



Factsheet: Epilepsy and Stress / Anxiety

Stress is a term used to describe emotional strain and tension. When we experience stress we also can become anxious. Although stress and anxiety do not cause epilepsy, for some people they may be a seizure trigger. There are different things you can do to reduce stress and anxiety. By lowering your stress levels you may be able to reduce the number of seizures you experience.

Identifying stress

Most people will experience stress at some point in their lives. It can appear in a variety of different ways. Sometimes it is difficult to tell if you are experiencing stress. It is often our friends and family who pick up on the first signs. Being aware of the possible symptoms can help you identify if you feel stressed or anxious. These can include:

- Poor sleep
- Irritability
- Poor concentration
- Poor memory
- Sweating
- Lack of appetite
- Headaches
- Depression or feeling low
- Feeling tired or having excess energy

Relationship between stress and epilepsy

There are a variety of ways in which stress can affect epilepsy.

- Feeling stressed can make you more forgetful. This may make it more difficult to remember to take your anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). If you don't take your AEDs at the right time you may be more likely to have seizures. Using pill boxes and alarms can help. Our helpline has more information about these.
- Stress causes chemical changes in the brain. This can affect how the brain works. For some people these chemical changes can increase the likelihood of having a seizure. For some people reducing stress can also reduce the number of seizures they experience.

- Some people may become anxious or afraid of having a seizure, which itself causes stress. Feeling stressed can then increase the number of seizures in some people. This can become a vicious circle with the seizures causing stress and the stress resulting in more seizures.
- If you are feeling stressed, you may have trouble sleeping. This can cause you to feel more tired during the day. For some people being tired can be a seizure trigger.

Coping with stress

There are a variety of different things you can try to help relieve stress. For some people reducing stress levels can improve seizure control.

Be more active: Exercise unwinds the mind. It can make you feel more positive and less anxious. Exercise can help you to clear your thoughts and deal with problems more calmly. It can also alter the chemical balance in the brain to help counter the effects of stress. You could try walking, jogging or going to the gym. Other forms of exercise like dancing, yoga and Tai Chi have also been shown to reduce stress. See our Leisure Guide for more ideas.

Connect with people: There is a saying that “a problem shared is a problem halved”. For many people talking about their anxieties can help relieve them. You could talk to family and friends. Why not go for a walk with someone, go to the cinema, or join an epilepsy support group? Some areas have support groups that meet regularly. There are also on-line support groups and forums. Our helpline has more information on support in your area. Speaking to someone with specialist knowledge about epilepsy may also help. This could be an Epilepsy Specialist Nurse, an Epilepsy Fieldworker or the Epilepsy Scotland helpline. Our helpline number is 0808 800 2200.

Avoid certain habits: Cutting down on drinks containing caffeine can help. These include coffee, tea, some fizzy drinks, sports drinks and energy drinks. You can check if the ingredients on the label include caffeine. Watching how much amount of alcohol you drink can also reduce stress. We have a separate factsheet on Epilepsy and Alcohol. Smoking can make stress worse. Giving up smoking is not easy and, in the short term may cause you to feel more stressed or annoyed, but it will help in the long term. The NHS Smoking Helpline can offer you advice and encouragement to help you quit smoking. Call them on 0800 022 4332. If you are thinking of using nicotine patches to help you stop smoking speak to your Epilepsy Specialist Nurse first.

Be positive: Living with a long term condition like epilepsy can be difficult. It can help to think positively. If you can identify areas of your life that make you feel anxious or upset, you can to start change the way you think about them. If you

are aware of being anxious about something, thinking more positively about it can help. For some people accepting the things they cannot change can make a difference. This can help stop negative feelings. Some people feel that talking about their epilepsy can help put it into perspective. If you feel talking things over helps, you could speak to a counsellor. There is a free telephone counselling service that you could try called 'Your Call' on 0808 801 0362. This is a specialist service for people with a disability and their families. Your GP may refer you to a counselling service like a cognitive behavioral therapist.

Complementary therapies: Some people find that complementary therapies can help them cope with stress. There are a variety of different complementary therapies that may help. These include:

- Aromatherapy massage
- Reiki
- Consulting a medical herbalist
- Reflexology
- Hypnotherapy

If you are thinking about trying a complementary therapy please check with your Epilepsy Specialist Nurse or GP first to make sure it is safe. Remember to let the therapist know about your epilepsy. It is important that you make sure the practitioner is fully trained, insured, and a member of a recognized professional body. You could ask friends if they can recommend someone.

Learning relaxation techniques: Learning to relax can help reduce stress. Different people find different things relaxing. This could be listening to music or going fishing, playing the guitar or going for a walk. You could try meditation, breathing exercises or yoga. There are also CDs that can teach you to relax. Why not make a list of the things you find relaxing?

If your seizures occur during sleep or when you are deeply relaxed, relaxation techniques may be a seizure trigger. Contact our helpline for more information on this.

Diet: Eating a healthy diet can help reduce stress levels. This includes eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and cutting back on sweet foods like cakes, chocolate and biscuits. You could speak to your local health centre and ask to speak to a dietician who could give you advice. It is also important to drink plenty of fluids. The NHS suggests that in the UK you aim to drink at least 1.2 litres (6-8 glasses) of water a day.

When to seek further help?

Sometimes you may need extra help to cope with stress. If you feel that some or most of the following applies to you, make an appointment to see your doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse:

- You feel sad most of the time.
- You seem to have lost interest in the things you used to enjoy, such as a hobby, sport or leisure activity.
- You no longer want to go out with friends and mostly prefer to be left alone.
- You are losing interest in your sex life.
- You feel bad or guilty, for no good reason.
- Your appetite has changed. Suddenly you don't want to eat or find you want to eat all the time.
- You find it difficult to get to sleep at night or frequently wake up during the night.
- You feel tired all the time even though you sleep for many hours at night and during the day.
- Friends notice that you no longer pay much attention to how you look.

If you feel anxious or stressed the first step is to admit this to yourself. If you need more information about this or would like to talk to someone please call our helpline.

For more help and information

Call our helpline 0808 800 2200, text 07786 209 501

Or email us at enquiries@epilepsyscotland.org.uk