### **Stress Factsheet**

*Brought to you by ProFriends Coaching & Mentoring*

### **What is Stress?**

Stress is a natural physical and emotional response to challenging or demanding situations. It's the body’s instinctual "fight-or-flight" reaction, which evolved as a survival mechanism to help individuals respond to threats or urgent challenges. When the body perceives a threat—whether it's physical danger or a high-stakes situation at work—it releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones increase heart rate, blood pressure, and energy levels, preparing the body to confront or escape the threat.

#### **Types of Stress**

* **Acute Stress:** This is short-term stress that comes from sudden, temporary demands, like a tight deadline or an unexpected social challenge. Acute stress can often be beneficial, motivating you to overcome challenges and stay alert. However, too much acute stress in a short period can still be overwhelming.
* **Episodic Acute Stress:** This type of stress occurs when someone experiences frequent episodes of acute stress. People who tend to worry a lot or often feel rushed may experience episodic acute stress, which can lead to irritability, anxiety, and physical symptoms such as migraines or hypertension.
* **Chronic Stress:** This is long-term stress that persists over an extended period, often in response to ongoing situations like financial difficulties, work challenges, or family issues. Chronic stress can be particularly harmful because it keeps the body’s stress response active for long periods, leading to serious health consequences like cardiovascular disease, depression, and a weakened immune system.

#### **How Stress Affects the Body**

**Stress isn’t just a mental experience—it has profound effects on the body. When stress becomes chronic, the body remains in a heightened state of alert, which can lead to physical exhaustion and wear down various systems.**

* **Hormonal Changes**: Stress hormones (like cortisol) can disrupt the balance of other hormones, impacting everything from digestion to immune response. Elevated cortisol levels over time are associated with weight gain, sleep disturbances, and an increased risk of health issues like diabetes and heart disease.
* **Nervous System Overactivity**: Prolonged stress activates the sympathetic nervous system, responsible for the fight-or-flight response, making the body feel constantly on edge. This overstimulation can lead to irritability, difficulty relaxing, and sleep problems.
* **Cognitive Effects**: Chronic stress affects the brain's ability to concentrate, make decisions, and regulate emotions. Over time, the hippocampus—the part of the brain associated with memory and learning—can shrink due to constant exposure to high cortisol levels, which can lead to memory issues and cognitive decline.

#### **Causes of Stress**

**Stress can arise from various sources, each affecting individuals differently. Some common causes include:**

* **Work or School Pressures**: Deadlines, performance expectations, workload, and interpersonal conflicts at work or school are major contributors to stress.
* **Financial Strain**: Concerns about money, debt, or providing for loved ones create a sense of insecurity, which can be a long-term source of stress.
* **Relationship Issues**: Conflict or changes in personal relationships—whether with family, friends, or partners—are common stressors.
* **Health Problems**: Living with chronic illness or caring for a sick loved one can cause prolonged emotional and physical stress.
* **Life Changes**: Major changes like moving, changing jobs, or experiencing a loss can be stressful, even if the change is positive.

#### **Is All Stress Bad?**

Interestingly, not all stress is harmful. **Eustress**, or "positive stress," is a type of stress that can motivate us, improve performance, and help us meet life’s challenges. Examples include the excitement before a new job, a sports competition, or a social event. However, when stress becomes excessive or prolonged, it shifts from being a motivator to becoming **distress**, the type of stress that leads to negative physical, mental, and emotional health outcomes.

#### **The Impact of Long-Term Stress**

**Long-term stress affects nearly every system in the body, with serious consequences if left unmanaged:**

* **Physical Health**: Persistent stress raises the risk of cardiovascular disease, strokes, digestive issues, and immune dysfunction. Chronic stress also contributes to tension headaches, high blood pressure, and sleep problems.
* **Mental Health**: Prolonged stress increases the likelihood of anxiety disorders, depression, and other mood disorders. It can also lead to emotional fatigue, commonly known as burnout, where a person feels constantly drained.
* **Behavioural Impacts**: High-stress levels often lead to coping behaviours, such as overeating, smoking, excessive drinking, or drug use. These behaviours provide temporary relief but can worsen stress and contribute to health problems.

### **Signs to Watch Out For**

#### **Physical Signs**

* **Frequent Headaches**: Tension headaches and migraines are common during stress.
* **Fatigue**: Persistent tiredness and lack of energy, even with adequate rest.
* **Muscle Tension**: Back, shoulder, or neck pain due to muscle tension.
* **Digestive Issues**: Stomach problems, including nausea, constipation, and diarrhea.
* **Sleep Disturbances**: Insomnia, frequent waking, or trouble staying asleep.

#### **Emotional Signs**

* **Irritability or Anger**: Increased frustration, quick to anger, or feeling overwhelmed.
* **Anxiety and Worry**: Constant feelings of nervousness, dread, or worry about the future.
* **Low Mood**: Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or emotional exhaustion.
* **Difficulty Concentrating**: Trouble focusing on tasks or making decisions.

