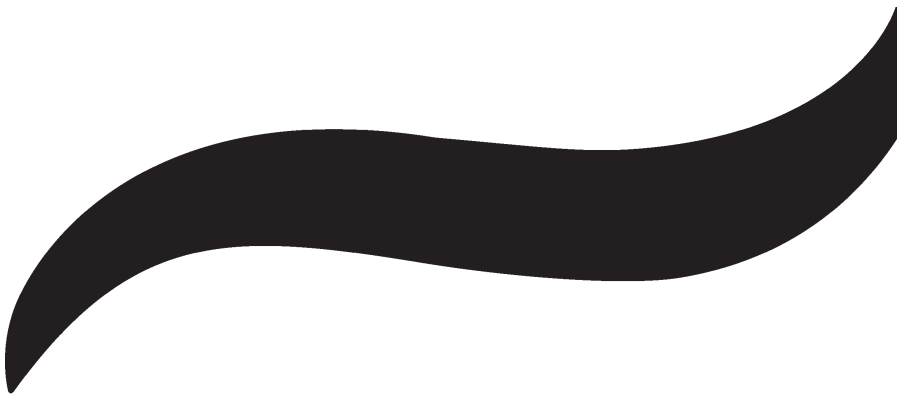




# Stress

Information for clients





## WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress can be defined as “the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them”. Stress occurs when the demands in our life affect our ability to cope. Stress affects each individual differently - what one person might find stressful may not be stressful for another.

Some stress is actually good for you because it can prompt you into action. For example, stress can be helpful if it leads you to study for an exam or prepare for a job interview. However, stress is unhelpful when it leads you to feel overwhelmed, burned out and unable to cope.

Here are some examples of people’s experiences of stress:

“I just feel like I can never get on top of everything I need to do. Whenever I think I am about to find my feet, something else comes up. I just jump about from task to task but never seem to finish anything.”

“I am so stressed all the time - I just feel so overwhelmed. I have butterflies in my stomach, feel sick and can’t seem to concentrate on anything. I don’t think I can ask for help, I don’t want people to think I can’t cope and can’t do my job properly.”

“Everyone seems to rely on me - I don’t want to let anyone down but I never get a moment to myself to relax. I feel like I am going to go crazy! ”

# WHY DO WE GET STRESSED?

Stress is very common and anyone can get stressed. Some people may be more likely to get stressed than others because of their genes. However, these people can still take positive action to reduce their stress levels.

Difficult life events can cause people to become stressed. Some examples of these are:

- ❖ Relationship problems or divorce
- ❖ Financial concerns
- ❖ Redundancy/unemployment
- ❖ Difficulties at work
- ❖ Role changes – e.g. becoming a parent, retiring
- ❖ Poor health
- ❖ Pregnancy
- ❖ Difficulties with parenting
- ❖ Death of a loved one
- ❖ Being treated unfairly/abuse
- ❖ Legal problems

These are just examples of events that can lead to stress; there are lots of reasons why someone may experience stress. For many people, there is often a combination of reasons. Everyone experiences stress differently and what is stressful for one individual may not be stressful for another.

Try to identify what factors are causing you stress at the moment. If you are not sure what is causing your stress, try to keep a diary of when you are feeling stressed for a few weeks. Try recording:

- ❖ The date, time and place where you felt stressed
- ❖ What you are doing and who you were with
- ❖ What was going through your mind
- ❖ How stressed you felt from 1 - 10
- ❖ What you did as a result

Keeping this record can help you to identify what triggers your stress and what effect this has on you.

# WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS?

Below are the physical symptoms, feelings, thoughts and behaviours you might experience when you are feeling stressed. See if you can identify with any of them.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Physical Symptoms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Tension in muscles</li><li>❖ Upset stomach</li><li>❖ Butterflies in stomach</li><li>❖ Headaches</li><li>❖ Feeling hot and sweaty</li><li>❖ Poor concentration</li><li>❖ Rapid change in weight</li><li>❖ Skin complaints</li><li>❖ Feeling very tired all of the time</li><li>❖ Breathlessness</li></ul> | <p><b>Behaviour</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Consume more caffeine</li><li>❖ Consume more alcohol</li><li>❖ Smoke more</li><li>❖ Exercise less</li><li>❖ Snap at people</li><li>❖ Bottle up how you feel</li><li>❖ Eat more junk food</li><li>❖ Skip meals</li><li>❖ Stop doing things that you enjoy</li><li>❖ Rush around trying to get everything done</li></ul> |
| <p><b>Thoughts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ “I can’t cope with this”</li><li>❖ “I am losing control”</li><li>❖ “I am not good enough”</li><li>❖ “If I ask for help, people will think I can’t cope”</li><li>❖ “I shouldn’t be feeling this way”</li><li>❖ “Things are never going to get better”</li></ul>  | <p><b>Feelings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Low</li><li>❖ Anxious</li><li>❖ Guilty</li><li>❖ Helpless</li><li>❖ Overwhelmed</li><li>❖ Burnt out</li><li>❖ Irritable</li></ul>   |

