



for Scotland's mental health

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

STRESS

This resource explains what stress is, what might cause it and how it can affect you. It includes information about ways you can help yourself and how to get support.

If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: info@samh.org.uk.



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WHAT IS STRESS?

Most of us know what it's like to feel stressed, but it's not easy to pin down exactly what stress means. When we say things like "this is stressful" or "I'm stressed", we might be talking about:

- Situations or events that put pressure on us – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens
- Our reaction to being placed under pressure – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with



“It’s overwhelming. Sometimes you can’t see beyond the thick fog of stress.”

There’s no medical definition of stress, and health care professionals often disagree over whether stress is the cause of problems or the result of them. This can make it difficult for you to work out what causes your feelings of stress, or how to deal with them. Whatever your personal definition of stress is, it’s likely that you can learn to manage your stress better by:

- managing external pressures, so stressful situations don’t seem to happen to you quite so often
- developing your emotional resilience, so you’re better at coping with tough situations when they do happen and don’t feel quite so stressed



Is stress a mental health problem?

Being under pressure is a normal part of life. It can help you take action, feel more energised and get results. However, if you often become overwhelmed by stress, these feelings could start to be a problem for you.

Stress isn't a psychiatric diagnosis, but it's closely linked to your mental health in two important ways:

- Stress can cause mental health problems, and make existing problems worse. For example, if you often struggle to manage feelings of stress, you might develop a mental health problem like [anxiety](#) or [depression](#)
- Mental health problems can cause stress. You might find coping with the day-to-day symptoms of your mental health problem, as well as potentially needing to manage medication, health care appointments or treatments, can become extra sources of stress.

This can start to feel like a vicious circle, and it might be hard to see where stress ends and your [mental health problems](#) begin.

“[When I'm stressed] I feel like I'm on the verge of a breakdown.”

Why does stress affect me physically?

You might find that your first clues about being stressed are physical signs, such as tiredness, headaches or an upset stomach.

There could be many reasons for this, as when we feel stressed we often find it hard to sleep or eat well, and poor diet and lack of sleep can both affect our physical health. This in turn can make us feel more stressed emotionally.

Also, when we feel anxious, our bodies release hormones called cortisol and adrenaline. This is the body's automatic way of preparing to respond to a threat, sometimes called the 'fight, flight or freeze' response'. If you're often stressed then you're probably producing high levels of these hormones, which can make you feel physically unwell and could affect your health in the longer term.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF STRESS?

We all experience stress differently in different situations. Sometimes you might be able to tell right away when you're feeling under stress, but other times you might keep going without recognising the signs. Stress can affect you both emotionally and physically, and it can affect the way you behave.

“My head is tight and all my thoughts are whizzing round in different directions and I can't catch them.”



How you might feel

- irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
- over-burdened
- [anxious](#), nervous or afraid
- like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- unable to enjoy yourself
- [depressed](#)
- uninterested in life
- like you've lost your sense of humour
- a sense of dread
- worried about your health
- neglected or lonely

Some people who experience severe stress can sometimes have suicidal feelings. See our information on how to [cope with suicidal feelings](#) for more information

“[It feels like] the world is closing in on me, I can't breathe and I'm running out of time.”

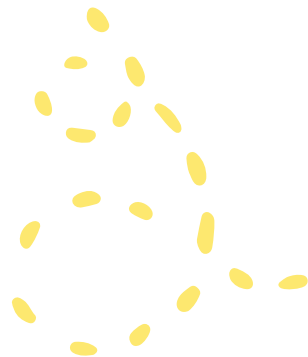


How you might behave

- finding it hard to make decisions
- constantly worrying
- avoiding situations that are troubling you
- snapping at people
- biting your nails
- picking at your skin
- unable to concentrate
- eating too much or too little
- smoking or drinking alcohol more than usual
- restless, like you can't sit still
- being tearful or crying

How you might be physically affected

- shallow breathing or hyperventilating
- you might have a [panic attack](#)
- muscle tension
- blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares
- sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- tired all the time
- grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw
- headaches
- chest pains
- high blood pressure
- indigestion or heartburn
- constipation or diarrhoea
- feeling sick, dizzy or fainting



WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Feelings of stress are normally triggered by things happening in your life, which involve:

- being under lots of pressure
- facing big changes
- worrying about something
- not having much or any control over the outcome of a situation
- having responsibilities that you're finding overwhelming
- not having enough work, activities or change in your life
- times of uncertainty

There might be one big thing causing you stress, but stress can also be caused by a build-up of small pressures. This might make it harder for you to identify what's making you feel stressed, or to explain it to other people.

