

## **Effects of Stress, Facilitator Note**

In preparing for this activity create traffic light cards. Make one in red with the “**NO I DO NOT AGREE**” written in the centre; one in yellow with “**MAYBE/NOT SURE**”; and one in green with “**YES I AGREE**”. Laminate and keep these for future use.

Stress signs should be placed on large card or sheets of A4 paper and laminated for future use. The idea is to be able to hold them up one at a time so that the whole group can read what is on it. Also prepare one sign marked **GOOD**, one marked **BAD** and one marked **NOT SURE**. These signs can be used in place of the traffic light signs if you just want to make a list under each heading of what participants think are good/bad/not sure ways of dealing with stress. You could use them with the traffic lights and once they have all agreed where stress signs go then you can group them under the good/bad/not sure headings and discuss.

### **Stress Signs**

Place one on card or paper and laminate:

- Drugs
- Taking on Too Much
- Relaxation
- Dealing with Problems
- Alcohol
- Holidays
- Comfort Eating/Limiting Food
- Making Time
- Taking Exercise
- Smoking
- Looking After Your body
- Work Out What Is Causing Stress
- Lashing Out/Violence/Anti-Social Behaviour
- Sleeping Well
- Expressing Yourself
- Risk Taking Behaviour
- Self-Harm
- Bottling It Up



Be prepared to discuss the use of illicit drugs, alcohol and smoking as part of this exercise. It may be worth taking the time to find out about the problems of using these substances as ways of coping with stress, anxiety etc. For instance some participants may perceive smoking tobacco to be a good way of dealing with stress. You can deal with this by saying that, for some people it can be seen as a good way in the short term, but that it leads to more health problems later on, it costs money, and it does not actually reduce stress or anxiety but can increase it.



Similarly with alcohol the same argument exists. Alcohol is a depressant and can lead to lower mood and increase anxiety. Alcohol consumption can also lead to anti social behaviour and risk taking behaviour which all have their own consequences.

Illicit drug use also has a detrimental effect on mental health. You can discuss the possible connections with cannabis and mental ill health (although it is always worth while getting further information on this topic), and that most illicit drugs can leave a person feeling vulnerable, low mood, paranoid and anxious if taken in sufficient quantities.

It may be a good idea to get some information sheets or leaflets of places to go for help or further information if participants want to find out more.

In ending the session it is always worthwhile to look over those suggestions which can help deal with stress etc. Those suggestions should include the cards:

Work out what is causing problem; sleeping well; looking after your body; talking; dealing with problems.

Encourage participants to explore why these are good for their mental health and who they can safely talk to about their problems.

Be aware that some situations, such as going on holiday, may for some young carers be more stressful than not going away. Take time and discuss why this might be the case for some people.





## **Positive ways of dealing with stress**

### **Work out what is causing you stress**

It's easy to think that everything is getting on top of us. Making a list of the positive things and negative things in our life will help you see what is causing you stress. Then ask yourself which of the stressful things you can change and which you have to learn to live with. Being a young carer may be something that can change straight away but support in dealing with some of the caring role might make it easier. We can only change the things that are within our control but we can change how things out with our control affect us.

### **Talking**

Talking to people who we trust, who listen well and won't share private information is important, it can help us cope with the stresses we can't change easily.

### **Expressing yourself**

Expressing feelings through writing them down, as a diary, poem, song or story or by using art or music, helps us make sense of what is going on and can relieve stress. Try making a list of situations when you have coped well before and use them to help with other situations.

### **Making time**

Taking time to do something we enjoy is important. Encourage the participants to think of things they enjoy and how they could make time for these every day.

### **Holidays**

Where possible, going on holiday can be beneficial. It can also be a source of additional stress however. Other breaks or changes of scenery can have a "holiday" effect on us, removing ourselves from a stressful situation and allowing us to re-charge. Might need to help some young carers find places where they can go at times of stress, a friend or relative's house might be an idea just to get away for a wee while etc.

### **Exercise**

Exercise de-stresses us, boosts feel good hormone levels, improves self-esteem, helps us sleep, maintains a healthy body and therefore helps maintain a healthy mind. Exercise can help to tackle the symptoms of depression. Encourage young carers to think about how they can incorporate a little exercise into their daily life.

