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Stress busters

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should have

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* make Mum's
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what's worth
doing, what's not

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'IN AN INSTANT,
MY MOTHER'S DAY
DREAM WAS
SHATTERED'

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Delicious
one pot



7 days to a stress-free you

Find out if you're coping, skating on thin ice or rushing headlong into a life crisis



How stressed are you?

- you can't concentrate
- you can't listen attentively
- you talk too much - or too little
- you have unpaid bills
- you're drinking or smoking more than usual
- you're eating badly
- you can't sort priorities
- you have unpredictable outbursts of temper
- you're clumsy
- you look untidy
- you have less energy than you'd like
- you have difficulty making decisions
- you plan your time badly, ending up with a tight schedule
- you hate to delegate
- you have no time for hobbies or socialising
- you're forgetful
- you don't get round to exercising
- you're not completing tasks
- you sleep badly
- you get frustrated by small delays

Some of us are more prone to stress than others. 'High neuroses' types have a tendency to try to force a quart into a pint pot - even though they also react more acutely to stressful situations than 'low neuroses' types. The more of the following symptoms you suffer, the more stressed you are likely to be, says stress expert Dr Malcolm VandenBurg.

For each of the above symptoms, score **1** for **never**, **2** for **occasionally**, **3** for **frequently** or **4** for **consistently**

5 signs that you're stressed

YOU HAVE A HEADACHE

A pounding head is more likely if you're under stress because your blood will be beating around your system faster and your muscles will be tense.

YOU HAVE SPOTS

Acne's another sign you need to slow down. The Acne Support Group found that 57 per cent of sufferers had a break-out when they were under stress.

YOUR SKIN'S ITCHY

Eczema is often linked to stress because skin is very sensitive to the changes in hormone levels that stress brings about.

YOU KEEP GETTING COLDS

Recurrent infections are more likely because stress hormones suppress your immune system.

YOUR BACK'S HURTING

Back pain is caused by the muscles contracting under stress, as your body thinks it's getting ready for fight or flight.

How I cope

When a colleague is getting up my nose, instead of arguing with them, I just nod and smile, while secretly imagining them on the toilet.

MAGGIE GALE, 40, from Leamington Spa, Warks, is a professor of drama and mother of two young sons

How I cope

When I'm confronted by passengers shouting about my bus being late, I agree with them to diffuse the situation. Then when I'm home, I reward myself with a glass of wine in the bath.

SANDRA BOUCHERE, 57, from Mitcham, Surrey, is a bus driver

IF YOU SCORED 20-35:

Your almost complete lack of stress is a sign that you aren't pushing yourself as hard as you could. You're opting for an easy life, and there's plenty of room for you to work harder at the things you enjoy, or find more things to work at. A little positive stress is not a bad thing!

IF YOU SCORED 36-40:

You're pushing yourself into your comfort zone, using pressure to help yourself work harder, and enjoying the benefits that moderate stress brings: a sense of achievement, happiness, and the possibility of promotion at work.

IF YOU SCORED 41-55:

Your soaring stress level is a sign that you're seeking out too much pressure. You need to recognise that you're taking on too much and that you're responding in an adverse way. Cut out any unnecessary pressures so that you can do the things that matter without feeling so bad.

IF YOU SCORED 56-80:

You've got yourself into a position where you are far too stressed. You're taking on too much and have to start saying no to yourself and others. Get some professional help with this. For more information, visit www.positiveunderpressure.com.



Under pressure

Could your busy life be damaging your health? We asked three women to monitor their blood pressure and heart rate as they went about their daily routines



Freida can cope with a difficult customer... but a truculent four-year-old child?

THE BUSY MUM

FREIDA WASHINGTON, 43, from Surbiton, Surrey, is divorced and has two children, Rianna, seven, and Harry, four. 'I used to run my own deli business, working 12 hours a day because I was so busy. That may sound stressful, but it gave me a real buzz. The pressure today – as a single mum of two children – seems worse.'

6.30am Wake up. Blood pressure (BP): 116/62. Heart rate (HR): 61. A few minutes'

peace before washing, dressing and grabbing my first cup of coffee. I prepare the children's school bags and lunches.

