

# Beat the winter blues

## Your winter wellbeing guide Stress and mental health



### Easing the pressure

Feeling the effects of stress is a normal part of life. It can drive us to take action or help us thrive under pressure. But stress should be manageable, and it should be temporary.

When stress affects our mental health, it makes us feel unproductive, irritable and isolated. But with healthy coping methods, we can learn to recognise and control our reaction to stressful situations before they overwhelm us.

If you're feeling the strain and it's affecting your mood, we've got some easy pointers to bust stress and boost your mental health this winter.



### Recognising stress

Sometimes the source of our stress is obvious, such as a looming deadline or expensive bill, but often it's a result of many factors which slowly build up.

While mental health issues certainly take their toll on our emotions, in time they can manifest physically as well. Stress can cause headaches, muscle soreness, tiredness and a raised heart rate. Identifying the source of your worries is the first step to easing them. Some common stressors to watch out for this winter include:

#### **Work-related stress**

Working long hours, feeling unfulfilled or having disagreements with colleagues can make work a constant worry.

#### **Relationship issues**

Such as divorce, childcare problems or an abusive relationship.

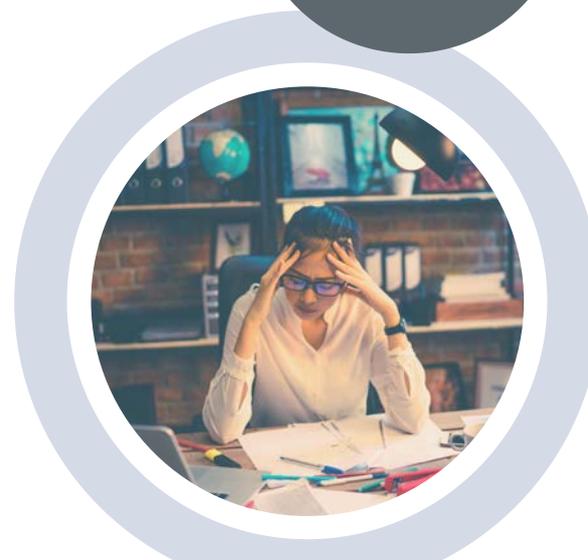
#### **Health and chronic illness**

You may be managing pain in your day to day life, caring for a poorly relative or recovering from COVID-19.

#### **Financial stress**

Such as dealing with poverty, living on a reduced wage, struggling to manage debt or overspending at Christmas.

Work-related stress was the most common form of stress in the UK in 2020





## Bring your whole self to work

Regardless of its source, stress impacts both our work and personal lives, so don't feel pressured to leave your troubles at the office door. Problems at home will make it difficult to concentrate at work. Equally, a stressful project might be on your mind all weekend, despite your best efforts to relax.

While you may try to compartmentalise your emotions, it's natural to be distracted by poor mental health. Try to prioritise your work-life balance and don't hesitate to reach out if you need support.

Your workplace might have [Mental Health First Aiders](#) who are trained to offer a listening ear, or you might feel more comfortable reaching out to a friend or colleague.



## Speaking to your employer

If you're feeling stressed out, whether at work or home, it's important to let your manager know. Often we fear that we may become a burden, or that we must fix problems for ourselves. Sometimes our own expectations can add further stress and lead us to suffer in silence.

59% of employees struggle to bring up mental health issues

According to 2020 research by [Raconteur](#), 59% of employees feel uncomfortable bringing up mental health issues with their manager. While they might not be able to offer a quick fix, your manager can likely make a few adjustments to give you some breathing room. If you're struggling to start the conversation, try these tips to help you prepare:

### **Decide who to speak to**

Your line manager or HR team will be best placed to support you, but if this seems daunting try having a chat with a colleague first.

### **Choose a time that works for you**

Make sure you've got plenty of time to chat, but it doesn't have to be a formal meeting. A regular 1:1 might provide an opportunity to get things off your chest.

### **Share what you're comfortable with**

Share as much or as little as you think is helpful. You might decide to plan what you want to say but remember there's no pressure to go into detail.

### **Ask what help is available**

Your manager should have plenty of suggestions. Perhaps you can adjust your working pattern, take some time off or speak to a health professional.





## Pandemic anxieties

COVID-19 has put wellbeing on everyone's mind. Just two months into the pandemic, over 50% of those surveyed in our Divided Together report said their mental health had declined. By August 2021, over half the workforce (51%) said they're at risk of burnout.

Whether you're going into the workplace or working from home, it's natural to feel stressed as your employer makes policy changes. Those working from home might struggle to switch off as their boundaries become blurred, while some industries continue to face closures and redundancies.

Connect with colleagues to share your experiences but remember to take a break if you feel overwhelmed. If you find yourself worrying more than usual, try switching off the headlines and only check the news once a day. Our free [COVID-19 resource centre](#) includes useful guides to help you and your employer navigate the pandemic.

### Useful links

[NHS: get help with stress](#)  
[Mind.org.uk: what is stress](#)  
[Time to Change campaign](#)  
[HSE stress at work resources](#)  
[Introducing mindfulness at work](#)  
[Westfield Health COVID-19 guides](#)

### Support and advice

#### Westfield Health Counselling and Advice

Free telephone advice for health cash plan customers 24 hours a day: 0800 092 0987.

#### DoctorLine™

Arrange a call back from a practising UK GP, available 24/7 with our health cash plans.



## Quick stress busters

When it all becomes a bit much, try a simple mindfulness technique to provide some immediate stress relief.

The countdown technique can help you ground yourself in the moment and give your brain a break. You can do it wherever you are, just in your head.

- 5 Notice FIVE things you **see** around you.
- 4 Find FOUR things you can **touch**.
- 3 Acknowledge THREE things you **hear**.
- 2 Notice TWO things you can **smell**.
- 1 Acknowledge ONE thing you can **taste**.

Taking just ten minutes to focus on the present moment can help you to refocus and relax. If you want to learn more, try guided meditation using a free app – we especially like [Headspace](#) for beginners.

Remember that if you find yourself feeling chronically stressed, have physical symptoms that won't go away or have started using drugs or alcohol, it's important to speak to a medical professional for further advice.

Next guide: Physical health in winter