“Lots of things stress me at the moment, mainly worries about my memory, as I'm a pensioner with nothing to do all day. Trying to fill my day is hard as I have arthritis so can't walk too far.”

Why do certain things make me feel stressed?

The amount of stress you feel in different situations may depend on many factors such as:

- your perception of the situation. This might be connected to your past experiences, your self-esteem, and how your thought-processes work (for example, if you tend to interpret things positively or negatively)
- how experienced you are at dealing with that particular type of pressure
- your emotional resilience or ability to cope with stressful situations
- the amount of other pressures on you at the time
- the amount of support you are receiving

We're all different, so a situation that doesn't bother you at all might cause someone else a lot of stress. For example, if you're feeling confident or usually enjoy public speaking, you might find that giving a speech in front of people feels comfortable and fun. Then again, if you're feeling low or usually prefer not to be the centre of attention, this situation might cause you to experience signs of stress.



“I get stressed when things get out of perspective – too much work, thinking too far ahead.”





What kind of situations can cause stress?

Stress can be caused by a variety of different common life events, many of which are difficult to avoid such as:

Personal

- illness or injury
- [pregnancy and becoming a parent](#)
- bereavement
- long-term health problems
- organising a complicated event, like a group holiday
- everyday tasks such as travel or household chores

Friends and family

- getting married or civil partnered
- going through a break-up or getting divorced
- difficult relationships with parents, siblings, friends or children
- [being a carer](#) for a friend or relative who needs lots of support

Employment and study

- losing your job
- long-term unemployment
- retiring
- [exams and deadlines](#)
- [difficult issues at work](#)
- starting a new job

Housing

- housing problems such as poor living conditions, lack of security or homelessness
- moving house
- problems with neighbours

Money

- worries about money or benefits
- poverty
- debt

“My breakdown [...] was due to having a stressful job as a project manager and dealing with a marriage break up and subsequent divorce.”

Can happy events cause stress?

Some of the situations listed above are often thought of as happy events – for example, you might feel expected to be happy or excited about getting married or having a baby.

However, because they can bring big changes or make unusual demands on you, they can still be very stressful. This can be particularly difficult to deal with, because you might feel there's additional pressure on you to be positive.



“I’ve never been more stressed in my life than the 6 months leading up to my wedding... everyone kept asking me if I was happy and expecting me to be excited all the time, but I just couldn’t feel it. I ended up getting really ill.”

HOW CAN I DEAL WITH PRESSURE?

There are various steps you can take to cope with being under pressure. This page gives some tips that people have told us they find useful, but it's important to remember that different things work for different people. Only try what you feel comfortable with.

For example:

- identify your triggers
- organise your time
- address some of the causes
- accept the things you can't change



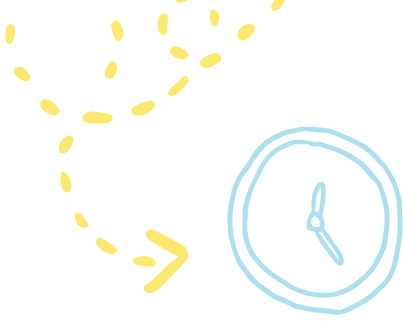
Identify your triggers

Working out what triggers stress for you can help you anticipate problems and think of ways to solve them. Even if you can't avoid these situations, being prepared can help.

Take some time to reflect on events and feelings that could be contributing to your stress (you could do this on your own or with someone you trust). You could consider:

- Issues that come up regularly, and that you worry about, for example paying a bill or attending an appointment.
- One-off events that are on your mind a lot, such as moving house or taking an exam.
- Ongoing stressful events, like being a carer or having problems at work.

