

**A Self Care Resource Pack
for People with
Chronic Health Conditions**



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Introduction

Living with a long term health condition or chronic disease requires ongoing care and support as your condition often impacts on many aspects of your life. There can be times when your long term condition impacts on your life, and times when life impacts on your long term condition!

Adjustment is a process we go through when we have a long term health condition – it can take time and has its ups and downs but is completely normal. Adjustment to having a health condition can lead to a wide range of emotions – some can be strong! We all have strengths and resources of our own and important relationships that can help to develop the resilience that is needed when living with a long term condition.

This resource pack was developed by the *Clinical Health Psychology Team* to give you some additional self management tools to help you with difficult thoughts, feelings and behaviours which can get in the way of living well with your condition.

Self management is an important tool for meeting your individual needs and values.



Dealing with uncertainty

Uncertainty is an unavoidable part of daily life; we can never be 100% certain about what will happen next. COVID 19 has meant that most of us are living with a lot more uncertainty than usual, and for some of us it can lead to feelings of distress such as anxiety, worry or low mood.

We might go to great lengths to try and regain a sense of certainty, such as searching the internet for answers, watching or reading all available news, ruminating about the future trying to find solutions, or seeking reassurance from others. Sometimes this can be counter-productive because it can increase feelings of distress and lead to more questions and uncertainty.

Rather than trying to feel better by seeking certainty, it can often be more helpful to either challenge our need for certainty, or to become better at accepting uncertainty and only attempt to influence what we can realistically control.

We can start to challenge our need for certainty by asking ourselves some questions such as “Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?” Or “Is it reasonable to predict bad things will happen just because things are uncertain?” And “How does this need for certainty help or hinder me?”

Alternatively, we can learn to accept uncertainty by noticing our thoughts and feelings about our need for certainty as they come up, and then letting these thoughts go without reacting or responding to them.

Learn More:

- **Accepting Uncertainty: Centre for Clinical Intervention**

[Managing uncertainty](#)



Managing stress

Stress is the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure and is felt by all of us at some point in our life. Pressure turns into stress when you feel unable to cope. People have different ways of reacting to stress; a situation that feels stressful to one person may be motivating to someone else. Many of life's demands can cause stress particularly work, relationships and money problems. And, when you feel stressed, it can get in the way of sorting out these demands, or can even affect everything you do. Stress can affect how you feel, I think, behave and how your body works.

You may feel anxious, irritable or low in self esteem, and you may have racing thoughts, worry constantly or go over things in your head. You may notice that you lose your temper more easily, drink more or act unreasonably.

You may also experience headaches, muscle tension or pain, or dizziness.

Stress causes a surge of hormones in your body. These stress hormones are released to enable you to deal with pressure or threats – the so-called “fight or flight” response.

Once the pressure or threat has passed, your stress hormone levels will usually return to normal. However, if you're constantly under stress, these hormones will remain in your body, leading to the symptoms of stress.

Managing stress in daily life

Stress is not an illness itself, but it can cause serious illness if it isn't addressed. It's important to recognise the symptoms of stress early. Recognising the signs and symptoms of stress will help you figure out ways of coping and save you from adopting unhealthy coping methods, such as drinking or smoking. There is little you can do to prevent stress, but there are many things you can do to manage stress more effectively, such as learning how to relax, taking regular exercise and adopting good time management techniques.

If you're not sure what's causing your stress, keep a diary and make a note of stressful episodes for two to four weeks. Then review it to spot the triggers.



Things you might want to write down include:

- The date, time and place of a stressful episode
- What you were doing
- Who you were with
- How you felt emotionally
- What were you thinking
- What you started doing
- How you felt physically
- A stress rating (0-10 where 10 is the most stressed you could ever feel)

You can use this diary to:

- Work out what triggers your stress
- Work out how you operate under pressure
- Develop better coping mechanisms

There's no quick-fix cure for stress, and no single method will work for everyone. However, there are simple things you can do to change the common life problems that can cause stress or make stress a problem. These include relaxation techniques, exercising and talking the issues through with someone you can trust.

Many people find exercises that focus on breathing and muscle relaxation to be helpful in relieving stress. The playlist below will help you to understand how stress works and start feeling better. These exercises can be done anywhere and are designed to help you feel more relaxed in general, as well as helping you feel calmer if you are becoming stressed.

