

Understanding and Managing Stress



Stress is a normal reaction to the challenges we face in life. A certain amount of stress is necessary to keep us all going; without it, we would be bored and listless.

It is not being suggested that stress directly causes PVFS/CFS. However, it seems that for many people it is one of a number of factors that makes them vulnerable to physical illnesses and makes recovery more difficult. There is evidence that long-term stress, which causes overproduction of cortisol, can compromise immune function. This may explain a link between PVFS/CFS and stress for some people.

The Table shows how stress may have an effect on you physically, emotionally and in the way that you behave.

PVFS/CFS AND STRESS

Long-term illness can cause its own worries. Worrying can trigger the stress response and muscles then become tense. Changes in muscle tension can be quite subtle and it is difficult to be aware of it happening. This increased tension can worsen fatigue and aggravate any pain, leading to more stress and worry.

You may also tend to put yourself under stress by doing some of the following things:

- taking on more than you can possibly do;
- never saying 'no' to people;
- never being satisfied with what you have achieved (perfectionism); and
- not relaxing enough.

Being aware of some of these things can

many of us.

Learning how to relax is a little like learning meditation – to get better takes practice. Luckily, there are a number of easily accessible relaxation techniques and strategies to help you consciously relax the body and mind on a regular basis.

Most people already have things they tend to do when they feel quite stressed: some listen to music, talk with a friend or go for a walk. Regular exercise can also help to reduce tension in the muscles and give a feeling of wellbeing, as does massage. Sometimes your usual methods of handling stress may become less effective when stress rises beyond a certain point. It is useful during these times to have some specific methods of dealing with stress. They may also have become difficult to do because of your illness.

Becoming aware of the signs of increased tension and stress and spotting them at an early stage is a useful start. We are often not aware of tension in our bodies. Listening to a relaxation track is one way of beginning to become more aware. Learning to relax means that you can reduce muscle tension and break out of the vicious cycle of fatigue, stress and tension, which can be worsened when living with PVFS/CFS.

Relaxation is different from watching TV or reading a book, where it is quite easy to remain tense and may be tiring in their own right. When practising relaxation you need to find somewhere quiet and warm, where you can find a comfortable position and you will not be interrupted.

At the beginning, relaxation may be frustrating if you find it difficult to concentrate or feel it is not working. It is a skill and it is likely to take a bit of practice to master. Remember that there

Physical Changes	Emotional Changes	Behaviour or What People Notice	Other Effects
Heart racing	Tense	'Short fuse'	Poor concentration
Sweating	Frustrated	Always rushing	Memory problems
Breathing faster	Afraid	Loss of humour	Difficulty making decisions
Queasy stomach	Irritable/angry	Impatience	
Trembling	Tiredness	Don't listen	
Dry throat	Fear/dread	Sudden mood change	
Muscle tension	Argumentative	Forgetful	

All of these physical reactions are a normal survival response to physically dangerous situations. However, in modern society, a lot of the things that create stress are not life-threatening situations, such as financial worries or family problems. In these situations, stress levels may rise and remain quite high, and after a while we may begin to feel the effects of this. Over a long period of time stress can contribute to making us feel exhausted and unwell.

be useful. There are positive management strategies for stress and for the symptoms of stress.

REDUCING STRESS THROUGH RELAXATION

Has someone ever told you to 'just relax' when you're in the middle of a stressful situation, and you thought to yourself, "Well, that's easy for you to say!" Relaxation actually isn't easy for

are different forms of relaxation, to meet individual preferences. It is worth seeing the initial stages as an investment of time, which can pay dividends in the medium and long term. Daily practice will give the best results. Download some apps or find some online videos to follow. Many provide guided instruction which may help in the early stages.