You might be surprised to find out just how much you're coping with at once. Remember that not having enough work, activities or change in your life can be just as stressful a situation as having too much to deal with.



Organise your time

Making some adjustments to the way you organise your time could help you feel more in control of any tasks you're facing, and more able to handle pressure.

- Identify your best time of day and do the important tasks that need the most energy and concentration at that time. For example, you might be a morning person or an evening person.
- Make a list of things you have to do. Arrange them in order of importance and try to focus on the most urgent first. Some people find creating a timetable useful so they can plan when they can spend time on each task. If your tasks are work-related, ask a manager or colleague to help you prioritise. You may be able to push back some tasks until you're feeling less stressed.
- Set smaller and more achievable targets. When you're under a lot of pressure it's easy to set yourself large targets that are often unachievable. This can make you feel more stressed and if you don't reach them, it can make you feel disappointed and frustrated. Setting smaller more achievable goals can make you feel in more control and you can see your achievements more easily.

- Vary your activities. Balance interesting tasks with more mundane ones, and stressful tasks with those you find easier or can do more calmly.
- Try not to do too much at once. If you take on too much, you might find it harder to do any individual task well. This can make you feel like you have even more pressure on you.
- Take breaks and take things slowly. It might be difficult to do this when you're stressed, but it can make you more productive.
- Ask someone if they can help. For example, you could ask a friend or family member to help with some of your daily tasks so that you have more time to spend completing your tasks that are causing you to feel stressed.

Address some of the causes

Although there will probably be lots of things in your life that you can't do anything about, there might still be some practical ways you could resolve or improve some of the issues that are putting pressure on you. You might find it helpful to read our information or speak to an organisation that can help you start to tackle some of the things that are worrying you:



Housing and finances

- **housing concerns:** [Shelter Scotland](#) may be able to support you
- **money and insurance:** you can seek information from [Mental Health and Money Advice](#)
- **benefits:** Citizens Advice Scotland's [Money Talk Team](#) can offer support

Work and student life

- wellbeing at work: see our information on being [mentally healthy at work](#)
- **discrimination at work:** See Me Scotland offers advice on [workplace discrimination](#)
- **Student life:** see our information on [coping with student life](#) and [exams](#)

Family and personal life

- coping when supporting someone else: see our [information](#)
- coping as a parent with a mental health problem: the [NSPCC](#) has more information
- **abuse:** see our [Useful Contacts](#) section for organisations who can support you
- **addiction and dependency:** [Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs](#) can offer information and support

Accept the things you can't change

It's not easy, but sometimes accepting that there are some things happening to you that you probably can't do anything about will help you focus your time and energy more productively.

"Sometimes I take a minute to 'reply' to my stressy thoughts... it's hard to be stressed when you've got things in perspective! Most of the things I worry about are either things I can't change or things which aren't earth-shatteringly important."





“Sometimes I take a minute to ‘reply’ to my stressy thoughts... it’s hard to be stressed when you’ve got things in perspective! Most of the things I worry about are either things I can’t change or things which aren’t earth-shatteringly important.”



HOW CAN I BE MORE RESILIENT?

Taking steps to look after your wellbeing can help you deal with pressure, and reduce the impact that stress has on your life. This is sometimes called developing emotional resilience. Resilience is not just your ability to bounce back, but also your capacity to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing. Resilience isn't a personality trait, it's something that we can all take steps to achieve.

For example, you can:

- make some lifestyle changes
- look after your physical health
- give yourself a break
- build your support network

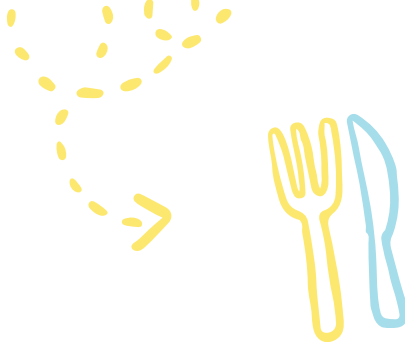
For more tips on building your emotional resilience, see our information on [improving your mental wellbeing](#).