Learn More:

<https://soundcloud.com/nhs-health-scotland/1-getting-started>



Re-activate and re-engage

Our mood can be greatly affected by what we do, when, and with whom. In order to maintain a healthy sense of wellbeing, we need to balance what we do. We can use the acronym ACE to help us remember:

- **ACHIEVE** - work, chores, study
- **CONNECT** - with friends, family, community
- **ENJOY** - play, fun, pleasure

When we feel stressed, we often spend more time doing things that help us achieve, but less of enjoyment and connecting with others. When we feel depressed, we withdraw and isolate ourselves and do much less, and when we feel anxious, we tend to avoid places or people where we feel anxious.

Make time for yourself each day - relaxation, fun, enjoyment. Create a healthy balance - allow time for activities which give you a sense of achievement, those that give a sense of connecting with and of being close to others, and of a sense of enjoyment. These activities affect our brain chemistry by acting directly on the release of neuro-transmitters, and are our natural anti-stress and anti-depressants. Therefore, making sure we keep doing these ACE activities every day will help us overcome our problems.

Using a diary or a weekly planner will help to remind you to schedule these activities in on a daily/weekly basis.



Managing unhelpful thoughts and feelings

Thoughts pop into our head all day long and they can happen so automatically that we don't often take the time to consider if what we are thinking is actually true. We tend to take our thoughts at face value. But thoughts are not always facts! The way we think affects how we feel and what we do. When we think negatively it can make us feel bad. When we think in a more positive or balanced way it can make us feel good or at least a bit better!

Sometimes just acknowledging your thoughts without engaging with them or judging yourself for having them can be enough to help them pass. If not there are strategies you can use to help you change your thoughts.

You can learn to notice when you are having a negative thought and label it as such. What unhelpful thinking habits have you fallen into without noticing? Are you mind reading and assuming what other people are thinking? Are you making mountains out of molehills, or are you only noticing the bad stuff? Once you've spotted your negative thoughts then you can learn to question or challenge them. You can ask yourself questions such as "What evidence is there for this thoughts", "Is there another way of looking at this?", or "How would someone else see it?"

Learn More:

- **Unhelpful Thinking Habits**

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/UnhelpfulThinkingHabitsWithAlternatives.pdf>

- **Finding Alternative Thoughts**

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/FindingAlternativeThoughts.pdf>

Metaphors can help us see thoughts – their nature and role - in a different light.

Seeing our thoughts differently, helps to create a space between us and them, which helps us to stand back a little, see things a bit more objectively, and helps us make wiser and more helpful decisions about how to react effectively.

Let us imagine that life is like a journey on a bus and you are the driver. You want to go to places and do what is important to you i.e. move towards your values. Various passengers have boarded our buses from time and they reflect our thoughts and feelings. Sometimes these passengers are pleasant and helpful; they support us in our chosen direction. At other times our passengers are not so pleasant and helpful; they try to discourage us from driving towards where we want to go.



If we fight, struggle or give in to our unhelpful passengers then we are no longer in control of our bus and are not heading towards what is important to us. There are ways that we can respond to the passengers so that we can still head in the right direction for us. We can allow the passengers to shout and call whatever they like whilst we keep our attention focused on the road ahead

- **Therapy Metaphors**

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/Metaphors.pdf>

- **Passengers on the Bus**

[passengers on my bus](#)