MANAGING YOUR STRESS

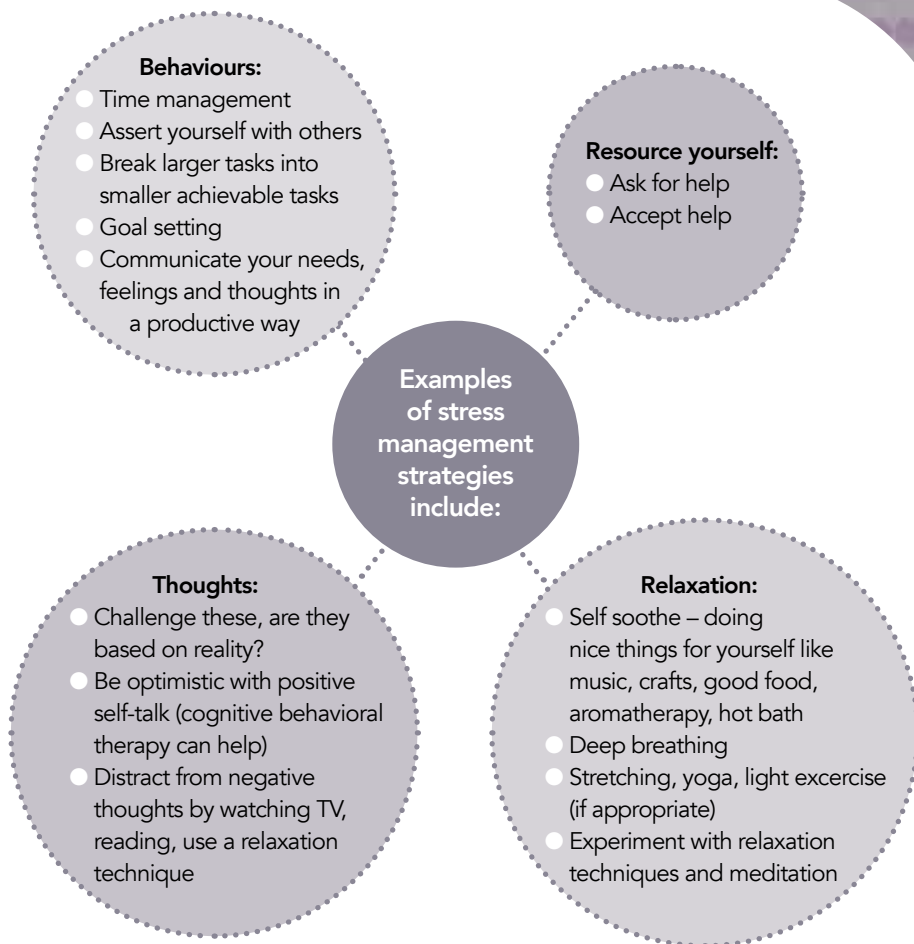
How Do You Manage Your Stress at the Moment?

Common answers to this question include:

- Go for a walk.
- Call a friend.
- Listen to music.
- Smoke cigarettes.
- Eat/drink unhealthily.
- Avoid the situation.

When you do these things to manage your stress, ask yourself these questions:

1. How do these strategies work for me?
2. Do they work in the long term?
3. If not, what else could you do?



TECHNIQUES FOR MANAGING STRESS

1. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. Think better to feel better.

2. Deep breathing

When you're anxious your breathing tends to be shallow and rapid. One of the simplest ways to relax is to take some deep diaphragmatic breaths, also called belly breathing. By shifting your breathing rate and pattern you can trigger a calming response, which decreases your heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tension.

3. Meditation for relaxation

Follow some guided



meditation to start using an app or joining a class.

4. Progressive muscle relaxation

This involves a series of exercises in which you tense your muscles as you breathe in and relax them as you breathe out. Deep muscle relaxation is incompatible with our body's anxiety response, which is why this technique can help us feel calm (and is recommended if you have trouble sleeping). Plus, you can do it almost anywhere.

5. Yoga and tai chi

6. Spend time in nature

7. Massage

Massage affects your body's production of hormones that influence your behaviour and feelings of wellbeing. A therapist's



touch tends to elevate our body's level of dopamine, which affects inspiration, joy and enthusiasm. Serotonin is also released which can bring about calm and relaxation. The gentle pressure of massage stimulates the body's circulation and helps us to relax and rest.

8. Enjoy yourself!

This may seem odd, but as hard as it may be having a good catch up, natter and laugh with close family or friends can be the exact medicine you need to de-stress and lift your spirits.

Ask your therapist for more information on or help learning any of these methods.



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