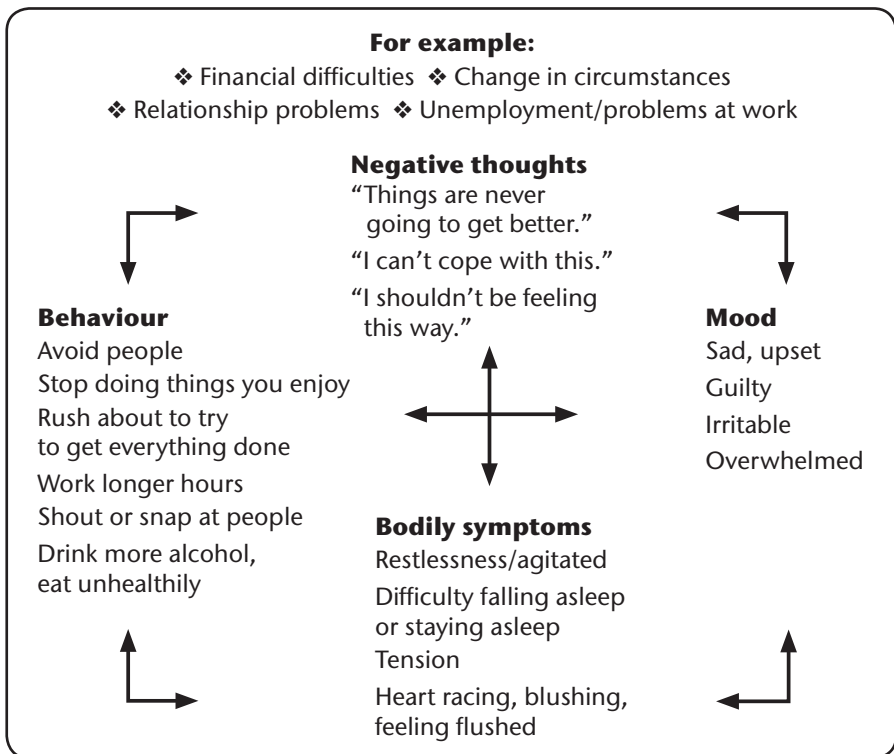
The symptoms listed on page five are the short-term symptoms of stress. There are also long-term health risks associated with stress. These include sleep problems, frequent colds and coughs, headaches, bowel problems, stomach problems, low energy levels and high blood pressure.

The good news is that there are lots of helpful steps you can take to help you cope with stress.

## THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF STRESS

Our thoughts, our behaviour, our mood and our physical symptoms all affect one another. This can sometimes become an unhelpful, vicious cycle, like the example below.

