

Stress Solutions

Advice to avoid stress and promote healthy sleep

by Alison Cullen





What is Stress?

We humans need a certain amount of stimulation to get us out of bed in the morning. Supermodels may be motivated by the millions of pounds they'll be making, but us mere mortals tend to find that work deadlines and the need to meet mortgage payments are the (less glamorous...) things that get us going.

Motivating stimulus is fine up to a point but, as with most things, there is a point beyond which something healthy and positive becomes negative. Too much **unrelenting stimulus**, and things tend to deteriorate. **Stimulus becomes stress**, and long-term stress causes many symptoms of ill health as the body gradually loses its ability to cope with the demands being made on it.

Causes of Stress

- **Physical** Too much exercise, sleep deprivation, pregnancy, adolescence (with its hormonal adjustments and physical changes), injuries, dietary changes, drug exposure (medicinal or recreational)... these are all causes of increased physical demands on our systems.
- **Mental** Work pressures and deadlines, work colleagues, finances, commuting or school.
- **Emotional** issues with relatives, relationships, weddings, divorce, bereavement, or moving house are all things that most of us encounter at some point. Interestingly, getting married and getting divorced are experienced as being almost equally stressful!
- **Dietary** Stimulants such as alcohol are often turned to as a way of dealing with stress, but their use can actually cause or exacerbate stress. Alcohol, for example, reduces vitamin B and magnesium in the body, both of which are needed for a properly functioning nervous system. The end effect of alcohol intake is not stimulating but depressing, so it's doesn't help at all! Coffee and tea are commonly taken in large amounts on a daily basis, and tend to be increased in stressful circumstances. What people don't realise is that these beverages reduce iron absorption, which causes fatigue, and can therefore trigger or worsen stress symptoms.

Many people think that they are suffering from mental or emotional problems, when actually their bodies are displaying signs of poor nutrition. It is wonderful to see what happens when someone improves their diet and realises that they feel heaps better in their mind as well as their body – all that misery was just a physical manifestation of bad diet!

What happens when you're exposed to a source of stress?

The body copes by producing adrenalin, which is a hormone that activates the following changes in the body –

- Blood is diverted to the brain, heart, lungs and muscles, which will need to work well to get you out of danger
- The heart beat speeds up to pump blood more effectively round the body to these areas
- Blood is diverted away from the digestive tract, as stopping for a picnic shouldn't really be on the agenda when there's a life and death situation going on
- Breathing speeds up to get oxygen supplies to the muscles, etc., as quickly as possible
- Sweat levels go up to stop the body from overheating
- Blood sugar levels go up dramatically so that glucose is available to feed the brain and muscles
- Blood vessels constrict (so blood pressure goes up)

This is the age-old mechanism we know as fight-or-flight, designed to get you out of the way of a hairy mammoth or to help you win a to-the-death struggle for the best cave in town.

In this day and age, it is a great mechanism if the stress is caused by someone wanting to beat you up – you can fight or run away more effectively. Similarly, if your toddler is steaming towards a busy road, you need to be able to sprint to save them, however plodding you are in your everyday life.

If, however, there is no such physical outlet for the adrenalin-activated energy, it just puts extra pressure on the body. Also, if this potentially life-

saving reaction is activated many times in one day, by traffic jams, work deadlines, checkout queues, arguments with your spouse, being late for picking your children up, etc., your system is constantly being battered and the results are legion. Read on...

Symptoms of Stress

High blood pressure, headaches, neck aches, muscle tension and pain, cramps, dizziness, asthma, digestive symptoms such as diarrhoea, bloating, nausea, IBS, lack of appetite, over-eating, ulcers, cravings, crying easily and copiously for little reason, tiredness, sexual problems, poor immune function, emotional instability (irritability, moodiness, snapping at people, or feeling unable to cope with things that previously didn't phase you), low mood or depression... Really, it's no fun being stressed!

Why do all these symptoms appear?

What do most people do when they are under stress? Start focusing on a healthy diet, providing their body with essential nutrients, making sure they get enough sleep and sufficient exercise to allow them to cope with the increased demands being made on them? Not likely! Most people reach for the coffee pot, the chocolate bar, the wine bottle and whatever TV programme is easiest on the brain. The body therefore goes short of the nutrients that would make it more able to deal with the stress: a vicious circle that most of us have experienced at some time or another.

The body needs	for	and deficiency causes
Vitamin B vitamins	the nervous system	irritability and anxiety
Magnesium	the nervous system	cramps and insomnia
Vitamin C	the adrenal glands	poor immune function
Iron	energy	fatigue and depression

In times of stress, these nutrients are used up in larger quantities than normal. The demand increases and we rarely increase the supply.

Viciousness...

Lack of iron, magnesium, vitamin C => fatigue, cramps, irritability, anxiety, low immune function, low blood sugar (which causes dizziness, mood swings, cravings and disorientation) => heading for tea, coffee, alcohol, sugar, chocolate and bread => less iron, magnesium, vitamin C....