### **Relaxation**

Listening to music, watching TV or a film, reading, lazing in the bath, all help us de-stress, sleep better and maintain a healthier mind.



## **Sleeping well**

Sleep is essential to the growth and repair of your body and allows your mind to process the events of the day and prepare you for the next one through dreaming. Sleep deprivation increases stress, reduces your body's ability to cope leaving you more prone to infection and can lead to low moods and anxiety.

## **Dealing with problems**

If possible deal with things as they happen. For example if something happened in school to make you stressed, try and fix it before you go home. Set aside worry time and not-allowed-to-worry time. For example if school is causing you stress then after school think about what worried you, what you can do to change this and, just as importantly, what can't be changed. Decide a time to stop worrying about it, e.g. "When I sit down for my tea I'm not going to worry about this for the rest of the day".

It may not be possible to change the stressful situation, e.g. family life, so it is important to make time away from the situation by going for a walk, seeing a friend, etc. Set goals for yourself, then break them down into manageable tasks. Think about what is realistic and achievable. Remember to congratulate yourself when you achieve even parts of your aims and goals.

## **Looking after your body**

The body and mind are one and the same. If you maintain a healthy body you are better able to maintain a healthy mind. Prolonged stress leaves the body prone to infection and eventually can lead to physical illness. It doesn't follow that a person with an on-going medical complaint, e.g. asthma or diabetes or a physical disability will necessarily have poor mental health nor does it follow that a person with a mental health diagnosis such as bi-polar disorder cannot be mentally healthy.





## **Negative Ways of Dealing with Stress**

### **Alcohol**

The use of alcohol to relieve stress is counter-productive. The source of stress is still there the next day, along with the after effects of alcohol. Discuss with participants the possible consequences of using alcohol as a coping mechanism, particularly in the long term. Also tease out what it is that people enjoy about using alcohol and why it seems to help with stress. Often it is the social aspects that produce the positive effects, seeing friends, having a laugh, talking, “letting your hair down”, rather than the alcohol.

Be aware that some young carers in the group may be affected by alcohol abuse so care needs to be taken when dealing with this, but emphasise that alcohol does not take the problem away and can lead to other problems, but that help is available.

### **Drugs**

As with alcohol, the use of drugs is a negative way of dealing with stress and has risks attached. Cannabis in particular is linked to developing mental health problems as well as health risks associated with smoking. Discuss: what are the possible consequences of drug use? (again be aware of young carers affected by drug abuse within group and treat topic accordingly)

### **Smoking**

Smoking doesn't relieve stress! It is a psychological association with relaxation brought about by a range of factors – taking a cigarette break, the relieving of nicotine withdrawal systems, images from media etc. Discuss: what are the consequences of smoking?

### **Keeping on going/bottling it up**

Bottling up emotions doesn't cause them to go away. Instead they build up and become more severe and harder to process.

### **Taking on too much**

Some people may seek to avoid confronting their stress and feelings by taking on more and more tasks, in order to keep themselves distracted, keep others happy, or to maintain an illusion (to themselves or others) of coping. This can lead to exhaustion and mental health problems. Discuss: have you ever taken on too much, how did you feel. If you think you've taken on too much what can you do about it?



## **Lashing out/violence/anti-social behaviour**

When emotions such as frustration, anger, loss or feelings of worthlessness aren't dealt with they may be expressed through violence, verbal or physical. Discuss: what are the consequences of violence and anti-social behaviour?

## **Risk taking behaviour**

Taking unnecessary risks with personal safety, including sexual risks is often symptomatic of low self-esteem, stress or trauma. Discuss: what are the consequences of such behaviour?

## **Comfort eating/limiting food intake**

Comfort eating and limiting food intake are similar behaviour in that they have their roots in equating the relationship with food to perceptions of self-worth. These feelings can lead to developing eating disorders.

## **Self-harm**

People self-harm for a huge range of reasons, related broadly to perceptions of self-worth. Although the behaviour in itself is dangerous, it is the underlying feelings of despair and worthlessness that need to be dealt with. It is important to stress that self-harming shouldn't necessarily be tackled by removing the items used to self-harm as the person will feel they have lost their coping strategy and may seek to use other methods, which may be more dangerous. For more information see [www.selfharm.org.uk](http://www.selfharm.org.uk)