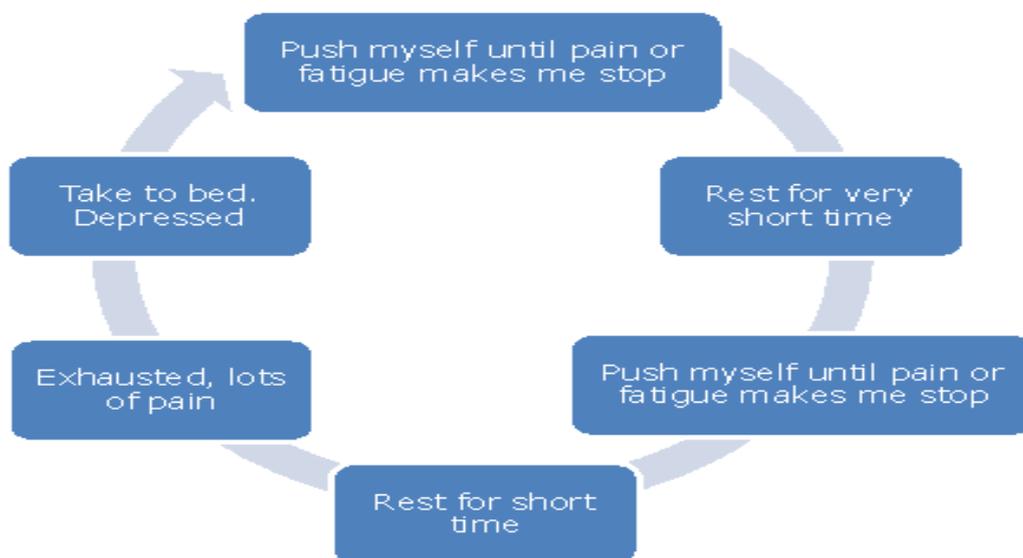
Chronic pain and chronic fatigue

Living with pain and fatigue can be difficult and challenging. You may have days where you feel miserable and feel like you can't do anything. It's a vicious cycle, doing nothing can make you feel depressed and even less motivated to do anything. This can also leave you feeling less fit, which means that when you do try to do something, it takes even more effort than before.

You may also have days where you feel like you can take on the world. So you clean the house from top to bottom and also wash the windows. While it makes sense to do lots when you're having a good day and feeling better, in the long run this can leave you feeling worse.

Being in constant pain and feeling fatigued can take over your life. You may find that you're doing a lot less of the things that you enjoy. You may also have negative thoughts about yourself ('I should be able to...') and worry about what your pain means, how long it will last and whether it will ever get any better.

Having chronic pain and/or fatigue is difficult. However, you are not alone. There are different strategies that you can use to try and help you live the life that you want to live, in spite of your pain. This isn't about getting rid of your pain, it's about being able to say 'I have chronic pain/fatigue and I am living a meaningful fulfilling life'.



Rather than becoming stuck in this all or nothing cycle, it can be helpful to **pace** yourself and **plan** what you will do, which will help you achieve the things you want to and will also help make you feel better. Breaking this simplistic vicious cycle means stopping before the pain or (physical and mental) fatigue makes you stop - and scheduling in some rest periods



One of the best ways to start is to find out what it is that you want to get out of your life and planning, in detail, how you will do this. It is important to do things gradually and to start with small achievable steps. It is also helpful to develop strategies to deal with stress in your life, such as using relaxation.

Learn more:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/Pain&Fatigue.pdf>

https://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/media/2375561/patient_information_pain_toolkit_booklet.pdf

Values

Identifying our values can be useful to help us understand what directions are important for us to go in our lives. If we move too far away from our values, it can make us feel stressed and unhappy, for example if we strongly value family but find we are working long hours it can make us feel bad in a number of ways.

Our values are what we want to live by and for. They are personal to us and can change over time. Values are like the destination sign on the front of a bus that you are driving; they guide you on your journey towards your chosen direction through life.

To identify your values ask yourself some questions. What do you want your life to be about? What sort of person do you want to be? Think about your values across a number of areas of your life such as family, friendships, or work.

Then think about whether you need to make any changes to move your life in order to move closer to your values and feel more content. If one of your values is kindness to others, think of a small change or goal that could help you move closer to that value such as calling a friend you haven't spoken to in a while for a catch up.

Learn More:

https://www.actmindfully.com.au/upimages/VALUED_Living_Questionnaire_-_adapted.pdf



Relaxation and breathing

We often talk about relaxing in everyday life. But what does it actually mean? Relaxation is a skill, which helps to calm the body and the mind and can help make you feel better, both physically and mentally.

When we are stressed or going through a difficult period, we can often tense our body and experience aches and pains. We may often find it more difficult to concentrate and may also have problems sleeping. Relaxation can help.

Learning how to relax does take practice. It can include meditation, mindfulness, or yoga. Find a form of relaxation that suits you and set aside some time to try and practice it regularly. Hopefully, what you will find is that you will feel better able to cope when you do experience difficulties.

Example of a simple breathing exercise:

This breathing exercise takes only a few seconds, no matter where you are. It is particularly helpful at stressful times, and also practise it at regular intervals throughout the day.

