

Managing stress

This factsheet is for people who use violent or abusive behaviours towards their partner and struggle to find strategies to help manage their stress levels.

Stress and domestic abuse

Stress is something that most of us experience from time to time. It's a feeling of being under too much pressure and can be a normal response to the ups and downs of life. The key with any feeling is how we express it and how our feelings affect people around us negatively, particularly our partner and children.

Many people who have been violent, abusive, and controlling towards their partner, identify feelings of stress as a particular challenge because it can contribute to their behaviour. Where there has been violence and abuse in your relationship it might feel easy to excuse your behaviour because you felt stressed. However, being stressed is not the cause of domestic abuse.

Identifying what stress is and how it manifests for you before putting strategies in place to manage your stress in a healthy way, is the first step in a process that can help you stop the anger from escalating in violent or abusive behaviour.

Stress can arise from:

- Situations or events that put pressure on you, for example when you have lots of things to do or lots of people are demanding things from you.
- Times of uncertainty when you feel you lack control over the outcome of a situation, or what is happening to you.
- Worrying about things, these could be real or imaginary concerns.
- Major life challenges or changes such as divorce, losing your job or bereavement.
- A series of minor frustrations such as having a tough time at work, arguing with a family member and children playing up. When these smaller frustrations happen all at once, your stress levels can increase much more quickly, and it can be harder to identify what is actually causing you stress.
- Having responsibilities that you find overwhelming, for example supporting your family and being a parent/carer.
- Not having enough work, activities or change in your life.

Signs of stress

We all experience stress differently. You might be able to tell right away when you're feeling stressed, but other times it might not be

so obvious. Stress can affect you emotionally, physically and through how you act and your behaviour.

Emotional signs of stress can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Feeling constantly worried, anxious, nervous, and depressed
- Feeling irritable, aggressive, impatient, or wound up
- Feeling like your thoughts are constantly racing and you can't switch them off
- Feeling over-burdened/overwhelmed and unable to enjoy anything
- Feeling uninterested in your life, neglected or lonely

Physical signs of stress can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Difficulty relaxing
- Difficulty concentrating or focussing on anything
- Aches and pains in your muscles
- Feeling sick or dizzy
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Breathing more quickly
- Panic attacks
- Feeling tired all the time

Your behaviour may also change in response to feeling stressed and this might show by:

- Losing your temper more quickly
- Being more verbally and physically aggressive
- Finding it hard to make decisions and/or avoiding situations that are worrying you
- Eating too much or too little
- Smoking, drinking, or using drugs more than usual
- Losing your interest in sex
- Being tearful or crying a lot
- Being silent and moody

Experiencing any of these stress responses will be difficult, but there are ways to manage them. Understanding your stress responses will make it easier to identify when you are stressed, so you can manage it before you escalate to violence and abuse.

Remember, it's never too late to make a different choice. You can make a positive choice and walk away. Right up to the moment you are violent or abusive, you can choose to do otherwise.

How might this make your partner feel?

Your stress is likely to be having a serious effect on your partner's health and wellbeing. If you have used violence or abuse when you have felt stressed in the past, then your partner may fear that this will always be the case when you are stressed.

Any indicators of your stress levels rising might be frightening and traumatic for your partner, as they may worry about what you might do next.

Your partner may feel:

- worried about you, powerless to make things better, or that they are a contributing factor in your feelings of stress
- they are walking on eggshells: terrified of upsetting you and making you more stressed and the abuse escalating as a result
- like they have lost who they are and cannot make any decisions freely, in case it increases your stress and you use violence or abuse
- some, or all, of the following: depressed, stressed, vulnerable, drained, terrified, angry, confused, anxious, unloved, worthless, destroyed, humiliated, lost, alone, isolated
- physically tense, on edge and exhausted having to manage your feelings of stress
- entirely responsible for the house and the children. They might feel lonely and overwhelmed with the pressure they are under

Your partner and/or children may find it more difficult to respect and love you.

What can you do to manage your stress?

Interrupt and distract yourself from stressed thoughts and feelings.

You can do this by:

- Getting some distance from the feeling: notice its physical effects on you, so that it starts to loosen its grip on you.

- Distracting yourself with a task that brings you back into the present moment, rather than focusing on your fears about the future.
- Focusing on yourself and what you need to do.
- Call someone you know will be supportive in helping you to manage your feelings of stressed. You need people who will help you in choosing non-abusive behaviour, will have the safety of your partner and children at the forefront of their mind and will hold you accountable for your abusive behaviour.
- Doing things that make you feel good about yourself (e.g. going to the gym, pampering yourself, learning something new, doing an activity with the children, taking up a hobby).
- Not drinking alcohol or taking drugs; they may mess with your thinking and mean you blow things out of proportion making it more likely that you will do something you will regret. This is particularly important if you know you are more likely to be violent or abusive when you are drunk or high.

When you are calm and have some space, identify your causes of stress, and think of techniques to manage your stress:

- Are there issues that come up regularly or ongoing sources of stress for you. Or is there a one-off event that is playing on your mind?
- Try and break down what is making you feel stressed – perhaps make a list of everything to bring some order to your feelings and thoughts and set some small and achievable goals for things that you can deal with.
- Do not put yourself under too much pressure, you do not want to make yourself more stressed by not achieving your goals.
- Create a list of things you could say to yourself before, during and after situations where your behaviour might potentially escalate to violence.

Other ways to manage stress

- Use cool-down tactics and try to relax: focus on your breathing, drop your shoulders, loosen your face, hands and limbs.
- Exercise.
- Distract yourself: when you notice you are becoming stressed, try switching to a new thought or a completely different

activity: count to 10, 50 or 100. Play relaxing music, read a book, or watch some tv.

- Slow your behaviour from escalating to violence or abuse by getting out of your environment. Take a few minutes to get away and take a short walk or go to a different room where you can separate yourself from your feelings of stress and you can cool-off.

If you are finding it hard to change

If you don't feel able to stop your violence and abuse you should think about moving out the house and not seeing your partner for a while. It's the only way to keep your partner and children safe.

Call the Respect Phonenumber – freephone 0808 8024040

We will listen to you in a non-judgemental way, discuss your situation and help you think about how to change. We can give you contact details for a domestic abuse prevention programme, if there is one in your area. Our helpline is confidential.