7am Get kids up, give them breakfast, wash and dress them – with no co-operation. Rianna gets cross as I try to brush her thick, knotty curls. **BP: 119/68 HR: 69.**

7.25am We're going to be late if the kids don't hurry, but they're glued to breakfast TV and I'm getting very agitated. **BP: 124/73 HR: 79.**

7.40am **BP: 125/76 HR: 94.** Out of the house on time – amazing! But the traffic is awful and I'm anxious knowing Rianna's friend is waiting to be picked up. They have to be in school at 8.20am, and at 8.15am I park badly, feeling stressed about a nearby traffic warden. See the girls off and go to Harry's school.

9.15am At the supermarket (**BP: 137/77 HR: 86**) then

What's normal, what's not

WHAT DOES A BLOOD PRESSURE READING MEAN?

Your blood pressure reading will usually be written down as a fraction, such as 120/90, which translates as a systolic pressure of 120mmHg and a diastolic pressure of 90mmHg. Clear as mud? Here's the translation: systolic pressure is the maximum that the heart achieves at each beat, and diastolic pressure is the low point of pressure in the body's blood vessels that occurs just before the heart contracts again in its next beat.

WHAT'S NORMAL? Healthy adults have a systolic pressure reading below 135mmHg and a diastolic

pressure reading below 85mmHg.

WHAT'S NOT? People with systolic blood pressure consistently above 160mmHg and those with diastolic pressure above 100mmHg need treatment.

WHAT CAUSES HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE? As you get older, your blood pressure has a tendency to rise due to an increased intake of salt and weight gain. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is also caused by smoking, alcohol, stress, low potassium intake and raised cholesterol.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS? A stroke is one of the most serious consequences of untreated high blood pressure, followed by angina and heart attack.

How I cope

Much of my stress comes from wondering if I'm good enough. I counteract this by reminding myself of my worth. Dancing to '70s music is a great relaxer, too!

DR ROSEMARY ANDERSON, 47, from Beaconsfield, Bucks, is the chair of The International Stress Management Association

How I cope

When things pile up, I list them all and tackle the most important stuff first. Then I work off stress by gardening.

SUSANNE MAYNARD, 49, a physiotherapist from Hauxton, Cambridge

go home to start preparing dinner, as I'll have no time later. I tidy round, make the beds and put on the washing. My back aches as I sit down to make phone calls concerning my divorce and a dental negligence claim. Prepare Harry's football kit, two swimming bags and two afternoon snacks for the kids, then load up the car.

12pm Collect Harry. Feel stressed while parking for errands at the bank and post office, as Harry doesn't want to get out of the car.
BP: 130/74 HR: 81.

12.30pm Arrive just in time for Harry's football lesson.
BP: 131/82 HR: 90.

1.30pm Take Harry for lunch.
BP: 132/84 HR: 85.

3pm Arrive at Rianna's school.
BP: 131/88 HR: 87. Take children to swimming club.

6pm Arrive home after bad journey with the kids bickering. (**BP: 128/79 HR: 92**). Serve up dinner. Rianna doesn't like it, and I can feel my patience running out. Try to do Rianna's homework with her, but Harry is being loud and messy. The kids start fighting, and I'm fed up with repeating myself.

8.15pm The kids are finally in bed, but they share a room and Harry is annoying Rianna. I end up shouting at him and he starts to cry. I sit down with a coffee and cigarette. **BP: 124/80 HR: 94.**

9pm Peace at last, but my mind's turning somersaults

thinking about how hard it is to be a single parent. Feel like I've got to be a mum and a dad to my young pair. Long to have my career back, but I will always put the kids' needs first – and mine last.
BP: 128/79 HR: 95.