Make some lifestyle changes

There are some general changes that you can make to your lifestyle that could help you feel more able to cope with pressure and stressful situations:

- Practise being straightforward and assertive in communicating with others. If people are making unreasonable or unrealistic demands on you, be prepared to tell them how you feel and say no. Use relaxation techniques. You may already know what helps you relax, like having a bath, listening to music or taking your dog for a walk. If you know that a certain activity helps you feel more relaxed, make sure you set aside time to do it. [NHS Inform](#) provides information on relaxation techniques on their website.
- Develop your interests and hobbies. Finding an activity that's completely different from the things causing you stress is a great way to get away from everyday pressures. If stress is making you feel lonely or isolated, shared hobbies can also be a good way to meet new people.



- Make time for your friends. When you've got a lot on this might seem hard, but it can help you feel more positive and less isolated. Chatting to friends about the things you find difficult can help you keep things in perspective – and you can do the same for them. Laughing and smiling with them will also produce hormones that help you to relax.
- Find balance in your life. You may find that one part of your life, such as your job or taking care of young children, is taking up almost all of your time and energy. Try making a decision to focus some of your energy on other parts of your life, like family, friends or hobbies. It's not easy, but this can help spread the weight of pressures in your life, and make everything feel lighter.

“When I’m stressed, I take myself away from everyone, into another room or somewhere quiet – even just for five minutes – and sing to myself. Not full on belting out a tune, but just quietly or even humming to myself, really calms me down.”

Look after your physical health

Taking steps to look after your physical health can help you to look after your mental health and reduce feelings of stress.

- Get enough sleep. Stress can often make it difficult to sleep, and can cause sleep problems. Getting enough sleep can help you feel more able to deal with difficult situations.
- Be active. Being [physically active](#) is important for both our physical and mental health. Even making small changes such as going for a regular walk outside may help you to feel less stressed.
- Eat healthily. When you're stressed it can be tempting to skip meals or eat too much of the wrong kinds of food. What and when you eat can make a big difference to how well you feel. [Community Food & Health Scotland](#) has lots of tips which may be useful.



Give yourself a break

Learning to be kinder to yourself in general can help you control the amount of pressure you feel in different situations, which can help you feel less stressed.

- Reward yourself for achievements. Even small things like finishing a piece of work or making a decision. You could take a walk, read a book, treat yourself to food you enjoy, or simply tell yourself “well done”.
- Get a change of scenery. You might want to go outside, go to a friend’s house or go to a café for a break – even if it’s just for a short time.
- Take a break or holiday. Time away from your normal routine can help you relax and feel refreshed. Even spending a day in a different place can help you feel more able to face stress.
- Resolve conflicts, if you can. Although this can sometimes be hard, speaking to a manager, colleague or family member about problems in your relationship with them can help you find ways to move forward.
- Forgive yourself when you feel you have made a mistake, or don’t achieve something you hoped for. Try to remember that nobody’s perfect, and putting extra pressure on yourself doesn’t help.

“I distract myself from my [...] worry by doing a puzzle or playing a game.”

Build your support network

Remember that whatever you’re going through that’s causing you stress, you don’t have to cope with it alone.

- Friends and family. Sometimes just telling the people close to you how you’re feeling can make a big difference – and they might be able to help you out in other ways too.
- Support at work. You may be able to seek support from your line manager, Human Resources (HR) department, union representatives, or through employee assistance schemes. Try not to worry that talking to your manager or colleagues about stress will be seen as a sign of weakness – your wellbeing is important and responsible employers will take it seriously. If you’re worried that the culture in your workplace might not be very supportive, you might find it helpful to take a look at:
 - SeeMe resources on [mental health support at work](#)
 - Health Working Lives [information on work-related stress](#)



“When I’m stressed, I take myself away from everyone, into another room or somewhere quiet – even just for five minutes – and sing to myself. Not full on belting out a tune, but just quietly or even humming to myself, really calms me down.”



