



FIRE AND RESCUE  
How to manage  
stress and anxiety

Blue Light Programme





## How to manage stress and anxiety

This booklet is for anyone in the fire and rescue service who wants to manage their stress and anxiety. It gives practical suggestions about how to deal with stress and anxiety and where to go for support.

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## How do stress and anxiety affect me?

Working in the fire and rescue service is a job where you may often feel like you are under a lot of pressure, and it's natural to feel stressed or anxious. But if you become regularly overwhelmed by these feelings, this could start to seriously affect your health.

### Our research shows:

- 85% of fire and rescue staff and volunteers have experienced stress and poor mental health at work, but you are less likely to take time off work as a result compared to the general workforce.
- You are also twice as likely to identify problems at work as the main cause of your mental health problems compared to the general workplace.

## What are the causes of stress and anxiety?

You might be affected by stress and anxiety because of work, or factors outside of work, like family, relationships or financial concerns. There might be one big thing causing you stress and anxiety, or it could be a build-up of small challenges. This might make it harder for you to identify exactly what's affecting you.

And if you're feeling stress or anxiety in one area of your life, this can impact other areas too – so you might find that problems in your relationship are causing you to be less engaged at work; or difficulties at work are affecting the way you behave with friends and family.

**You go to nasty jobs and you try and leave it behind. But you've got your own stresses on top of that... it makes the job extremely hard, and sometimes too hard to do.**





## What is stress?

When we say things like “this is stressful” or “I’m stressed”, we might be talking about:

- Situations or events that put pressure on us – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don’t have much control over what happens.
- Our reaction to being placed under pressure – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with.

We’re all different, so a situation that doesn’t bother you at all might cause someone else a lot of stress.

**It’s overwhelming. Sometimes you can’t see beyond the thick fog of stress.**



## Why does stress affect me physically?

You might find that your first clues about being stressed are physical signs, like tiredness, headaches or an upset stomach.

This is because when we feel stressed emotionally, our bodies release hormones called **cortisol** and **adrenaline**. This is the body's automatic way of preparing to respond to a threat, and it can help you perform in emergency situations. But if you're regularly producing high levels of these hormones, it can make you feel physically unwell and could affect your health in the longer term.

## Is stress a mental health problem?

No, but it's closely linked to your mental health because stress can cause mental health problems, and make existing problems worse. For example, if you often struggle to manage feelings of stress, you might develop a mental health problem like anxiety or depression. And if you experience a mental health problem, lots of everyday situations could become very stressful for you.



# What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a word we use to describe feelings of unease, worry and fear. It incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something.

It's common to be anxious from time to time: you might feel tense, nervous and perhaps fearful at the thought of a stressful event or decision you're facing, for example:

- going into hospital
- getting a promotion
- moving house
- having a baby
- getting married or divorced.

In situations like these it's understandable to have worries about how you will perform, or what the outcome will be. For a short time you might even find it hard to sleep, eat or concentrate. Then usually, after a short while or when the situation has passed, the feelings of worry stop.



## When does anxiety become a mental health problem?

It's sometimes hard to know when it's becoming a problem for you – but if your feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, it can be overwhelming.

### For example:

- You might find that you're worrying all the time, perhaps about things that are a regular part of everyday life, or about things that aren't likely to happen – or even worrying about worrying.
- You might regularly experience unpleasant physical and psychological effects of anxiety (see the tables on the next two pages) and maybe panic attacks (see p.20).
- Depending on the kind of problems you experience, you might be given a diagnosis of a specific anxiety disorder.

If anxiety is affecting your ability to live your life the way you'd like to, it's worth thinking about ways to help yourself, and what kind of treatments are available (see p.29).





## What does anxiety feel like?

If you experience anxiety, you might find that you feel some of the sensations listed in these two tables. Anxiety can feel different for different people, so you might also experience other kinds of feelings, which aren't mentioned here.

### Physical sensations

- nausea
- tense muscles and headaches
- pins and needles
- feeling light headed or dizzy
- faster breathing
- sweating or hot flushes
- a fast, thumping or irregular heart beat
- raised blood pressure
- difficulty sleeping
- needing the toilet more frequently, or less frequently
- churning in the pit of your stomach
- experiencing panic attacks.

### Psychological sensations

- feeling tense, nervous and on edge
- having a sense of dread, or fearing the worst
- feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down
- feeling like other people can see you're anxious and are looking at you
- feeling your mind is really busy with thoughts
- dwelling on negative experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again
- feeling restless and not being able to concentrate
- feeling numb.

## What are the long-term effects of anxiety?

If you have felt anxious for a long time or you're frequently anxious, you may experience additional effects in your mind and body, such as:

- problems sleeping
- depression
- lowered immune system, which might make you more susceptible to certain physical illnesses
- smoking or drinking a lot, or misusing drugs to cope
- a change in your sex drive.

You might also have difficulty with everyday aspects your of life, such as:

- coping with the demands of your job
- developing or maintaining relationships
- simply enjoying your leisure time.