12.30am Flop into bed, worn out. **BP: 124/67 HR: 80.**

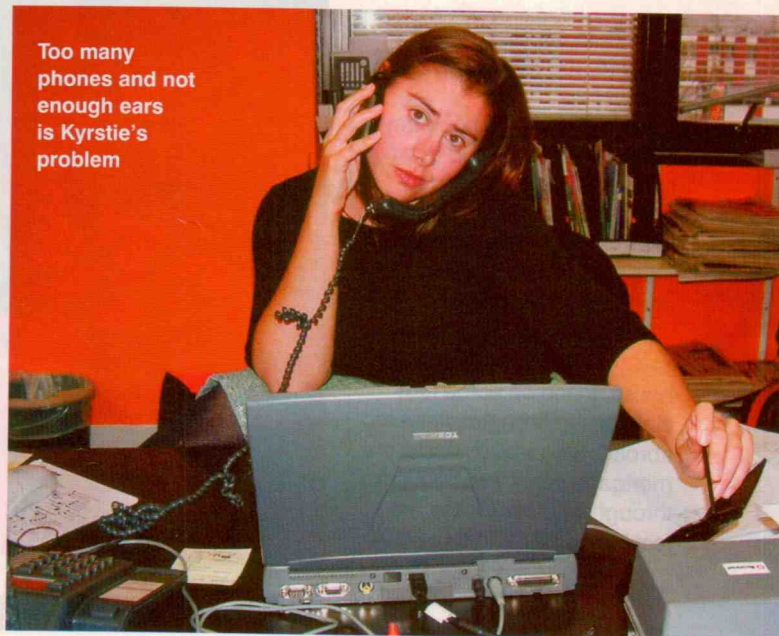
STRESS VERDICT

Dr Malcolm VandenBurg is a Harley Street physician who runs workshops for the stressed. 'Freida's heart should be producing 60-70 beats a minute. Instead, it's climbing above 90 – a sign she needs to slow down. She needs to swap that morning coffee for a good breakfast, switch off the TV, and persuade Rianna to do her own hair. She feels stressed throughout the day and her back pain is a symptom of this. A lot of women find motherhood more stressful than a career, as they feel less in control than they do at work and find the day-to-day chores unrewarding. I wonder if she could ask her ex-husband to share in the childcare? She could also cut down on some of the children's activities, as her chauffeur role causes so much stress it affects the whole family. Harry's bedtime tears are another symptom of Freida's bad day. She'd be a happier mum if she found herself a rewarding part-time job, and started and ended each day with some meditation.'

How I cope

When I step out in front of the audience, I think: "It's not brain surgery and they can't shoot me if I make a mistake!"

CHLOË MARCH, 34, from Godalming, Surrey, is a singer



Too many phones and not enough ears is Kyrstie's problem

THE PRESSURED PROFESSIONAL

KYRSTIE SUTCLIFFE, 34, works in London as an account director for a busy PR company. 'I've always been prone to stress. Even as a waitress, when I was a student, I'd worry after work that I'd served the wrong food! But I also thrive on the buzz of a high-pressure job, so I'm my own worst enemy.'

6.30am Wake up feeling very relaxed. **BP: 112/72 HR: 61.**

7.30am Wake up again, realising I've fallen asleep and will be late for work. I like to take the bus and be in the office at 8.45am, but will now have to catch a train and arrive later, at about 9.15am.
BP: 119/79 HR: 80.

8.45am Changing trains at Victoria Station. The platform is four or five people deep and I can't get through to a clear

space. Caught in a crush, with everyone pushing past me.
BP: 136/87 HR: 78.

9am Arrive at South Kensington, feeling fine and ready for my ten-minute walk to work. **BP: 144/80 HR: 87.**

10am Very excited this morning. A piece of coverage I arranged has appeared in a magazine. Feel great.
BP: 107/77 HR: 71.

11am Work's going well, but I'm feeling apprehensive as I've got to ring journalists about a new story and I've lots to do. **BP: 132/93 HR: 69.**

1.30pm Finally stop for lunch after a busy morning and hear mortgage interest rates are going up – I'm in the process of buying a new flat. I can afford the new rates but still feel anxious. The muscles in my shoulders are tight and my head feels foggy.
BP: 157/92 HR: 55.

3.30pm Feeling a post-lunch dip and I'm starting to panic about all I have to do today.
BP: 148/89 HR: 83.

4pm Despondent about not placing this new story. Now my

shoulders are really tight.
BP: 145/108 HR: 59.