Healthier options (easy to do, without increasing stress)

Drink smoothies instead of caffienated drinks

1 apple, 3 satumas, 180g raspberries, 120g blueberries – chop up the apple, peel the satumas and place with the other ingredients in a blender or juicer. A hand blender can be used instead. Blend or juice and drink at once. Any leftovers can be frozen or refrigerated for later. This recipe makes 2 big glasses full. Add soya cream for added gorgeousness.

Increase B vitamin intake

green leafy veg (see **What Do I Do With**, below), oats, avocados, nuts (almonds, cashews, brazils), and seeds (sunflower, pumpkin and sesame). Feel that your brain isn't working properly? The oils in nuts and seeds will help with brain function, as well as giving you B vitamins.

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Go for a brisk 10-minute walk every evening

It'll really calm you down and liberate natural happy chemicals called endorphins inside you – very cheering.

Go for wholegrain carbohydrates for energy fixes

use dried fruit such as dates, figs, apricots or dried bananas, instead of sugar; and use wholemeal bread instead of white. Wholegrain carbohydrates give you long-term energy without messing up your blood sugar or giving you mood swings and cravings.

Consciously learn relaxation techniques

go to a yoga class or a meditation class with a friend, or get a relaxation tape and listen to it instead of watching some daft reality TV programme.

What Do I Do With these green leafy veg you keep going on about?

Chop several green veg (any you like – broccoli, cabbage, leeks, mangetout, kale...) into smallish pieces and throw into a pan with a stock cube and enough water to cover the veg. Bring to the boil and then simmer, stirring occasionally, until they feel soft when you poke a sharp knife into them. Blend in a blender or with a hand blender if you like your soup mushed up, or just serve as it is with oatcakes.

What Do I Do With oats?

- 1 Make porridge with water or soya milk or rice milk.
2. Make muesli by mixing in chopped dried fruit, nuts and seeds to a bowl of oats and adding soya milk or rice milk or fruit juice.

What Do I Do With avocados?

1. Peel the skin off and take the stone out of the middle. Slice onto a plate with a green salad and drizzle with salad dressing.
2. Peel and remove stone as above, then mash up with mayonnaise and spread on oatcakes or ricecakes.

Good foods to get you through

Breakfast	
Iron sources	pistachio nuts, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, millet, tofu, beetroot, watercress and green leafy veg in general.
Good energy sources	bananas, dates, figs, oats, brown rice
Good soup ingredients	cabbage, leeks, and onions
Colourful fruit	apricots, oranges, plums, peaches, grapes and berries such as strawberries and raspberries
Colourful vegetables	beetroot, watercress, carrots
Light snacks	lettuce, celery, asparagus, sprouted seeds and beans
Nuts and seeds	walnuts, cashews, brazils, pecans, almonds, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds
Herb teas	lemon verbena, lemongrass, lemon balm, chamomile, ginger



Heavenly Herbs

Nature helpfully provides many herbs to relax and revitalise the nervous system. They benefit from having **no addictive qualities or unwanted side effects**, working gently with your body to restore you to balance. They **continue to work** no matter how long a period of time you use them.

Look through the remedies below to see which suits you best. **Always remember that taking these herbs in a liquid form really increases their effect when you are stressed, as they will absorb straight into your system without your digestion having to do any work at all.**

Avena sativa

Oat seed is the ingredient used here. Oats are full of vitamin B and calming constituents that **gently reduce the pressure** being felt both physically and emotionally in times of stress, and **nourish the nervous system**.

It's such a gentle herb that its effects build up gradually – don't expect to see amazing results the first day you take it, but don't be surprised when you feel increasingly better as you carry on taking it. Its mild action means that it can safely be taken long-term.

For situations such as looming exams, where the stress is on-going, it is ideal. Take it several months before exams to maximise your ability to study without getting agitated.

It is also great for children who have to deal with stressful circumstances such as house moves, new schools or family ructions. Hyperactive children often respond well to it too.

Passiflora Complex

This is a combination of Avena sativa and Passiflora. Passiflora is slightly stronger in its effect than Avena sativa, **relaxing muscle tension and relieving anxiety**.

If you constantly feel nervy and wound-up, this may well be just what you need to make your day-to-day life calmer.

People often find that their sleep quality improves when they take Passiflora Complex, as the reduction of stress during the day makes it easier for them to slip off to sleep at night.



Passiflora has a mildly beneficial action on the heart, too.

Non-addictive and with no side effects, Passiflora Complex is suitable for short or long-term use and can be taken alongside other medication.

If you are taking tranquillisers, sedatives or antidepressants, it isn't sensible to take herbs that have similar effects on top of that medication. If you feel your medication isn't working suitably for you, go back to your doctor to discuss changing the medication or coming off it and trying herbal remedies instead.

Valerian

Those who want something stronger for a **faster and more targeted action** will find Valerian helpful. Valerian reduces muscle spasm and has an impressively sedating effect on mind and body, reducing the way blood pressure shoots up under stressful conditions and generally making people **feel less stressed**.



Take Valerian if the cause of your stress is short-term and you need something that will work fast and not give you any side effects such as feeling drowsy during the day. Examples would be a job interview, a business presentation where you need to be at your best but not too anxious, or a family occasion where you want to avoid getting wound-up and irritable.

