

## Epilepsy and stress / anxiety

Stress is a term used to describe emotional strain and tension. When we experience stress, we can also become anxious. Although stress and anxiety do not cause epilepsy, for some people stress and anxiety may well be a seizure trigger.

Many people will feel upset, stressed or anxious after a new diagnosis of epilepsy. This is a completely normal reaction. Give yourself time for your treatment to work and for things to settle down.

If you continue to have seizures, this can be a major source of stress and anxiety. If you are affected by this, or generally feel a continuous level of stress or anxiety in your life, it's time to ask for help.

Start off by contacting the Epilepsy Scotland helpline 0808 800 2200 and talk to someone. Find out what help is out there. Find out more about epilepsy and empower yourself with knowledge of this condition. We have lots of general information about epilepsy in the information section on our website [www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk](http://www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk). We can also post you an information pack.

You may find that once you have asked for help and let people know how you feel, you feel more in control of your life. This may help you feel less anxious and stressed about having epilepsy.

### Identifying stress

Stress can appear in a variety of different ways. Sometimes it is difficult to tell if you are experiencing stress. Our friends and family are often the first to pick up on the signs. Being aware of what to look out for can often 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

Some of these symptoms can also be side effects of anti-epileptic drugs. So, if you are experiencing any of these symptoms, always speak to your GP or epilepsy specialist nurse first.

## 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 forget to take your medication or don't take it at the right time you may be more likely to have seizures. Set an alarm reminder on your phone or use a pill box to help you remember to take your medication on time.
- \* 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 make you feel tired during the day. For some people being tired can be a seizure trigger.

## Coping with stress

You may not always be able to avoid stressful situations, but you can often change how you respond to stress. We are all different and need different things from life. Not everything works for every person. Find your own unique ways to help you cope with stress. We have summarised some general things which are known to help reduce stress levels. If you don't know where to start, speak to your GP.

It's worth putting some effort into it, because apart from having a better quality of life, you may also be able to reduce the amount of seizures you have if you get on top of your stress.

## Be more active

Exercise is good for you. It can make you feel more positive and less anxious. Exercise can help you 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.

Even just walking has many health benefits. If you don't want to walk alone, join a local walking group. Many local authorities also put on guided health walks you can sign up to. Join a gym. Find out what classes your local leisure centre offers such as dancing, yoga or Tai Chi. Swimming can be a great exercise too. There is bound to be something out there you may enjoy doing.

Most forms of exercise can be made safe for people with epilepsy. Speak to your specialist nurse first before you take up any exercise or contact us on our helpline for more information about staying safe while exercising.

## Connect with people

Having epilepsy can make you feel lonely at times. It's not always easy to open up to others and talk about what it's like for you. Bottling things up can be stressful. Find someone you trust and start talking. Some people may find it easier to talk to someone they don't know. Our helpline officers are here to help; contact them on 0808 800 2200.

You may not want to talk to everyone about your feelings and struggles but even just arranging to meet up with someone for a coffee or a trip to the cinema can make you feel more connected.

Consider joining an epilepsy support group if there is one in your area. Alternatively sign up to an online support group, such as our own online private Epilepsy Scotland Support group. Knowing you are not alone in what you experience and how you feel can help you feel connected.

## Avoid certain habits

Too much caffeine can increase anxiety and stress. Many drinks contain caffeine, such as coffee, tea, some fizzy drinks, sports drinks and energy drinks. Be mindful of the fact that some painkillers and cold remedies you can buy over the counter also contain caffeine. Chocolate also contains small amounts of caffeine. The darker the chocolate, the higher the caffeine content. You might be surprised to discover how much caffeine you consume when you add it all up. Cutting down on caffeine can help you reduce stress and anxiety.

Many people drink alcohol to relax. Too much alcohol can, however, have the opposite effect making you more stressed and anxious. To find out more about epilepsy and alcohol, ask for our separate factsheet.

