

# Stress, anxiety and epilepsy

Stress is defined as emotional strain and tension. When we experience stress, we can also become anxious. Although stress and anxiety do not cause epilepsy, they can be a seizure trigger for some people.

## *Some stress is normal*

Stress is not always bad. If it is short term, it can help kick us into action or seek out help. Stress can be a completely normal reaction to a difficult or challenging situation.

A diagnosis of epilepsy can cause all kinds of emotions and feelings including stress and anxiety. These initial reactions and feelings are completely normal. It can take some time to process information and get your head around what epilepsy might mean for you.

When stress becomes prolonged and is starting to impact on your mental and physical health, it is important to seek help.

## Identifying stress

It's not always easy to tell if you are stressed. Others might notice it before you do. Signs of stress can include:

- struggling to sleep
- feeling tired all the time despite sleeping
- feeling irritable
- struggling to concentrate or focus on tasks
- problems with your memory
- sweating
- lack of appetite or wanting to eat all the time
- headaches
- feeling low, depressed or tearful
- having excess energy
- suddenly not paying attention to your appearance
- suddenly not wanting to go out and socialise with friends
- losing interest in the things you used to enjoy

Some of these symptoms can also be side effects of some anti-epileptic drugs. Always seek medical advice first to rule out a link to medication side effects.

## Explaining the link between stress and epilepsy

Stress can affect your epilepsy in many ways:

- Stress causes chemical changes in the brain affecting how well our brain functions. For some people, these chemical changes can increase the likelihood of having a seizure.
- The fear of not knowing when the next seizure happens, and having a seizure, can cause stress and anxiety.
- Stress and anxiety can affect your sleep. If you do not sleep well during the night, you can feel tired during the day. This lack of sleep and tiredness can be a seizure trigger for some people.
- And finally, feeling stressed and anxious can also affect your memory making you more forgetful. Taking your anti-epileptic drugs regularly is important for seizure control. If you forget to take your medication or do not take it at the right time you may be more likely to have a seizure.

## Steps you can take to feel less stressed

Over time, less stress could mean fewer seizures, if this is one of your seizure triggers.

Avoiding stressful situations is often easier said than done. If you can, walk away from situations and people that trigger a stress reaction in you.

You can also work on trying to change how you respond to stress to reduce the potential impact it may have on your seizures. Even small changes can significantly improve your mental health and sense of wellbeing. Do not turn your life upside down by introducing big and multiple changes straightaway,

this could actually increase your stress. Start by picking one thing you want to change and see where it takes you.

## *Be more active*

Improving your physical wellbeing has a direct impact on your mental health. Exercising can make you feel more positive and less anxious. It can also alter the chemical balance in the brain to help counter the effects of stress.

It doesn't have to be the gym. Go swimming. Join a walking group or go on a local guided health walk. Even just taking yourself on a walk around your neighbourhood for half an hour can give you a much-needed mental health boost.

Before you take up any new activity, check with your epilepsy nurse to make sure this activity is safe for you.

## *Connect with nature*

Get yourself out into nature. Even a stroll around your local park can be a great stress buster. Research shows that being in nature can improve both our physical and mental health. Being in nature can bring you into the present moment and help clear your head. It lowers tension in your body and decreases stress hormones, making you feel better emotionally and ready to tackle some of the challenges that come your way.

## Learn relaxation techniques

Breathing techniques, meditation or yoga can give you the tools to manage your stress. It works best if you incorporate relaxation techniques into your daily life once you found something that works for you.

There are lots of resources about breathing techniques online. Check out local yoga or meditation classes, some of them are also offered online.

## Connect with people

It is not always easy to open up to others and talk about what it's like living with epilepsy. Find someone you trust and start talking, you might feel more able to cope if you can verbalise what is going on for you. Even just meeting up with someone for a coffee and a general chat might make you feel less alone and less stressed.

Some people also find it helpful to reach out and connect with others who live with epilepsy. This could be via an online support group such as our private Epilepsy Scotland Support group on Facebook.

You can also contact our confidential helpline on 0808 800 2200 if you need someone to talk to. Our friendly helpline officers are here for you and great at listening.

