

Stress Awareness Month:

Managing Stress and Building Resilience

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Introduction

As the days get lighter and everything starts to feel a bit fresher, April can be a good time to reset. Not just in our surroundings, but in our minds as well. For many, “spring cleaning” isn’t only about decluttering the home; it’s about decluttering mental space, too.

Stress Awareness Month offers the perfect moment to pause, reflect, and explore how stress affects us and how we can manage it effectively. In many workplaces, stress is often worn as a badge of honour, but it comes at a cost. In fact, a 2025 UK-wide survey found that 74% of adults have felt so stressed in the past year that they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope.



Understanding stress, its biological roots, how it shows up in our daily lives, and what we can do about it is the first step toward taking back control. This newsletter explores these points and provides practical strategies to help you thrive under pressure and build resilience.

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What is Stress?

Stress is your body's natural response to a challenge or demand. It's not a sign of weakness; it's a biological process designed to protect you.

When faced with a stressor, whether a looming deadline, a challenging conversation, or even an unexpected traffic jam, your amygdala (the brain's "alarm system") alerts the hypothalamus. This triggers a surge of stress hormones:



Adrenaline:

Often called the "fight-or-flight" hormone, adrenaline increases heart rate, raises blood pressure, and sharpens focus.



Cortisol:

Often known as the "stress hormone", cortisol boosts glucose in the bloodstream to fuel your brain.

Evolution shaped this response to keep our ancestors alive. Today, though, our brains often react to modern "threats" like emails, meetings, or personal pressures in the same way. When this alarm system remains active for extended periods, chronic stress can develop, affecting the immune system, cardiovascular health, digestion, and sleep.

Did you know? Short-term stress can actually be helpful. This "eustress" motivates us to meet deadlines, solve problems, and stay alert. The real danger lies in chronic, unmanaged stress.

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The Four Stress Responses

Humans don't all respond to stress the same way. Recognising your primary stress response is key to handling it well.



Fight:

Feeling irritable, controlling, or aggressive. You may snap at colleagues or feel combative energy.



Flight:

Wanting to escape or avoid the stressor. This can manifest as procrastination, "busy-work," or withdrawing socially.



Freeze:

Feeling stuck or unable to act. You might stare at your screen for hours or feel paralysed in decision-making.



Fawn:

People-pleasing to avoid conflict. You say "yes" to everything, even when overwhelmed, to keep the peace.

Reflective Exercise: Think back to a stressful moment recently. Did you fight, flee, freeze, or fawn? Noticing how you responded is the first step toward taking control.

Tip: Keep a stress journal for a week. Record triggers, your response, and how you felt afterward. Patterns quickly emerge, helping you develop healthier coping strategies.