Contrary to popular belief, smoking actually increases anxiety and tension. When you smoke, the nicotine in cigarettes initially gives you an instant sense of relaxation. However, this feeling is temporary and will give way to withdrawal symptoms and

cravings. This means you need to smoke more to maintain that state of relaxation but it doesn't reduce the reasons why you feel stressed.

Giving up smoking is not easy and in the short term may cause you to feel more stressed. It will, however, help you in the long term. Choosing the right time for you to quit smoking is important and can make all the difference as to whether you will be successful. If you currently experience high levels of stress or have experienced a recent loss, this might not be the time to give up smoking.

Smokeline can offer you advice and encouragement to help you quit smoking. They are Scotland's national NHS smoking helpline and you can call them on 0800 84 84 84. Many GP practices will also run smoking cessation classes.

Be aware that some nicotine replacement therapies such as patches may interfere with your anti-epileptic medication. Always seek medical advice from your epilepsy specialist nurse or GP first before you buy and use any nicotine replacement therapies.

## Put things into perspective

If you can, try and identify anything that makes you feel anxious, stressed or upset. Ask yourself, is this something I can change? If not, you may need to let it go. For example, if you are stressed about what people might think if you have a seizure in public, it's pointless. You can't control what other people think about you. It's their problem, not yours.

Once you accept that there is nothing you can do, you may start to think differently about it, and this will change the way you feel about it. This is called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and a CBT therapist can help you make these changes.

Focus on the areas of your life you may have some control over. For example, if you are affected by side effects of your medication, seek medical advice from your epilepsy specialist. If you are stressed about not knowing when your next seizure

comes, focus on identifying possible seizure triggers and working on avoiding or reducing these. If you are stressed about what your friends might think about your epilepsy, talk to them, let them ask you questions, and help them understand epilepsy.

You might need some time yourself to get your head around your epilepsy, understand the condition, and what it means for you. Talking about how you feel and being able to ask questions can help you be less stressed about it and put it a bit more into perspective. Our helpline 0808 800 2200 can give you lots more information and a respectful, non-judgmental space to talk.

## **Book yourself a complementary therapies session**

Complementary therapies can often work well to reduce stress levels. A massage, for example, can be a great stress buster. Check with your epilepsy specialist nurse or GP first to make sure that whatever you want to try is safe for your epilepsy and doesn't interfere with your anti-epileptic medication.

Not all therapies may be suitable for someone with epilepsy. If, for example, you want to try a herbal supplement to help you sleep better, it is safer to consult a fully trained medical herbalist than buying this in a health food shop. This is because some herbal remedies can make seizures worse. Always speak to the therapist beforehand and let them know you have epilepsy.

## **Learn relaxation techniques**

Relaxation techniques can help towards lowering your stress levels. This could be learning specific breathing exercises, meditation or yoga. Find yourself a class or check out the many online resources. We all have different ways of relaxing, and for some people this could be simply listening to music or going for a walk. Whatever works for you, try and incorporate this into your daily life, so you will reap the benefits.

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

## Keep an eye on your diet

Eating a healthy diet can also have a positive impact on your stress levels. This includes eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and cutting back on processed, fatty, salty and sweet foods.

Many of us crave sugar when stressed. It makes you more relaxed and you feel more able to deal with stressful situations. This is, however, only a short-term fix. In the longer term, a diet heavy on sugar can cause physical stress to your brain, often leading to memory loss, which then leads to more stress. There is also some evidence that suggests that cutting down on sugar in your diet can help with seizure control.

Don't forget to keep well hydrated. Your brain needs fluids to fully function. The NHS suggests that we should drink at least 1.2 litres (ie six to eight glasses) of water a day.

If you need help with your diet, ask your GP to refer you to a dietician.

## When to seek further help?

If stress and anxiety is taking over your life, don't hesitate to seek help. If 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

Admitting to yourself that you are struggling is the first step to getting help. Don't be alone. Speak to someone. If you don't know where to start, call our helpline 0808 800 2200.