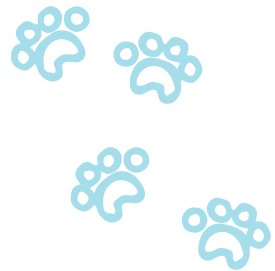


- Support at university or college may be available through your tutors, student union or student services. See our information on [how to cope with student life](#) for more tips on accessing support as a student and our resources on [coping during exams](#).
- Peer support. Sometimes sharing your experiences with people who've been through something similar can help you feel less alone. [Big White Wall](#) offers a supportive online community where you can talk openly about stress and your mental health. (For guidance on using online services safely, see [mygov.scot](#) for information on staying safe online.)
- Specialist websites and organisations. For example:
 - The [Stress Management Society](#) offers information about stress and provide techniques for coping.
 - [Mind Tools](#) for stress management at work.
 - The [Mindfulness Association](#) provide a range of mindfulness courses, including free, daily guided meditations
 - The [International Stress Management Association](#) can help you find a specialist stress practitioner in your local area.

- Your GP. If you feel like you need some professional support, you can [speak to your doctor](#). They can check your overall health, and help you access support and treatments. They could also recommend that you take some time off work, university or college, and sign a medical note for you.

The [SAMH Information Service](#) can also let you know about support groups and mental health services in your local area.

“[It helps me to] hug, fuss and play with my kittens!”



WHAT TREATMENTS ARE THERE?

“Using mindfulness [helps me] to just allow some space to breathe and focus on the present moment.”

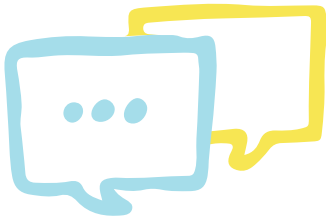
Stress isn't a medical diagnosis, so there's no specific treatment for it. However, if you're finding it very hard to cope with things going on in your life and are experiencing lots of signs of stress, there are treatments available that could help. These include:
talking therapy

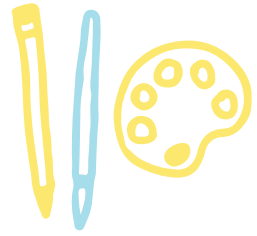
- medication
- ecotherapy
- complementary and alternative therapies

To access most treatments, the first step is usually to [talk to your GP](#).

Talking therapies

- Talking with a trained professional can help you learn how to deal with stress and become more aware of your own thoughts and feelings. Common types of talking therapies which can help with stress are:
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which helps you understand your thought patterns, recognise your trigger points and identify positive actions you can take.
- Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), which combines mindfulness, meditation and yoga with a particular focus on reducing stress. You can find out more on the [Mindfulness Association website](#).





Medication

Feelings of stress are a reaction to things happening in your life, not a mental health problem, so there's no specific medication for stress. However, there are various medications available, which can help to reduce or manage some of the signs of stress.

For example, your doctor might offer to prescribe:

- sleeping pills or minor tranquillisers if you're having trouble sleeping
- antidepressants if you're experiencing [depression](#) or [anxiety](#)
- medication to treat any physical symptoms of stress, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or high blood pressure

Before deciding to take any drug, it's important to make sure you have all the facts you need to make an informed choice. NHS Inform has a range of information on things to consider before taking medication and questions you might want to ask the prescriber, that will help you do this.

Ecotherapy

Ecotherapy - also known as therapeutic horticulture - is a way of improving your [wellbeing](#) and self-esteem by spending time in nature. This can include physical exercise in green spaces or taking part in a gardening or conservation project.

(You can find out more about ecotherapy, including details of local SAMH therapeutic horticulture programmes [here](#).)

"[It helps me to] spend time outdoors or doing crafts."

Complementary therapies

You may find certain complementary therapies help you manage feelings of stress. These might include:

- yoga and meditation
- acupuncture
- aromatherapy
- massage

The [British Complementary Medicine Association](#) has more information about complementary therapies on the website and a register of members to help you find a local practitioner.



***“ [It helps me to]
spend time outdoors
or doing crafts.”***



HOW CAN OTHER PEOPLE HELP?