- Take a deep, slow breath in and hold it for 5 seconds. Feel your belly expand as you do this.
- Breathe out slowly, to a count of 5.
- Breathe in again, make every breath slow and steady and exactly the same as the one before it and the one after it.
- As you breathe out, concentrate on expelling ALL the air in your lungs.
- If you are alone, you could make a noise like **WHOO** as you do this to help you feel the air being let out.
- Keep the outbreath going for as long as you can. Keep it relaxed for a few seconds before you inhale again.

Learn More:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/relax.htm>



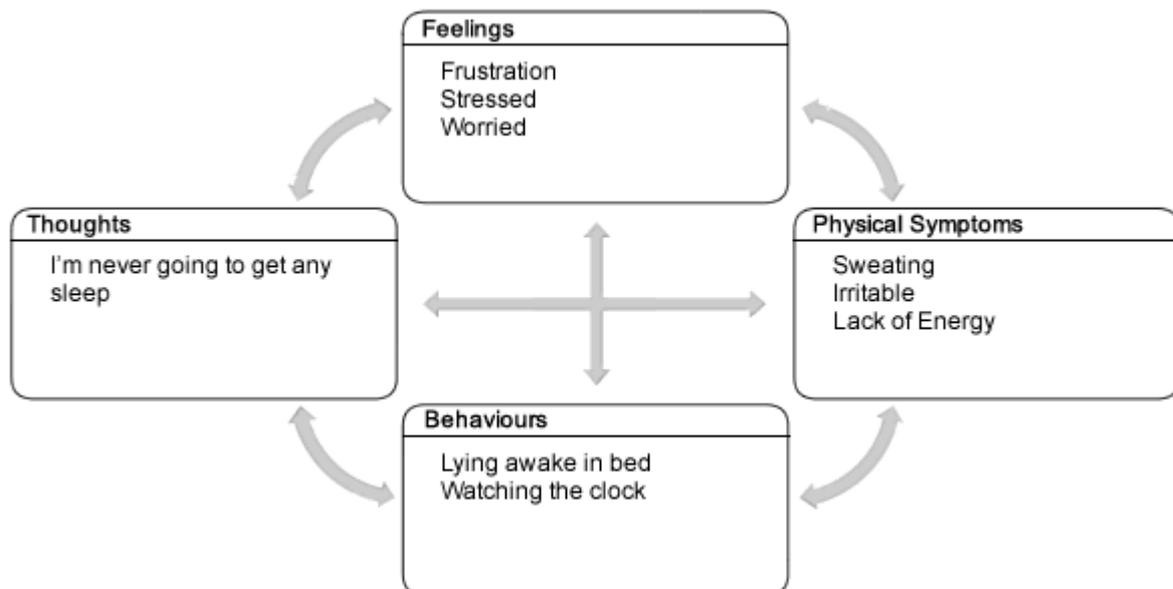
Sleep and sleep problems

There is no correct amount of sleep that everyone must have. On average most adults don't usually need more than 9 hours; it varies from person to person but the range is from 4 hours to 10 hours of sleep per night. Sleep is a natural process that is not directly under our control. Our bodies take what they need. In the short-term our bodies will adjust the type and quality of sleep to make sure we stay healthy. 30% of the adult population are affected by sleep problems. Another way to think about this is that less than 10% of adults report that they have never experienced sleep problems.

It is helpful to remember to be realistic; some people just need less sleep than others. If your sleep pattern has not changed, and you do not feel sleepy during the day, you are probably getting enough sleep.

If people think they are not sleeping enough, it can be worrying to them. In fact research has shown that people who think they are poor sleepers and those who think they are good sleepers both sleep for about the same amount of time. So although some people may **think** they are not sleeping enough, in fact they probably **are**.