## Cut down on caffeine

We often reach out to caffeine for a pick-me-up but too much of it can make you jittery and stressed. Many products contain caffeine, and you may not

always be aware of this. Obvious culprits include coffee, tea, fizzy drinks, sports drinks and energy drinks. Even over-the-counter painkillers and cold remedies often contain caffeine which can add to your daily total of caffeine intake.

## Drink less alcohol

We often drink to relax but too much alcohol can have the opposite effect making you more stressed and anxious. When you drink alcohol over a long period, especially if you drink more than the recommended safe limit of 14 units per week, it can interfere with the balance between chemicals and processes in our brains.

This can affect our feelings, emotions and thoughts, making it even harder to deal with stress. Too much alcohol can also affect the quality of your sleep, which is vital to reduce stress hormones in our body.

## Stop smoking

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

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. Speak to your GP for a referral to a smoking cessation clinic.

Be aware, some nicotine replacement therapies are contraindicatory for some people affected by seizures. Always seek medical advice from your epilepsy specialist nurse or GP first before you use nicotine replacement therapies.

## *Improve your sleep*

Sleep reduces the stress hormone cortisol we release when we are stressed. If you do not sleep well or not enough, cortisol levels in your body will remain high keeping you in a permanent state of stress and anxiety. Aim for between seven to nine hours of sleep every day, if you can, to support your body deal with stress.

If you have problems sleeping, seek medical advice in the first instance. You can get plenty of resources and information online to help you with setting up a good sleep routine.

## *Eat well for good mental health*

Eating a healthy diet can have a positive impact on your mental health. A balanced healthy diet usually includes fresh fruit and vegetables and cutting back on processed, fatty, salty and sweet foods.

Many of us crave sugar when stressed. The feelgood factor we get from eating chocolate and other sweet foods is, however, only a short-term fix. In the longer term, a diet heavy on sugar can cause physical stress to your brain. There are lots of resources online about how to 'feed your brain' and healthy eating in general. If you need more specialist advice, speak to your GP or ask them to refer you to a dietician.

## Keep yourself well hydrated

Try this next time you are feeling stressed: drink a glass of water. Your brain and other organs need water to function properly. Dehydration can increase your stress levels because your body is unable to function properly.

The NHS suggests that we should drink at least 1.2 litres (ie six to eight glasses) of water a day.

## Focus on what you can change

It seems unhelpful getting stressed about a situation which you cannot change. For example, you may be getting stressed about what people might think if you have a seizure in public. You cannot control what other people think about you.

Try and identify what makes you feel anxious, stressed or upset. Ask yourself, is this something I can change? If not, try and let it go. Once you accept that there is nothing you can do about a situation, this may change the way you feel about it.

Consider counselling if you find yourself too wrapped up with factors you cannot control. A counsellor can help you change how you think and feel about certain situations and help you come up with effective coping strategies.

## And finally, take time out for yourself

We tend to keep busy when we are stressed but sometimes it's important to just be. Take ten minutes every day doing nothing. Switch off your phone. Make yourself a hot drink, preferably caffeine free, and relax. Running on empty all the time increases stress levels. Even ten minutes of doing nothing can help you charge up your batteries increasing your resilience and ability to cope with stressful situations.

## When to seek help

If stress is constant and seems to affect the quality and enjoyment of your life, it might be time to seek help. Admitting that you are struggling is the first step to getting the help you need.

Your first point of call should always be your GP or epilepsy specialist nurse. This is to rule out any medication side effects or other medical issues that could be causing the way you feel. Your GP may also be able to refer you to a counsellor if this is the most appropriate course of action for you.

If you do not know where to start, call our helpline 0808 800 2200. Our friendly helpline officers are here to listen and can make suggestions where to go next. Sometimes just speaking to someone can help to offload and feel less stressed.

If you are stressed because you are feeling overwhelmed by your epilepsy and don't understand the condition, speak to us, or check out our website [www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk](http://www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk). You will find a large number of resources explaining epilepsy on our [About epilepsy](#) pages. You may feel more in

control of your epilepsy once you have a better understanding of epilepsy and how you can help yourself.

Our [Support for you](#) pages also list additional support you can access to help you move forward.

**Our resources are always free. If you would like to support our work please text FACTS to 70085 to donate £3. Texts cost £3 plus one standard rate message.**



[www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk](http://www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk)

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