#### **Behavioural Signs**

* **Changes in Eating Habits**: Eating more or less than usual, often craving comfort foods.
* **Social Withdrawal**: Pulling away from friends and family or isolating oneself.
* **Procrastination**: Difficulty starting or completing tasks due to overwhelm.
* **Substance Use**: Increased reliance on alcohol, nicotine, or drugs to cope.

### **Facts & Figures About Stress**

* **74% of UK adults** report feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope due to stress (Mental Health Foundation).
* **51% of UK adults** who feel high stress report being anxious, while **61%** report feeling depressed (Mental Health Foundation).
* **Chronic stress** can increase the risk of conditions like cardiovascular disease, stroke, and diabetes, according to the NHS and American Psychological Association.

### **Detrimental Effects of Stress**

**Physical Health Risks**

* **Heart Disease**: Chronic stress is a risk factor for high blood pressure, heart attacks, and other cardiovascular issues.
* **Digestive Problems**: Stress affects the gut, leading to conditions like IBS, acid reflux, and indigestion.
* **Lowered Immune Function**: Persistent stress weakens the immune system, making the body more susceptible to infections and slower to recover.
* **Weight Changes**: Stress can trigger weight gain or loss due to changes in eating habits and hormone fluctuations.

**Mental and Emotional Health Risks**

* **Anxiety and Depression**: Long-term stress increases the risk of developing anxiety disorders and depression.
* **Cognitive Impairment**: Chronic stress can impair memory, focus, and decision-making skills.
* **Substance Abuse**: People under prolonged stress may use alcohol, drugs, or nicotine to self-medicate, increasing the risk of addiction.

**Social and Behavioural Impacts**

* **Relationship Strain**: Stress often causes irritability and withdrawal, which can lead to conflicts or distance in relationships.
* **Work Performance**: High stress reduces productivity, creativity, and job satisfaction, potentially leading to burnout.

### **Tips & Tools to Manage Stress**

1. **Practice Deep Breathing and Relaxation Techniques**
Deep breathing exercises, like the box breathing 4-4-4-4 or 7-4-8 techniques, activate the body’s relaxation response, reducing cortisol levels and promoting calm. Progressive muscle relaxation, guided meditation, and yoga can further help.
2. **Establish Boundaries and Prioritize Tasks**
Learn to set boundaries by saying “no” when needed and break larger tasks into smaller, manageable steps. Prioritizing tasks can help prevent overwhelm.
3. **Regular Physical Activity**
Exercise is a natural stress reliever, releasing endorphins and improving mood. Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity several times a week, whether it’s walking, cycling, or swimming.
4. **Build a Support Network**
Talking to trusted friends or family members about your feelings can alleviate stress. Social support provides comfort, advice, and different perspectives.
5. **Practice Mindfulness and Meditation**
Mindfulness practices, like meditation, can help you focus on the present, reduce stress, and avoid overthinking. Apps like Headspace and Calm offer guided sessions.
6. **Limit Stimulants and Alcohol**
Caffeine and alcohol can increase stress levels. Instead, opt for herbal teas, water, or non-caffeinated beverages to help keep you calm and hydrated.
7. **Maintain a Healthy Sleep Schedule**
Stress and sleep often have a two-way relationship. Prioritize a regular sleep routine, limit screen time before bed, and create a restful sleep environment to improve resilience to stress.
8. **Journaling**
Writing down your thoughts, feelings, or worries before bed can help clear your mind and identify stressors, making them feel more manageable.

### **How Profriends Coaching and Mentoring Can Help**

At **Profriends Coaching and Mentoring**, I'm committed to helping you navigate stress effectively, providing tools and guidance tailored to your unique needs. My supportive coaching services aim to empower you to take control, manage your stress, and find balance.

* **Personalised Stress Management Coaching**: I work one-on-one to develop coping strategies, establish boundaries, and set achievable goals for a healthier lifestyle.
* **Emotional Resilience Building**: Learn techniques to build resilience, boost confidence, and respond to stress in healthier ways.
* **Day-to-Day Support**: I can guide you in managing daily stressors, tackling overwhelming situations, and creating a routine that works for you.
* **Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques**: My coaching can include practices like mindfulness, meditation, and breathing exercises and tips on where you can find these.

**Website**: [www.profriendscoachingandmentoring.co.uk](http://www.profriendscoachingandmentoring.co.uk/)**Support for Women 18+**: Stress can be overwhelming, but you don’t have to face it alone. Let us help you create a path to peace, balance, and personal growth.

**Managing stress is essential for a healthier, happier life.** At Profriends Coaching and Mentoring, I provide the tools and support needed to reclaim control, reduce stress, and build a more resilient you.