



Somerset Community Pain
Management Service

**Working together
on my health**

Stress and Pain

Stress affects everyone but we know that if you have ongoing pain, stress can make your pain feel worse. So learning how to manage stress is helpful.

Stress cannot be avoided entirely. A certain amount is good for you. It provides you with the energy that motivates you to attempt challenges and to make changes in your daily life. It can focus your attention and spur you into action. However, too much stress is a bad thing. It can affect the way we think, act and behave. Too much stress can prevent us from dealing with long-term pain effectively, and can in fact make pain worse.

Thankfully, there are solutions to this. This factsheet is designed to help you come up with your own solutions to problems with stress. If you want more information, then go to the 'Get More Information' section of the patient online platform, if you're registered with the pain service. This website is accessible at <http://somesetpain.co.uk>. If you're not registered, there is more information at the same website under the 'Get information/resources' section.

What is stress?

Stress is a pattern of responses to real or imagined situations that threaten our well-being. These responses are:

- **Physical** – changes in your body, such as an increased heart rate
- **Behavioural** – things we do to try and cope with stress
- **Psychological** – changes in what you are thinking, such as problem solving and worrying
- **Emotional** – changes in how you are feeling. For instance, anxious, motivated or frustrated

What causes stress?

There are many different causes or 'stressors' and they affect people in different ways. They can be divided up like this:

- **Positive events** such as moving house, getting married, having a baby or a new job
- **Negative events** such as a serious illness, redundancy or relationship breakdown
- **Daily hassles** - things that are happening to you every day, such as commuting to work, managing household tasks, having too many things to do or on going worries about weight, finances or pain.
- **Emergencies** – a 999 call, a robbery or an assault.

How do we react to stress?

We all tend to react to stress in the same way. This is known as the stress response, or as **flight or fight**. The brain releases chemicals, and this leads to changes in the body. The diagram below explains these changes:



Many of these changes allow our bodies to respond to danger. **Flight or fight** evolved in humans and other animals to increase their survival rates. It is an automatic reaction. It can focus your attention and spur you into action. This is great in an emergency, but not always helpful in situations of daily ongoing stress.

What about on-going stress?

Daily hassles and life events can cause you to have a gradual build-up of stress. Most people do not realise when they are becoming increasingly tense.

Ongoing stress can make you anxious, which can interfere with your ability to do things. Prolonged and severe stress can increase your risk of illness. It can produce other symptoms such as:



So how can you manage stress?

Start by learning to recognise your response to stress. Remember, stress itself is not bad. Become aware of how you respond and when that response is happening or increasing and whether that response is helpful or unhelpful.

There are things you can do to help you to regain control over your physical and emotional responses:

- ✓ Relaxation and breathing exercises (see **Relaxation**)
- ✓ Problem solving
- ✓ Time management
- ✓ Goal setting
- ✓ Exercise (see **Exercise**)
- ✓ Look at the role of your thoughts
- ✓ Increasing activity and enjoyment (see **Becoming more active: getting started**)
- ✓ Using Mindfulness