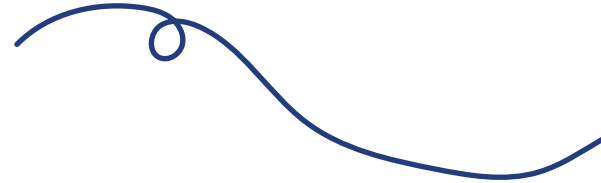




## What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is an exaggeration of your body's normal response to fear, stress or excitement. It is the rapid build-up of overwhelming physical sensations, such as:

- a pounding heartbeat
- feeling faint
- sweating
- nausea
- chest pains
- feeling unable to breathe
- shaky limbs, or feeling like your legs are turning to jelly
- feeling like you're not connected to your body.



During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that you're:

- losing control
- going to faint
- having a heart attack
- going to die.

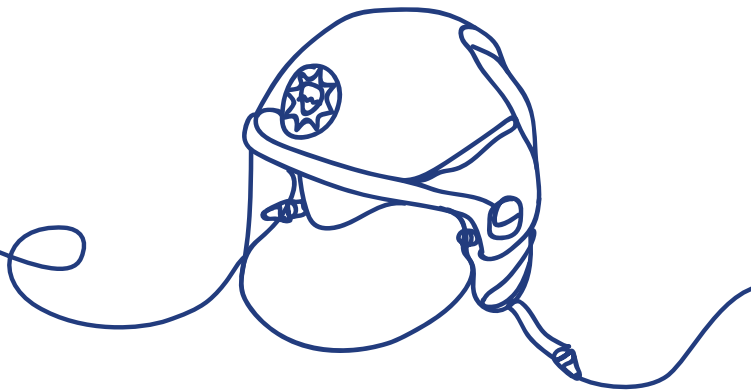
**My teeth would chatter uncontrollably and my whole body [would] tremble, I'd hyperventilate and cry with panic as the feeling that I was going to fall unconscious was so convincing.**

### How long do panic attacks last?

Panic attacks are different for different people. Most panic attacks last for between 5 and 20 minutes, but sometimes symptoms can last for up to an hour. If this happens you are probably experiencing one attack after another, or a high level of anxiety after the initial panic attack.

### How often might I have panic attacks?

Again, it's different for different people. You might have one panic attack and never experience another, or you might have attacks once a month or even several times each week.





## How can I manage stress?

There may be things in your life that you can't control, but there are things you can do to manage day-to-day feelings of stress.

### Find out what triggers your feelings of stress

You can then think about what you can change to manage them. You might be surprised to find out just how much you're coping with at once.

### Talk to friends and family

Sometimes just telling the people close to you how you're feeling can make a big difference – and they might be able to help you out in other ways too.

### Use relaxation techniques

You may already know what helps you relax, like having a bath, listening to music or taking your dog for a walk. If you know that a certain activity helps you feel more relaxed, make sure you set aside time to do it.



## Look after your physical health

- Sleep is important in managing stress. If you don't get enough sleep, negative feelings are likely to be exaggerated and you might find you are more irritable and less confident.
- Physical activity can help reduce depression and anxiety and boost your self-confidence.
- Eating healthily has a positive impact on your physical and mental health.

## Give yourself a break

Forgive yourself when you make a mistake, or don't achieve something you hoped for. Try to remember that nobody's perfect, and putting extra pressure on yourself doesn't help.

## Use support at work

Find out if your service has any specialist support services for staff, such as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), peer support groups or counselling. You might want to begin by speaking with your manager, occupational health unit or union representatives.

## Visit specialist websites and organisations

The Stressbusting website and the Stress Management Society both offer information about stress and provide techniques for coping. Our Blue Light Infoline can let you know about support groups and mental health services in your local area. See 'Useful contacts' on p.37 for details on how to contact these organisations.

**The ability to talk about a problem with someone makes a world of difference. It's amazing. Just talking about it can almost release some of it out of your body.**



## How can I manage anxiety?

Facing up to how anxiety makes you feel can be the first step in breaking the cycle. If you experience anxiety or panic attacks, there are many things you can do to help yourself cope.

It's common to feel unsure about seeking support for your mental health, and to feel like you ought to wait until you can't handle things on your own. But it's always ok for you to seek help – even if you're not sure if you are experiencing a specific mental health problem.

### Talk to someone you trust

Talking to someone you trust about what's making you anxious can help. You may find that they have encountered a similar problem and can talk you through it. It may be that just having someone listen to you and showing they care, can help in itself.

### Try a breathing exercise

Gently breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, keeping the pace slow and regular. Slowly tense then relax the muscles in your body, starting at your toes and working up to your head. Afterwards, just take some time to be still and focus on how your body feels.

### Try shifting your focus

Distract yourself from the anxiety you are feeling. Look at a flower, a picture or something that you find interesting or comforting. Really notice the details, the colours and any smells or sounds.

### Listen to music

Listening to music you find peaceful or you enjoy, can help you to feel calmer.

### Try reassuring yourself

You may find it helpful to tell yourself that the symptoms you experience are actually caused by anxiety – it is not really dangerous, and it will pass. This can help you feel calmer and less fearful of future attacks.

