



# MANAGEMENT FILE

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# STRESS, AND HOW TO HANDLE IT

## WHAT IS STRESS?

In very simple terms, people feel stressed when they can no longer cope with the sort of physical, mental or emotional pressures that occur in normal everyday life. In other words, these stressors no longer help to keep you motivated and 'on your toes'. They actually make you feel ill. So too much stress, or a failure to cope with what are normal levels of stress, can easily lead to major health problems.

## HOW DOES THE BODY COPE WITH STRESS?

We all react differently to stress. Some people actually thrive on stress and have a very high threshold when it comes to stress. They seem to be able

to cope with almost everything that life throws at them. Others prefer a much more relaxed and stress-free way of life. And one of the problems with any form of chronic debilitating illness like ME/CFS is that problems with doctors, benefits, employment, finances and family not only create new stresses; having a long term illness like this also tends to lower the body's threshold for dealing with stressful events.

Whenever the body recognises a stressful situation it automatically goes into what's called a 'fight or flight' mode with the release of brain chemicals such as noradrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol from the adrenal glands. Stress also stimulates the autonomic nervous system, which controls

the heart, bladder and bowels. It's these chemicals and hormones, along with increased activity in the autonomic nervous system, that causes many of the common symptoms of stress.

## HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT ME/CFS?

Although no real research has ever been carried out into possible links between stress and ME/CFS, most doctors agree that it can sometimes be a factor in all three stages of the illness.

Firstly, it's possible that people who have lived with chronic stress for many years, or have never been able to cope with stress, could be at increased risk of developing ME/CFS when the right trigger factor – such as an infection – comes along.

Secondly, anecdotal reports suggest that people who are under a lot of stress – mental or physical – at the time of an acute infection may be more likely to develop ME/CFS. This is especially so if this means having to carry on with normal work or family duties when they should be taking time off to rest, convalesce and recover. It could also help to explain why people such as athletes, who may be under a lot of physical stress during intense training, develop an ME/CFS-like illness if they also pick up a viral infection at the same time.

Thirdly, all the new external and internal stresses that often accompany ME/CFS can become an additional factor in maintaining the illness.

So recognising stressful situations and learning how to avoid or deal with stress, where it exists, can be a very important part of ME/CFS management.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

Besides 'feeling stressed', signs and symptoms include:

- Feeling tense or irritable and not being able to relax
- Loss of concentration - often with 'light headedness'
- Difficulty making decisions
- Rapid or shallow breathing
- Increased blood pressure and heart rate with palpitations
- Increased sweating and/or clammy hands
- Dry mouth
- Nausea
- 'Butterflies' in the stomach
- Loss of appetite or comfort eating
- Headaches
- Low sex drive
- Increasing use of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Asthma and eczema

When stress becomes more chronic, it can also play a role in causing a range of mental and physical health problems. These include:

## STRESS MANAGEMENT

The key component to dealing with stress is to develop a more relaxed attitude to life. Easier said than done... In simple terms this means:

- Avoiding undue stress where possible
- Learning how to deal with stressful situations that cannot be avoided
- Learning how to relax

Sometimes a few simple self-help approaches are all that is required. In more complicated cases, medication, talking therapies, or stress management programmes may need to be considered.

If you feel that stress is a factor in maintaining your ME/CFS, the best place to start is by talking to your GP – who should be able to go through the various management options.

## DRUGS

Doctors are usually very reluctant to start prescribing drugs to people who suffer from stress – mainly because anxiety-relieving drugs such as Valium/ diazepam aren't really suitable.

They won't deal with the underlying problem(s) causing stress and can easily become addictive. So medication is usually reserved for when stress is linked to anxiety, panic attacks or depression.

## TALKING THERAPIES

Referral to a counsellor, psychologist, or psychiatrist may be helpful if symptoms are more severe. There are also various types of stress management programmes and biofeedback courses available but these are not usually available on the NHS.

## ALTERNATIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES

Various types of alternative and complementary therapies may help, especially if you have faith in this type of approach. Options include:

- Aromatherapy - essential oils such as lavender can be very relaxing
- Massage
- Reflexology
- Transcendental Meditation

Taking up yoga is another possibility – provided you can find a teacher who knows the mental and physical limitations imposed by ME/CFS.

## SELF-HELP STRESS BUSTING

**A do-it-yourself stress management programme that combines common sense solutions and learning how to relax can often be very effective. Here are some basic stress-busting tips:**

- ★ Talk to your family and friends about how you feel – don't 'bottle things up' and try to sort out your problems all on your own.
- ★ Keep a stress diary in which you use a \* to \*\*\*\*\* scoring system to record a daily list of what makes you stressed over a period of a couple of weeks. You may well be surprised by some of the answers. Simply identifying a list of things that makes you feel stressed can help to provide some practical solutions.
- ★ Learn how to delegate, share tasks/responsibilities, and say 'no' to people.
- ★ Accept that there are things you won't be able to change and things you will be able to change. There is no point in pursuing battles that cannot be won.
- ★ Cut down on alcohol, caffeine and smoking.
- ★ Be creative – taking up a hobby such as painting or drawing that involves creative brain thinking will help to reduce stress levels.
- ★ Get a pet – owning an animal may not be possible if you have ME/CFS but it can be very helpful if you are able to do so.
- ★ Sort out your breathing – stress can increase the rate at which you breathe, sometimes even causing hyperventilation. A simple re-breathing technique involves breathing in (no need to take a deep breath), holding your breath and counting to 3; then breathing out for 3 seconds while you say the word 'relax'. This should help to make sure that you are not breathing too rapidly.
- ★ Learn to relax through the use of a self-help book, a tape/CD, relaxation classes, or professional help.
- ★ Take some regular chill outs during the day – where you lay down and completely de-clutter your mind for at least 10 minutes with pleasant thoughts or words.
- ★ Regular exercise and fresh air will also help to reduce stress levels – but this is clearly a difficult one for people with ME/CFS.
- ★ Sort out any sleep disturbance – unrefreshing sleep will always exacerbate stress.
- ★ Learning a few simple thinking strategies: "I'm going to achieve what I want to do by taking one step at a time", "I can handle this situation". This will help you feel more positive about how to cope with stressful situations and should also form part of any self-help management strategy. You also need to give yourself credit when you've coped with a stressful situation.

**Medical information contained in ME Essential is not intended to replace medical advice or treatment from your doctor. We recommend that you always consult your doctor or healthcare professional about any specific problem. We also recommend that the medical information we provide is shown to and discussed with your doctor, as appropriate.**