This section is for friends and family of someone who is experiencing stress, who want to support them.

If someone you're close to is feeling stressed there are lots of practical things you can do to support them – even though you probably can't change the situation they're in.

- **Help them reflect on whether they are stressed.** Often, people don't notice that some physical symptoms and behaviour (such as not being able to get to sleep, or drinking more than usual) are actually signs of stress. Sometimes you may be able to see it before they recognise it themselves. If you've noticed that someone seems particularly busy, anxious or unwell, you could gently let them know, and ask how you can help.
- **Listen to how they are feeling.** Having a chance to talk openly could help someone to feel calmer and more able to move forward. Just being there for them will probably help lots.
- Reassure them that stressful situations can pass. For someone who is in the middle of a stressful time, it can be hard to see an end point. Let them know that situations change and can get better.

- **Help them identify their triggers.**

You can be specific about things you've observed, but try to stay open-minded and non-judgemental. Your perspective might be valuable, but your friend or family member could find this conversation stressful, and being patient will help.

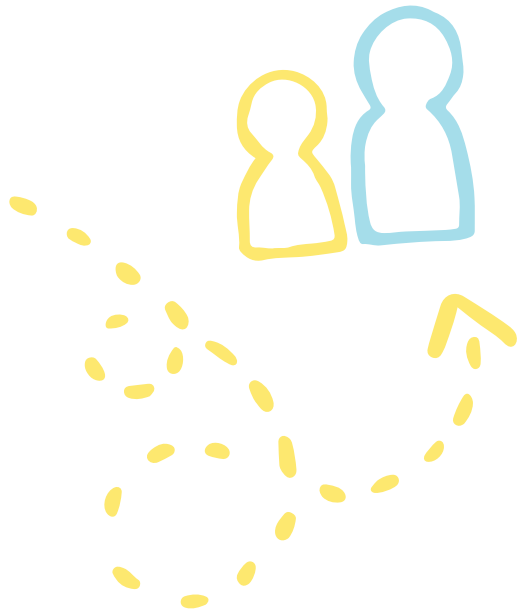
“Not putting extra pressure on me... letting me know they're there but that I don't have to do anything.”

- **Help them address some causes of stress, if you can.** You might be able to help your friend or family member look for support around issues like debt, housing problems or difficulties at work.
- **Help them learn and practise relaxation techniques.** You could help them research good relaxation techniques and find ways to practise them, such as a weekly yoga class, or setting aside time for breathing exercises at home. This might become something that you could do together. [NHS Inform](#) has more information.

"[When I'm stressed I need friends to] hug me. It's amazing how good a single hug can feel."

- **Support them to seek professional help.** For example, you could help them contact their GP, go with them to an appointment or do some research on mental health and wellbeing. See our information on [helping someone else seek help](#) for more.
- **Look after yourself.** If someone around you is very stressed, you might become stressed too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after your own wellbeing. Being calm and relaxed will make you more able to help someone else.

"[I want them to] understand that I may be irritable but I don't mean to hurt them in any way."



USEFUL CONTACTS





SAMH INFORMATION SERVICE

@ samh.org.uk/info

📞 0344 8000 550

📧 info@samh.org.uk

Whether you are looking for more information, have questions or are seeking support, SAMH can help. The SAMH Information Service provides information and signposting for pathways to better mental health and wellbeing over the phone, through emails and through a range of online information.

The SAMH Information Service is open from 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, except on Bank Holidays.



Who else could help?

This section contains details of organisations or support services which you may find useful.

SAMH does not endorse any particular support service, including those listed on this page. This is not an exhaustive list. You may be able to find other services near you.

LISTENING AND CRISIS SERVICES

Breathing Space

 breathingspace.scot

 0800 83 85 87

Offers a free, confidential phone and web-based service for people in Scotland experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

Samaritans

 samaritans.org

 116 123 (Freephone)

24-hour emotional support for anyone struggling to cope.

Shout

 giveusashout.org

 Text: 85258

Shout is volunteer-run and is the UK's first 24/7 crises text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere.