6pm End of the working day and I can start to wind down, but I still feel fuzzy-headed and a little bit tense. I used to relax with floatation therapy. Feel like I need to do this again. **BP: 134/92 HR: 71.**

7.15pm At my friend Jax's house, trying on some new clothes she brought after a trip abroad. Still anxious about the mortgage news, but talking it through with Jax makes me feel better. **BP: 150/84 HR: 70**

9.20pm Had a curry and gin and tonic with Jax and her fiancé, Ian. Feel relaxed and ready to go home. **BP: 140/79 HR: 83.**

10.30pm Go to bed, ready to switch off. **BP: 139/86 HR: 84.**

STRESS VERDICT

Dr Malcolm VandenBurg says: 'Kyrstie's day starts off badly and, by lunchtime, she's feeling the effects. Her aching shoulders and foggy head are typical symptoms of stress and often occur when the acute stress is passing. But, by the end of the day, her blood pressure (which should be around 120/80) has risen to the upper end of the normal range, and is higher than when she woke up. Seeing friends is good for fighting stress, but she must also learn to be happy without treating herself to things like the clothes her friend brought for her. Her single G&T is okay, but I don't really approve. She's learned that it's calming, but she needs to find another way of alleviating stress. She should go back to floatation therapy or take up yoga.'



Taxi! Lilian's the family chauffeur

THE ACTIVE RETIRED

LILIAN BARNES, 60, from Corby, Northamptonshire, retired from midwifery in July 2002. She's married to Paul, 55, a scenes-of-crime officer with the police. They have three children and five grandchildren. 'Most of my stress is my own doing - I try to pack too much in.'

6.30am Wake up feeling stressed. I didn't sleep well, worrying about the day ahead. My youngest child, Judith, 24, is borrowing my husband Paul's car, so I'll have to drop him at work. Have a headache and a sore throat. **BP 154/105 HR: 67.** I walk to the newsagent, then drop a paper off for my dad, who's 89.

7.30am Return home. **BP: 150/96 HR: 66.**

8am Anxious about my blood pressure, I check it again. **BP: 157/104 HR: 63.** I always

thought my BP was about 130/85. What's going on?

8.30am My grandson Josh, who's seven, arrives for me to take him to school.

8.40am I leave to drive Josh to school, four miles away. No traffic problems today, but, after the drop-off, I get stressed trying to find what I'm looking for at the shops.

10am Back home. **BP: 163/110 HR: 63.** Decide to go to the gym to work off my stress.

10.30am Arrive at gym. **BP: 156/110 HR: 70.**

11.30am Finish workout. **BP: 126/90 HR: 73.** Return home, put on washing.

12pm Stop for a quick lunch of soup and bread.

12.30pm Drive Paul to work, 12 miles away. Worried because I'm in a hurry. I've signed up to Voluntary Reading Help; a fieldworker is picking me up at 1.15pm.

1.05pm Back home. Hang out washing. **BP: 137/88 HR: 73.**

1.15pm Fieldworker arrives and we head off. The meeting is disappointing as I had

mornings in mind, and they need someone for afternoons.

2.20pm Back home. **BP: 148/102 HR: 64.** Relax with a cup of tea and the paper.

3pm Get ready to collect my granddaughter Lauren, aged nine, from school for a treat. Feeling relaxed. **BP: 127/92 HR: 48.** Drop the dog, Minnie, off at my Dad's. Collect Lauren and take her to Asda so she can spend some of her birthday money. We have tea in McDonald's, then go home. I bring in washing and change for the evening. I pop to Dad's, then drive Lauren ten miles to to see Annie at the theatre.

10.45pm After a lovely night, I drop Lauren back and arrive home. **BP:150/105 HR: 60.**

11.45pm Bedtime. **BP: 149/99 HR: 66.** Still feeling under the weather and wonder if it's linked to today's high blood pressure. Take readings again over the next few days and, when I'm feeling better and calmer, it's back to **130/88.**

STRESS VERDICT

Dr Malcolm VandenBurg says: 'Lilian leads such a busy life that I felt exhausted just reading about it all. She has to start saying "no" to other people - and herself, too. As well as looking after family members and a dog, she's taking on voluntary commitments. Her relaxing cup of tea should be replaced by something caffeine free to help with stress, and I'd also recommend assertiveness training and time-management exercises. The headache and sore throat are bad signs - you're more susceptible to infections when you're stressed - and her high blood pressure must be checked out by her GP.'

We used the Boots Wrist Blood Pressure Monitor, which costs £90 and is available from most branches of Boots (0845 0708090). To find out more about Dr VandenBurg's stress clinics and workshops, call 020 7935 0113. ▶

How I cope
I play football for my local team on Fridays. It's a chance to get rid of pent-up energy.

VICTORIA HEYNES, from Bristol, is a teacher