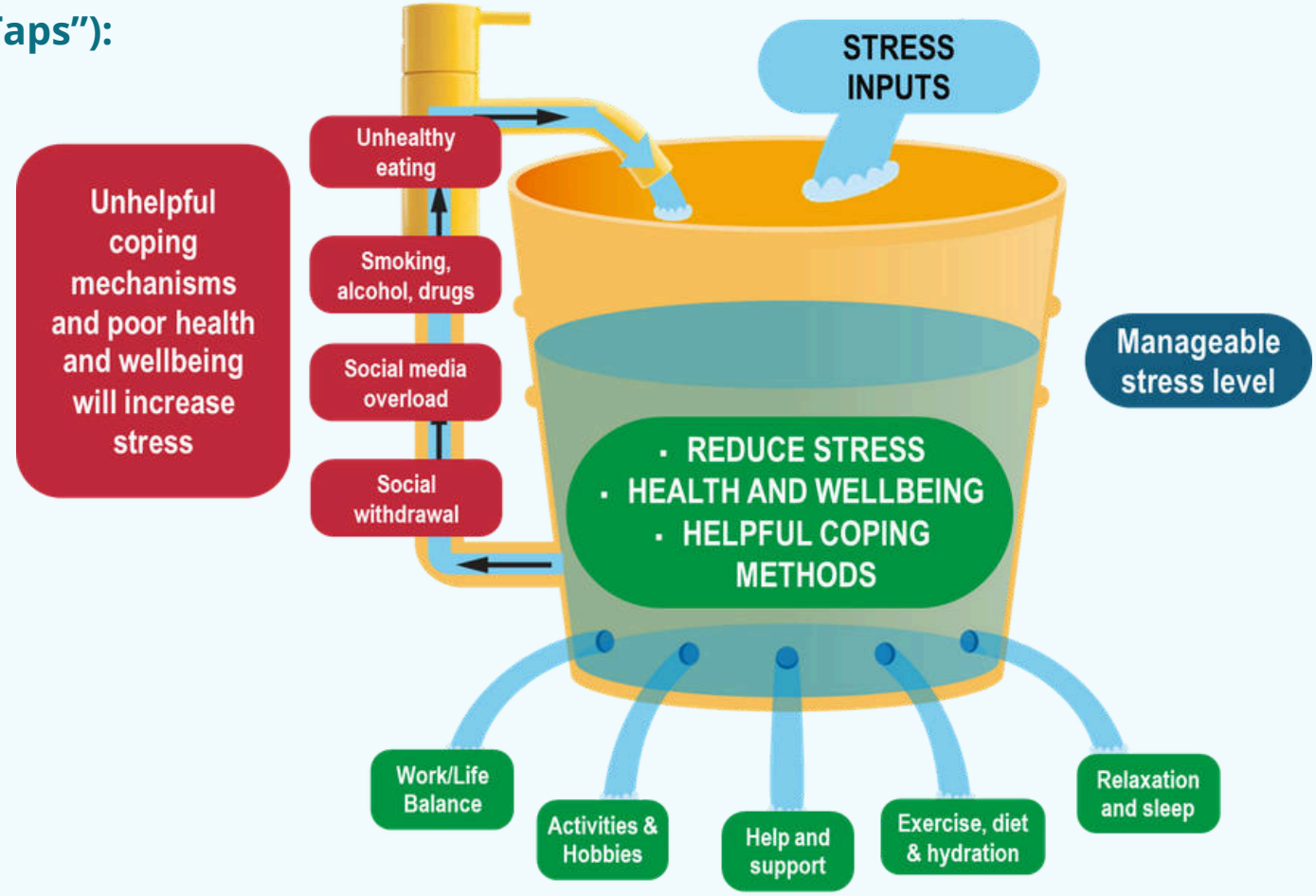
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The Stress Bucket: How Small Stressors Accumulate

Stress can be imagined as water filling a bucket. Work pressures, family responsibilities, financial worries, and even small irritations all pour in. Without ways to drain the bucket, it overflows - leading to burnout or emotional breakdown.

Helpful Coping Mechanisms ("Taps"):

- **Regular exercise:** A 10–15 minute walk can lower cortisol levels and boost mood, helping reduce stress and anxiety.
- **Quality sleep:** Aim for 7–8 hours per night to restore the nervous system and improve stress resilience.
- **Social connection:** Strong relationships reduce stress, support emotional balance, and protect against anxiety and depression.



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Unhelpful Coping Mechanisms ("Clogs"):

1

Excess caffeine, alcohol, or nicotine:

These may feel like quick fixes but can increase anxiety, disrupt sleep, and place additional strain on the body over time.