GENERAL SERVICES

Action for Children

 actionforchildren.org.uk

 0300 123 2112

A range of information and resources to support parents in helping their children with mental health issues.

Anxiety UK

 anxietyuk.org.uk

 08444 775 774

Provides advice and support for people living with anxiety.

Big White Wall

 bigwhitewall.com

An online community of people who are finding it hard to cope. It's completely anonymous so you can express yourself openly.

British Complementary Medicine Association

 bcma.co.uk

Provides information of different alternative therapies.

Citizens Advice Scotland: Money Talk Team

 financialhealthcheck.scot/home

 0800 085 7145

The Citizens Advice Money Talk Team can support you if you're worried about money.

Community Food and Health Scotland

 communityfoodandhealth.org.uk

Offers information regarding the positive good nutrition can have on mental health problems and stress.

Health and Safety Executive

 hse.gov.uk/stress

Information about health and safety law in the workplace. Specialist information on stress for employers and employees.

International Stress Management Association (ISMA)

 isma.org.uk

Promotes stress prevention and wellbeing. Offers a list of stress practitioners by specialist area.

Mental Health and Money Advice

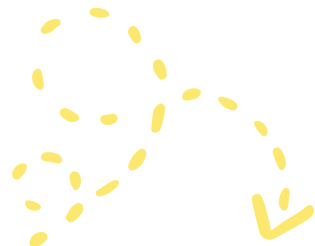
 mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org/scot

Offer support to help you understand, manage and improve mental health and money issues.

Mindfulness Association

 mindfulnessassociation.net

Offer a range of mindfulness courses, including free, daily guided meditations.



Mind Tools

 mindtools.com

Offer information on topics including stress management and assertiveness.

NSPCC

 nspcc.org.uk
 0808 800 5000

If you are stressed with concerns relating to experiencing mental health problems as a parent, the NSPCC can offer support and information.

NHS Inform

 nhsinform.scot



Information on a range of health issues, including tips on managing stress in the workplace.

Parentline from Children 1st

 children1st.org.uk/parentline-scotland
 0800 28 22 33

A confidential helpline, providing advice and support to anyone caring for or concerned about a child.

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs

 sfad.org.uk
 08080 10 10 11



SFAD provide a free and confidential helpline for anyone concerned about alcohol or drugs use.

See Me Scotland

 seemescotland.org

See Me challenges mental health stigma and discrimination. Provides information on mental health and workplace wellbeing for employers and employees.

Shelter Scotland

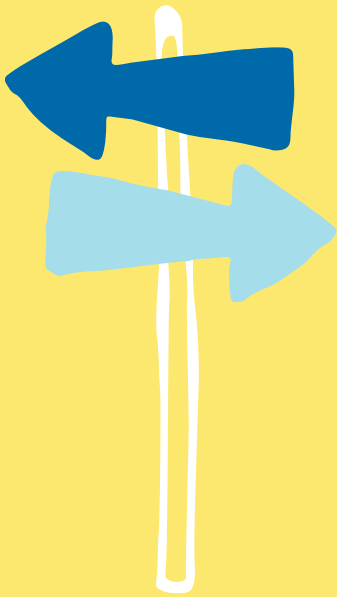
 scotland.shelter.org.uk
 0808 800 4444

If your stress relates to housing concerns, Shelter Scotland may be able to help.

Stress Management Society

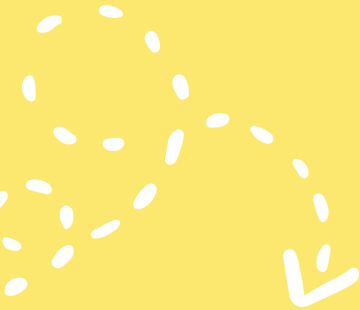
 stress.org.uk

A charity dedicated to helping others recognise and reduce stress. Offers information about stress and tips on how to cope.





for Scotland's mental health



SAMH is Scotland's mental health charity and is dedicated to mental health and wellbeing for all. We are here to provide help, information and support to people affected by mental health problems.

samh.org.uk

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