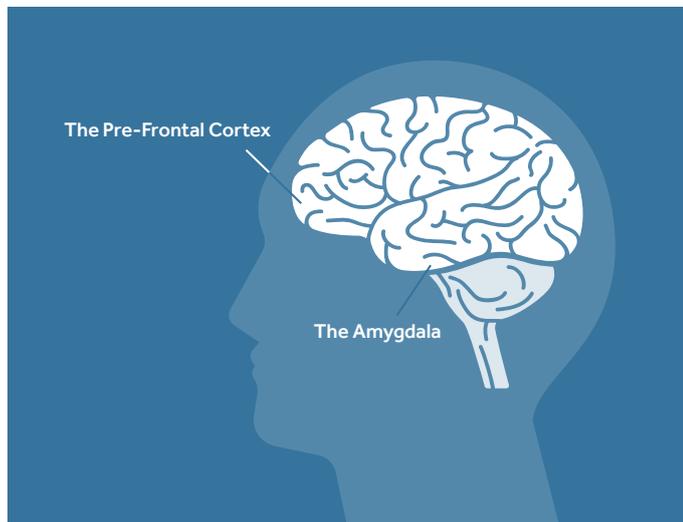




# Managing stress

In some contexts, stress can be a good thing – being under pressure can help us take action, feel energised and ultimately get results. But, for many of us, low level stress has become a part of everyday life as we move through this fast-paced world and try to juggle its changing demands. While short-term stress can be helpful, long-term stress can have a detrimental effect on our health and on our lives. We caught up with Olympian Lizzie Simmonds to discover what causes stress and find out her top tips to help reduce its harmful effects.



When it comes to understanding stress, there are two important regions of the brain that are involved:

**The Amygdala** – a fast-acting, automatic, defence-mechanism that continually scans the world around us, ready to respond to threats and keep us safe. The emotional control centre of our brain.

**The Pre-Frontal Cortex** – is in charge of logical, rational thinking, such as problem-solving and analytical work.

## What is happening when we become stressed?

Our Amygdala's primary function is to keep us safe. It assesses information from our environment to determine any potential threats. If a threat is detected, the Amygdala sends signals to another part of our brain that responds by controlling the release of adrenaline and cortisol (the hormone associated with stress) into our bodies. The adrenaline increases the oxygen available to our muscles, and the cortisol increases the glucose available – the classic 'Fight, Flight, Freeze' response has been triggered. This reflexive response is very helpful when we're in real danger – there isn't any time for complex reasoning when we're faced with a tiger.

While our Amygdala is very effective at assessing when we're in real danger, it can also be prone to overreacting. Times when it might 'overreact' can include job interviews, competitions, disagreements with partners or colleagues, financial worries, important deadlines, or juggling family commitments.

At its most basic level, this is what stress is for most of us – a modern manifestation of a primal response caused by our Amygdala as it continually tries to keep us away from harm. We can think of our brain as being 'hijacked' by our Amygdala – so while the logical, rational Pre-Frontal Cortex knows we aren't in real danger, our Amygdala is still interpreting a threat and telling us we need to be on high alert.

## Why is it hard to think rationally when we're stressed?

When you've been hijacked by your Amygdala, it's almost impossible to think rationally. Our brains are hardwired to be cautious about unknown situations and the part of our brain in charge of logic does not get a look in when we're in this extra vigilant mode; as a result, our thoughts and actions are often characterised by their irrational, emotional nature.

For example, when we're in the midst of an argument or lining up to execute some kind of performance – or even

experiencing a lack control in the current circumstances – the thoughts in our head may seem illogical. It can feel as though the consequences of something going wrong are catastrophic. Although we know we're not in real danger, it can be hard to get out of a cycle of negativity and worry.

## What can we do to reduce stress?

There are a few different things that we can do to reduce stress, and they all involve getting the human, logical, rational part of our brain to take back control.

### Short-term:

When you're feeling stressed 'in the moment', the first step is to recognise that you're being hijacked by the emotional control centre of your brain (the Amygdala). The second step is to engage with a strategy that allows the logical, rational part of your brain (the Pre-Frontal Cortex) to take back control. Some techniques that may help you do this are:

#### 1. Name the 'truths and realities' of the situation

This could be a reassurance that you're not in danger, or a reminder that everyone makes mistakes sometimes. These statements require logic and rational thinking and so we have to engage the Pre-Frontal Cortex. When you've done this, lay out the plan going forward – this puts you back into control and reassures your Amygdala that you're handling the situation.

#### 2. Take a time out

If you feel overwhelmed in the moment and you're finding it hard to get into logical thinking mode, then try taking a time out. Go for a walk, close your eyes and take some deep breaths, or engage in a mindless activity such as naming all the items on your desk. This gives your Pre-Frontal Cortex time to kick in and bring you back to the present, allowing the Amygdala time to settle down.

#### 3. Speak to someone else about whatever is causing you to be stressed

This could be a colleague, partner, friend or family member. While you're being hijacked by your emotions, their brain is hopefully engaging with you in a calm and logical way. So, even if they can't give you direct solutions to your problem, they can empathise with you and bring in their own set of reassuring truths.

### Long-term:

Managing stress in the long-term means addressing some of the underlying reasons why we're being hijacked by our Amygdala. Some ways you can do this are:

#### 1. Address the self-limiting beliefs

Self-limiting beliefs are assumptions or perceptions that you have about the world around you. They're 'self-limiting' because they are holding you back from achieving your full potential. For example, you may have a belief that you're no good at public speaking and that you always mess up when you deliver presentations. This can make

you stressed and anxious whenever you have to speak in front of people. Re-framing this belief into something more helpful can really help alleviate stress and anxiety:

"Public speaking is a skill I am developing, and today's presentation is a great way to practise! Everyone makes mistakes sometimes—if it happens to me today it isn't the end of the world."

#### 2. Separate what you can and can't control

Try and separate what you can control from what you can't control. It's so easy to become stressed out by the bigger picture, especially during the challenges of today's situation, but ultimately all you can do is your very best to keep you and your family safe and healthy. Try and stay objective about the fact that you don't have ultimate control over some things right now.

#### 3. Prioritise your health and wellbeing

Being tired or drained of energy can increase our stress levels so prioritise your nutrition, exercise, mental health and sleep. The lines between work and home are a bit blurred right now and we all need to ensure we take time out for ourselves and our wellbeing. Exercise and mindfulness activities can also give us an important break away from stressful tasks and give us space to get back into an objective mode of thinking.

Stress is normal and common, but right now many of us are dealing with higher levels of stress than usual. Having good self-awareness and wellness habits is really important but please do make sure that you reach out to friends, family and medical professionals if you feel that stress or anxiety is having an impact on your life.

## Together, #wecandothis

Lizzie Simmonds



Lizzie is a retired British swimmer who has won medals at World, Commonwealth and European Championships, and has represented Great Britain at two Olympic Games. She retired from professional competition in 2018 but still has many roles within high-performance sport, including supporting fellow athletes throughout and beyond their sporting careers. Lizzie has also developed a successful programme transferring the systems and habits of elite performers into the corporate world and works with companies to help staff find ways to prioritise their own physical and mental health

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