2

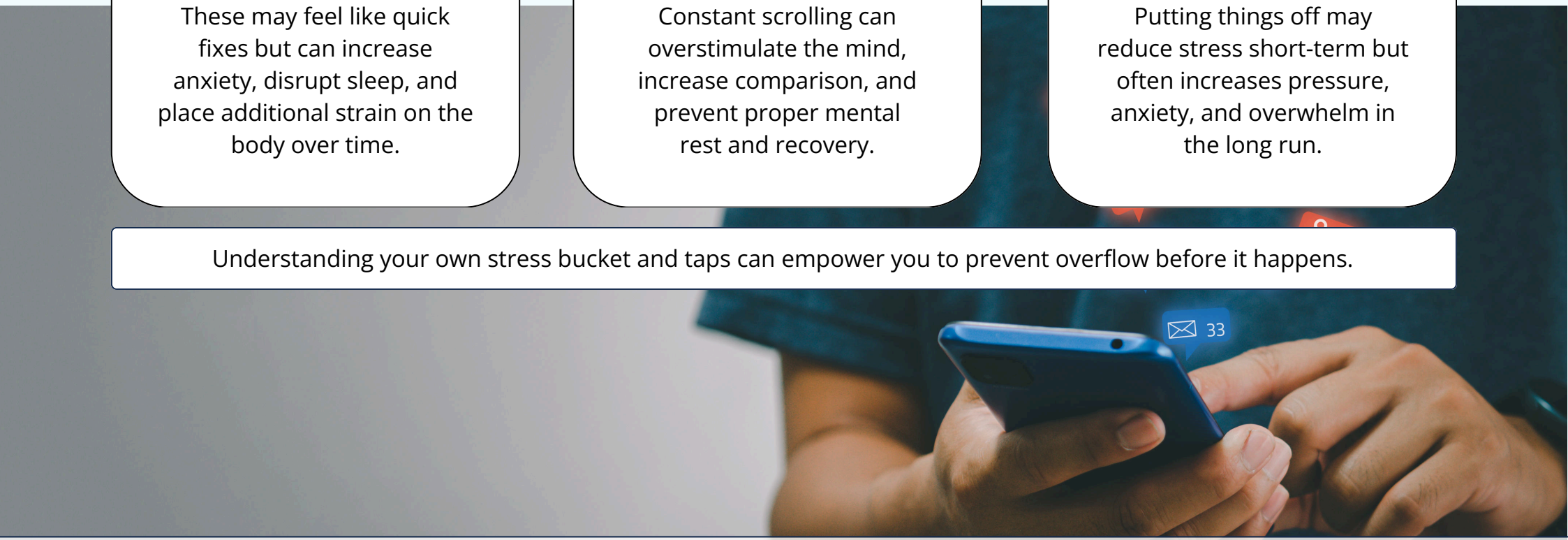
Endless social media scrolling:

Constant scrolling can overstimulate the mind, increase comparison, and prevent proper mental rest and recovery.

3

Avoidance or procrastination:

Putting things off may reduce stress short-term but often increases pressure, anxiety, and overwhelm in the long run.



Understanding your own stress bucket and taps can empower you to prevent overflow before it happens.

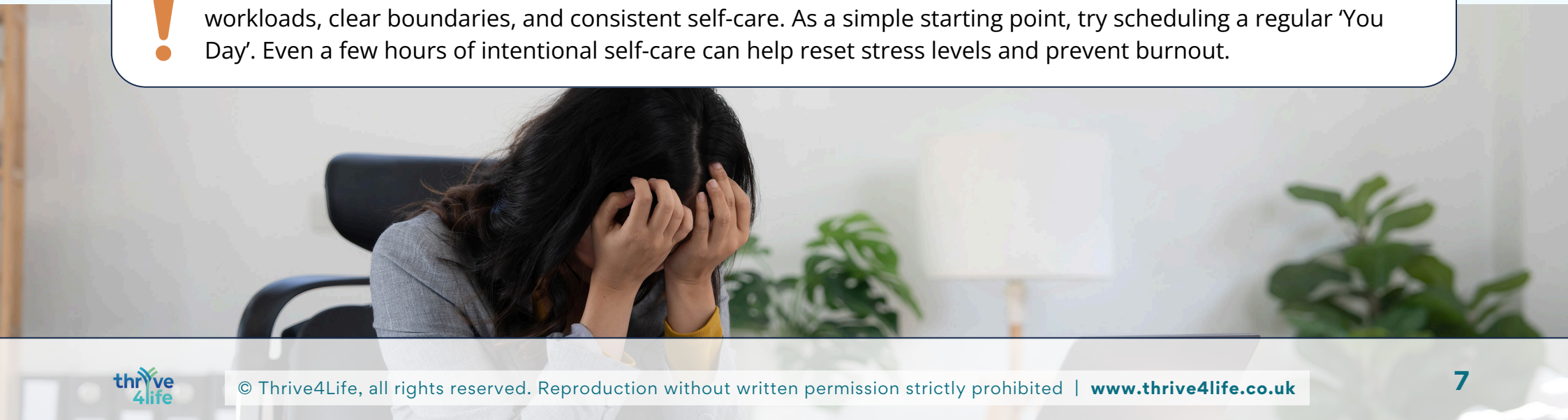
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Stress vs. Burnout: Spotting the Difference

Stress and burnout are often treated as the same, but they're different experiences.