### Do physical exercise

Going for a walk or a run can help you get some time to yourself to think things over, away from everyday stresses. If you're not able to do physical activities outdoors, think about what kinds of physical activities you can do indoors.

### Keep a diary

Keeping a note of what happens each time you get anxious or have a panic attack can help you spot patterns and help you deal with these situations in the future. You could also try keeping a note of times when you are able to manage your anxiety successfully. This might help you feel more in control.

### Eat a healthy diet

You may find it easier to relax if you cut down on stimulants such as coffee, cigarettes and alcohol. Some people also find that eating a healthy diet helps them to manage anxiety better.

## Try complementary therapies

This could include yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbal treatments, Bach flower remedies or hypnotherapy. One or more of these methods can help you manage your anxiety or panic attacks. Many chemists and health shops stock different remedies and should be able to offer advice.

For more information about complementary therapies, visit the websites of The Complementary Medical Association (CMA) and The Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine (ICNM). (See 'Useful contacts' on p.39)

## Attend a support group

Sometimes sharing your experiences with people who have been through something similar can help you feel less alone. Your service may already have some sort of peer support group set up.

Anxiety Care UK provides details of support services on its website. Big White Wall is an online community and forum overseen by trained advisers. You might be able to use it for free through the NHS, your employer or if you have previously served in the armed forces. You can also contact our Blue Light Infoline, and ask for details of any support groups in your local area. See 'Useful contacts' on p.37 for details on how to contact these organisations.

## Talk to your GP

If you feel like you need some professional support, you can speak to your doctor. They can check your overall health, and help you access treatments.



**I've been through the wringer, but I've got over my situation and I am in a position now to help others.**

## Andrew's story

When I was growing up, I was diagnosed with social anxiety. I couldn't go out for a meal, couldn't go to the pub. I never used to eat anything before getting on a bus or in a car, because I'd feel sick. I remember once going to a pub and someone started talking to me, and I had to walk away. That can send the wrong message to people.

I knew when I joined the fire service, aged 26, that I needed to get something done about it. So I went to see a doctor, I had some counselling and medication and it cured me. But because of my anxiety I found it difficult to integrate myself with other people. I couldn't go out to the pub and socialise, so it was always like "he's not one of us, he sits in a corner".

It was later on in my career, after I went through a divorce, that I started to suffer from depression. It's a very complicated thing. It's not about being sad – people said, "What have you got to be sad about?" – it's an imbalance of hormones in the brain.



In the fire service, we are exposed to some tragic, horrible incidents. But you can keep on top of those situations. The ability to talk about a problem with someone makes a world of difference. It's amazing. Just talking about it can almost release some of it out of your body. And if you keep bottling it up it will come out in the end.

It can be life-destroying, because you can end up taking your problems out on other people. But talking about them and getting assistance can help – if you want to get help there are so many organisations out there.

Occupational health have supported me 100% over the past four years, and my family has been fantastic.

Unfortunately there is still a stigma. I hope in the future people will talk a bit more about mental health, because the more you talk about it the more it improves.

Things do work out. I wouldn't change my experience because it has turned out very positively for me. I've been through the wringer, but I've got over my situation and I am in a position now to help others. And I'm in a very happy place now, working for myself and having control over my own destiny. Everything is perfect.

## Useful contacts

### Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999

(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm, local rates)

text: 84999

[bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk](mailto:bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk)

[mind.org.uk/bluelight](http://mind.org.uk/bluelight)

Offers confidential, independent and practical support, advice and signposting around mental health and wellbeing. The Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families, to help keep you or those you care about well for work.

### Anxiety Care UK

07552 877219

[anxietycare.org.uk](http://anxietycare.org.uk)

Helps people to recover from anxiety disorders.

## Big White Wall

[bigwhitewall.com](http://bigwhitewall.com)

Online community and forum overseen by trained advisers. Available free in many areas of the UK via the NHS, or by your employer. It is also free to all UK serving personnel, veterans and their families.

## Stress Management Society

020 3142 8650  
[stress.org.uk](http://stress.org.uk)

Information about stress and tips on how to cope.

## Stressbusting

[stressbusting.co.uk](http://stressbusting.co.uk)

Information about stress and techniques for coping. Lists several talking treatments and alternative therapies that can be used to treat stress.

## The Complementary Medical Association (CMA)

[the-cma.org.uk](http://the-cma.org.uk)

Provides a register of professional complementary medicine practitioners and training courses.

## The Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine (ICNM)

020 7922 7980  
[icnm.org.uk](http://icnm.org.uk)

Provides a register of practitioners of complementary medicine.

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References available on request

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# We're Mind, the mental health charity.

We won't give up until everyone  
experiencing a mental health problem  
gets both support and respect.

[mind.org.uk/BlueLight](http://mind.org.uk/BlueLight)

[bluelight@mind.org.uk](mailto:bluelight@mind.org.uk)

Mind Blue Light Infoline:  
0300 303 5999 (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm,  
local rates), or text: 84999

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 Mind

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