

# Don't mess with **stress**



## What is stress?

Our brains respond to threats by activating our stress response, also called 'flight or fight' mode. Once the threat passes, the brain and body return to 'rest and digest' mode, designed to be our natural resting state.

## Acute versus chronic stress

Short-term stress responses are normal and can help us deal with a threat, e.g. through increased energy and focus when working to a tight deadline.

When we feel stressed for lengthy periods, we might experience 'allostatic overload'. This is when challenges exceed our body's ability to respond in a helpful way. Allostatic overload and chronic stress can lead to poorer psychological wellbeing, suppressed immune function, memory issues, fatigue, and body aches.

## A chronically stressed brain can physically change

Severe and chronic stress is one of the most robust risk factors for developing mental disorders, including anxiety.

Neuroscience shows that chronic stress can remodel parts of the brain, leading to increased sensitivity or reactivity to stress and increased susceptibility to perceived stress.

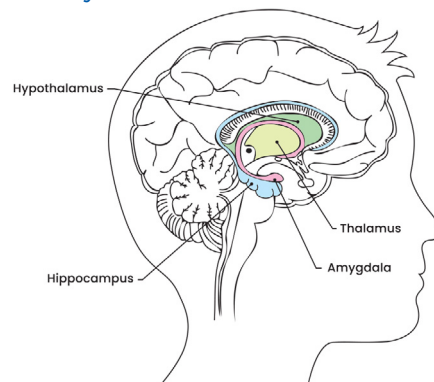
## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a universal human experience particularly associated with uncertainty. For example, it is normal to experience anxiety if starting a new job or public speaking.

Fear and anxiety are processed similarly in the brain but are quite different. Fear is a specific response to a recognised danger. Anxiety is a generalised response to an unknown threat.

They can both ignite 'fight or flight' mode. They can cause the same physical responses, such as a racing heart, rapid breathing, racing thoughts, and stomachache. If you experience a physical threat or sudden stressful event, the brain and body will return to 'rest and digest mode' after the stressor has passed. In cases of anxiety, the body can experience a prolonged stress reaction.

### The limbic system



The limbic system is responsible for most of the emotional processing the brain. Scientists have found those with anxiety disorders have more activity in the limbic system.

## Regaining calm

In today's busy world, it can be common to accept or normalise ongoing stress. But it's important we prioritise returning to 'rest and digest' mode. These strategies can help.

## Physical activity

A huge body of research shows that exercise is great for reducing stress, lowering anxiety, and managing the symptoms of stress disorders. Aim for a mix of cardio, stretching and resistance. Work up to a minimum of 30 minutes per session, on most days of the week.

Please consult a health care professional if you are over 40, have a chronic health condition or haven't exercised in a long time before starting a new program.

## Awareness of unhelpful thinking patterns

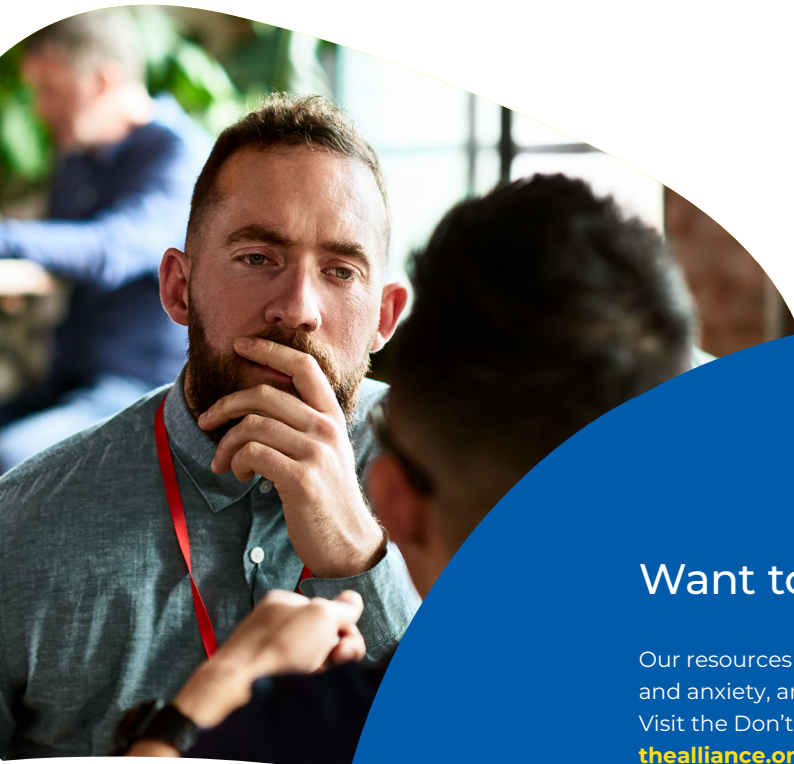
When feeling stressed or anxious, it can help to remember that our thoughts are not facts. Our brains often don't tell us the whole story when we're thinking about a stressful situation.

### Common unhelpful thinking patterns to recognise:

- Catastrophising
- Mental filter (focusing on negative, ignoring positive)
- Black and white thinking
- Jumping to conclusions
- Personalisation (mind-reading and assuming things are to do with us)
- Shoulding and Musting (having unrealistic expectations that we 'should' or 'must' do or be something)
- Magnification/minimisation (exaggerating the bad and dismissing the positive)
- Emotional reasoning (treating feelings as evidence of reality)
- Labelling (rigid, global statements about self or others)
- Try to be self-compassionate as you bring awareness to your own thinking styles.

### Scientific evidence also supports:

- Mindfulness exercise – exercising your brain to bring attention to the present moment
- Having a regular sleep schedule – the same sleep/wake time each day
- Hydration – drink 1-2 litres of water a day
- Social connection – call a friend, say hello to passers-by
- Eating nutrient dense food – avoid overly processed snacks and meals. Eat fruits and vegetables.



## Want to know more?

Our resources share the science behind stress and anxiety, and evidence-based strategies to help. Visit the Don't Mess with Stress website.  
[thealliance.org.au/don't-mess-with-stress](https://thealliance.org.au/don't-mess-with-stress)