Often patterns build up in our behaviour which can be unhelpful and actually end up maintaining a problem, a vicious cycle. A number of habits can develop when we have difficulties sleeping. These can make it more difficult to overcome, for example:



There is no quick solution to sleep problems. You have to train yourself and your body to behave in a way that helps you have a good sleep pattern. The best way to get a better night's sleep is to develop a good routine and stick to it. Here are some



Top Tips you should try to follow:

- Use the second half of the evening to **unwind**. Your mind and body need to rest before you go to bed. Set a deadline for work or activity 90 minutes before bedtime.
- Plan a bedtime that can become a regular time, about 8 hours before your alarm will ring the next day.
- Be careful about what you eat and drink for 2-3 hours before bedtime. Avoid coffee, tea, hot chocolate, cola, energy drinks or alcohol, as all these can upset your sleep. Try caffeine-free drinks: herbal teas (such as camomile), Horlicks and Ovaltine are soothing before bedtime.
- Some foods cause the digestive system to work hard, so try to avoid late night snacks of heavy foods such as cheese, curry or meat.
- If you are a smoker, try to cut down the amount you smoke in the evening.
- If you do take night time medication, try to take it at the same time every night as part of your bedtime routine. If you think your medication may be interfering with your sleep discuss this with your Doctor or Pharmacist.
- Get a good mattress that gives you the right support, maybe a board underneath a saggy mattress will make the difference between a good night and a bad one! The right pillows and the right covers, itchy blankets...Nightmare!
- Finding a 'comfy' position in bed.
- Is the temperature of your bedroom right for you?
- Put the **light out** as soon as you are in bed.
- Do not watch television in bed. If you want to watch TV late at night, sit in a chair to do this.
- Use one of the Mindfulness exercises that you have practised.
- While you're working on a better sleep routine, keep the interesting books and magazines out of the bedroom so that you can re-establish the bedroom with sleeping.
- Set the alarm to the **same rising time every day**. If you wake up before the alarm, try to lie quietly and enjoy the comfortable feeling of being in bed until you need to get up.
- **Do not nap** during the day, resting is helpful but try to keep this to short periods if you can.
- **Do not take extra sleep** to make up for a previous bad night. You are trying to retrain your body to a new routine, so keep to your new programme. Stick to the programme for **several weeks** in order to set up a regular pattern.



Other helpful tips:

- Avoid clock watching and checking the time, turn the clock away from you. Looking at it makes you feel more stressed and frustrated, as well as many other feelings that will not help you sleep.
- Get up and go to another room, do something that is useful or that you enjoy but will not provoke an over excited or emotional state. Do not worry about tomorrow.
- Remind yourself that sleep problems are common and not life threatening and that you are working hard on getting it better.
- Go back to bed when you are sleepy-tired, put the light out and relax.
- If you can't sleep then get up again after 15 minutes and repeat the steps above.

Learn More:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/>



Tips to manage set backs

Set backs are part of a chronic health condition and will happen; it is not realistic to think that you will never have a set back ever again. Accepting this can be useful as it allows you to identify strategies and support systems in advance. Your Self Care Resource Tool Kit needs to include a plan for these set backs. This will help to reduce worry. Your Set Back Plan should include the strategies and support systems that look after your physical health and emotional wellbeing. Having a Set Back Plan will help you feel empowered, in control, fewer flare ups and get back on track sooner.

Write down your Set Back Plan. Having a go-to plan of what you know works for you helps when you have a flare-up and perhaps are not able to think easily.

Catch those unhelpful negative thoughts. It is normal to feel fed up and frustrated during flare-ups. Be ready with some kind alternative thoughts to replace them with.

Know your triggers. Try to identify early signs and what causes a set back and adapt the way you do things to minimise risk of it happening again.

Relax use your favourite relaxation techniques to ease the muscle tension and calm your mind. Mindfulness, listening to calming music, a box set on TV etc.

It can be a good idea to cut back slightly on what you do but don't give things up altogether if you can help it. Remember you begin to lose muscle strength and cardio vascular fitness within a few days of inactivity. Limit bed rest as much as possible. Ask for help for a few days. As a flare-up settles get back to your usual activity levels ASAP.

If you have to take regular medication think of ways to remind you to take it. Many people just simply forget. Use post it notes, a timer or get someone to remind you. If you feel you need extra medication you should speak to your GP or pharmacist.



Other useful websites

Health and wellbeing

<https://www.nhsdg.co.uk/mental-health-and-wellbeing-and-coronavirus/>

People at higher risk from coronavirus

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/>

Advice for those who live with specific medical conditions

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-tailored-advice-for-those-who-live-with-specific-medical-conditions/>

Infections and poisoning

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19>

