impossible to find a solution. This problem solving technique can help you to think through the problem in a step by step way and hopefully come to a practical solution. This might also be a helpful technique to use if you find you have more evidence for a negative thought than against it. If the thought is based on the facts then it is more helpful to think about what can be done to overcome this problem rather than simply change how you think about it.

7 Steps to problem solving

1. Problem identification - What is the specific problem?
2. Solution identification - What are all the potential solutions? Even those that sound absurd!
3. Strengths and weaknesses analysis - What are the strengths and weaknesses of each solution?
4. Solution selection - Which solution is the best?
5. Implementation plan - Plan what, where, when and who?
6. Implementation - Carry out the planned solution
7. Review - Review the original problem. Has this made a difference?
Well done for working through Stress Busting!

It is worth keeping an eye on your stress levels. It is perfectly normal to experience some stress, but if you find that it starts to impacting on your wellbeing then you should try to do something about it. The important thing is that you have learnt some skills that you can use to reduce your stress levels.

You might feel as though you’re still not where you want to be in terms of how stressed you feel. This is completely normal, it can take time for these techniques to reverse the vicious cycle of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. If you found that they have made any difference at all, even if it’s small, this is encouraging. Just keep up the good work and as time goes on you will notice it getting easier. You might also find further Cognitive Behaviour Therapy helpful.

It can be helpful to schedule in a day a month where you can focus on YOU! Where you can have a look back through this booklet to remind yourself of the different techniques and only do activities that are enjoyable and don’t involve any stress. If you schedule it in you’ll be more likely to do it, these things can easily get lost or forgotten about otherwise.

Jenny Cadman and Josie Bannon (Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners), Wellbeing Centre University of Exeter