Feature	Stress	Burnout
Energy	Over-engaged, anxious	Exhausted, detached
Emotions	Reactive, irritable	Hopeless, numb
Physical impact	Tension, headaches	Chronic fatigue, immune suppression
Feeling	"I have too much to do"	"I have nothing left to give"

While short breaks may offer temporary relief, lasting recovery requires structural changes, such as realistic workloads, clear boundaries, and consistent self-care. As a simple starting point, try scheduling a regular 'You Day'. Even a few hours of intentional self-care can help reset stress levels and prevent burnout.



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Common Sources of Stress in Daily Life

Stress can come from external pressures or internal expectations. Some of the most common triggers include:

- Tight deadlines and heavy workloads
- Poor work-life balance
- Financial concerns
- Relationship conflicts
- Constant connectivity and digital notifications



Digital Boundaries: Our always-on culture can keep cortisol levels elevated, making it harder for the body to switch off and recover. Regularly checking emails late at night or endlessly scrolling before bed can prolong this stress response.

Quick Tip: Create “tech-free” windows in your day, especially in the evening. Even a short break from screens can help your mind unwind and support better rest.



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Managing Stress in the Moment: Practical Techniques



Stress may be unavoidable, but there are simple, evidence-based tools you can use to regulate your nervous system in real time:

Physiological Sigh: Inhale through the nose, take a second short inhale, then slowly exhale through the mouth. Research shows that this helps rapidly reduce stress and lower heart rate.

Box Breathing: Inhale for 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4. This technique helps slow breathing and signal safety to the nervous system.

Cognitive Reframing: Shift your perspective: instead of "I can't cope with this," try "this is challenging, but I can take it one step at a time." Small mindset shifts can reduce emotional intensity.

Mindfulness: Bring your attention to the present moment - your breath, your body, or your surroundings. This can reduce overthinking and interrupt the stress cycle.

Use these tools *proactively*, not just when overwhelmed. Practising them regularly makes them more effective when you need them most.

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Building Resilience for Long-Term Wellbeing

Resilience isn't about avoiding stress; it's about strengthening your ability to recover and adapt over time. This is built through consistent habits across key areas of health:

Social Connection

Meaningful relationships reduce stress, protect mental health, and trigger oxytocin to support immunity and heart health.

Nutrition & Hydration

Balanced meals and regular hydration stabilise mood, focus, and stress response. Even mild dehydration (1–2%) can affect brain function.

Exercise

Movement releases endorphins, lowers stress hormones, and boosts sleep, energy, focus, and resilience. Aim for 150 mins/week of moderate activity.



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Sleep:

Quality sleep resets both brain and body, improving mood, focus, memory, decision-making, and resilience while reducing the risk of mental and physical health problems.

Morning Light:

Getting natural light within 30–60 minutes of waking regulates your circadian rhythm, stabilises energy and mood, boosts serotonin, and supports healthy cortisol levels.

Proactive Health:

Understanding your stress patterns, monitoring your wellbeing, and acting early on key health matters empowers you to prevent chronic stress and improve long-term health outcomes.

TOP TIP: Focus on small, consistent habits across these pillars. Over time, they compound, creating stronger physical, mental, and emotional resilience.



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Key Takeaways

- Stress is a natural, biological response that helps us cope with challenges, but chronic stress can harm both body and mind.
- Knowing your stress response (fight, flight, freeze, fawn) can help you respond more effectively.
- Small, consistent actions, such as mindfulness, movement, and staying connected, can significantly reduce stress over time.
- Burnout differs from everyday stress and requires deliberate recovery.
- Practical strategies applied consistently make a measurable difference in wellbeing.

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