It is not sensible to take Valerian alongside other sedative medication, as it has quite a strong action itself and the overall effect of adding it to sedative medication may be too relaxing!

Valerian isn't the best thing to give to children – choose Avena sativa or Passiflora Complex for them instead.

Hypericum Complex

Hypericum is well known for its positive effect on **mild depression and low mood**. It elevates your mood in a gentle, natural way that doesn't cause side effects. Combined with Hops and Lemon Balm, as it is in this remedy, it also tackles the **underlying anxiety** that can trigger depression.



It may seem to you that anxiety and depression are polar opposites, with one indicating an increased state of nerves and the other involving lowness and lack of response. It is the case, however, that ongoing stress and anxiety can wear the body down until depressive symptoms take over.

Nervous anxiety and tension, linked to mild depression, will improve within 1-3 weeks with Hypericum Complex – not for nothing is it known as the **Sunshine Herb**.

This is a great remedy if you are struggling with a multitude of menopausal symptoms and find that they are affecting your peace of mind.

Those with SAD syndrome benefit from Hypericum.

Hypericum is not suitable to be taken with other medication.

Ginsavena

Feeling exhausted but jumpy and nervy too? This mixture of herbs **lifts energy levels whilst soothing frazzled nerves**. It's a wonderful way of dealing with fatigue whilst calming down at the same time. Energy is great, but nervous energy is not necessarily useful – you need calm, steady energy to get you through the day, and that is what Ginsavena can give you.



Increase the effectiveness of this remedy by avoiding caffeine and drinking plenty of water.

Moving house, divorce, bereavement or a very hectic period at work are all perfect situations for using Ginsavena.

Do not take this remedy for longer than 3 months at a time, and avoid it if you are on heart medication, hormonal medication or heart medication, or are diabetic, epileptic or schizophrenic.

Flower Essences

There are several Flower Essences that can help in times of stress. Flower Essences work by balancing the emotions. They take effect almost immediately and have no contraindications or side effects, so they are very easy to use. They are ideal for children, because of their lack of any possibility of side effects. Choose from:

Relaxation Essence if you are stressed and anxious

Mood Essence if you are depressed and low

Vitality Essence if you are fatigued and unmotivated

These remedies can be taken alongside herbal remedies. The effect of a Flower Essence used with a herbal remedy can be excellent. For example, take Passiflora Complex and Relaxation Essence together, or Hypericum Complex and Mood Essence.



What Should I Take? – some examples...

You're going through the menopause and, although you have a good job, nice family and no obvious worries, your sleeping patterns have deteriorated and you are feeling worried and nervy without any particular cause. You put a brave face on it for the outside world, but inside you're feeling miserable.

Take **Hypericum Complex** and concentrate on looking after yourself for a while. Avoid caffeine, which uses up nutrients that your body needs right now, and take a 10-20 minute walk every day to get raise your levels of endorphins (natural happy chemicals in your body). Talk to other women of your age, as many will be going through the same experiences.



You're a working mum with 2 children and seem to be constantly on the go. You're worried because you keep forgetting things and you're snapping at the children far more than usual. You're tired too, which doesn't help – you sleep ok but don't feel refreshed in the morning.

Take **Passiflora Complex** as this will calm you down and improve your sleep quality, which will then relieve the tiredness and irritability, and increase your powers of concentration. Drink plenty of water and use herb teas such as Chamomile and Lemon Balm or Lemon Verbena to chill you out more. For extra energy, take the iron tonic Floradix, and for an extra brain-boost, take Essential Fatty Acids such as Flaxseed Oil.



You're a busy businessman with a very important meeting coming up. You need to be dynamic but in control, rather than just shouting at everyone which is what's happening right now. You don't want to take anything sedative in case it switches you off. You also don't want to take anything that interferes with an occasional alcoholic beverage...

Take Valerian for about 2 weeks before the meeting. It won't sedate you but will reduce wasteful expenditure of nervous energy. On the big day, take Vitality Essence to give you an extra injection of confident energy. These herbal remedies are all suitable to take alongside alcohol, but be aware that alcohol stimulates your nervous system, makes you tired, and steals valuable nutrients from your system, which you could be using for brain function!



For Real

Anya was a busy teacher about to move house. She wanted to increase her energy levels to cope with the stresses of moving, but didn't want to be fizzing with caffeine-type energy as that just made it harder for her to sleep. Being a teacher, her stress levels were quite high already, and she was worried that the strain of moving would make her ill.

In the month before moving, she took Ginsavena and Floradix, whilst using herbal teas to avoid caffeine and promote even better sleep. She was surprised at how well she handled the move, and enjoyed feeling more in control of her stress levels on a day-to-day basis.



How did she do it?

Instead of:

Coffee

Tea

Sugary snacks

Alcohol

She took

Herb teas such as chamomile

Rooibosch tea

Dried fruit, full of minerals

Sparkling fruit juices

Ginsavena gives you calm, useful energy!

Warning: This book is intended for educational purposes and should not be used as a guide for the diagnosis and/or treatment of any disease. Health problems should be referred to a Healthcare Professional.





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