### Outside world – background stresses

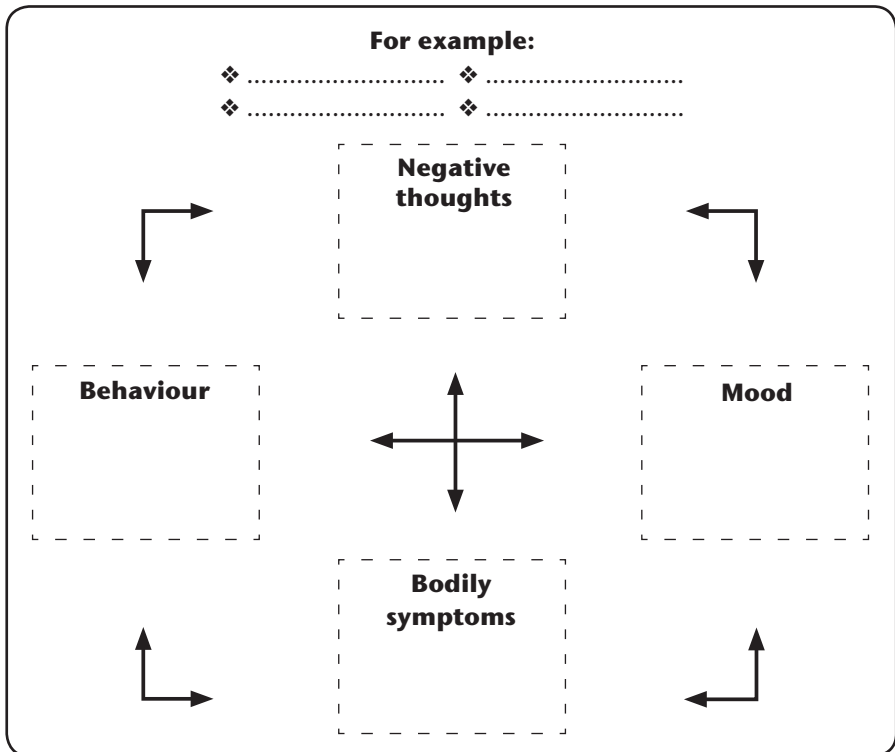


Try to draw out your own vicious cycle below.

- ❖ What events or situations make you feel stressed? Put these under events
- ❖ What images or words go through your head? What sort of thoughts do you have about yourself, the situation or the future? Put these under thoughts
- ❖ What things do you feel in your body? Put these under bodily symptoms
- ❖ What is your mood like? This is usually just one word. Put these under mood

## THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF STRESS

### Outside world – background stresses



To break the vicious cycle, we can try to think differently and act differently. The next section will give you some tips on how you can do this.

## PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

The reason that we notice some of these physical symptoms is due to the **“fight or flight response”**.

Our body reacts in a certain way to stress, fear and anxiety. When we are presented with a “threat”, **adrenaline** gets released into our body. Adrenaline is a chemical messenger sent from our brain to make our body get ready to run away, fight or freeze. Some of the things that happen to the body include:

Adrenaline is released in dangerous situations (e.g. nearly being knocked over). This can be helpful because it prepares our body to take appropriate reaction (e.g. jumping out of the way). However, anxiety can also be released in everyday situations (e.g. going to the shops, speaking in front of large groups). When we start to experience these bodily sensations in these situations, this can actually make us feel more anxious because we start to become self-conscious or we worry about what these sensations mean.

The important thing to remember is that these bodily sensations are **normal, natural** and **not dangerous**. These reactions are designed to protect us and can be helpful.

Practicing relaxation techniques or carrying out relaxing activities can help to reduce the physical symptoms of stress.



## RELAXATION

Relaxation is a really good way to reduce symptoms of stress, reduce tension and to unwind. You can use relaxing activities or specific relaxation exercises. Try to plan a relaxing activity each day. Some examples of relaxing activities include:

- ❖ Exercise - going for a walk or a swim
- ❖ Reading a book
- ❖ Watching a favourite TV show
- ❖ Going to the cinema
- ❖ Doing something creative - drawing, painting, writing poetry
- ❖ Playing a game or doing a puzzle
- ❖ Listening to music
- ❖ Calling or visiting family or friends

You can also use specific relaxation techniques to help manage the symptoms of stress.

## CONTROLLED BREATHING

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Step 1: | Breathe out.  |
| Step 2: | Breathe in slowly to the count of four “one elephant, two elephant, three elephant, four elephant.” |
| Step 3: | Hold your breath for the count of four.   |
| Step 4: | Breathe out slowly while counting elephants.  |

Repeat the above steps until you start to feel calm. Take a few ordinary breaths in between the deep ones. Don't take too many deep breaths in a row or breathe too quickly, or you will become dizzy.

## PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

When we feel stressed, we often experience tension in our muscles. This can sometimes result in feelings of pain. Progressive muscular relaxation is an exercise that can help reduce the feelings of tension. It involves tensing up muscles and then relaxing them. The purpose of this exercise is to help you notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Try to tense each muscle group for five seconds, don't tense the muscles too tightly and stop if you feel any pain.

Here are the muscle groups to try:

- ❖ Forehead
- ❖ Eyes
- ❖ Mouth and jaw
- ❖ Neck
- ❖ Shoulders
- ❖ Arms
- ❖ Hands
- ❖ Chest
- ❖ Lower back
- ❖ Stomach
- ❖ Bottom
- ❖ Thighs
- ❖ Back of legs
- ❖ Front of legs
- ❖ Feet

You can work through the muscle groups that you would like. Some people experience tension in particular areas so you might find it helpful to focus on those areas in particular.

There is also a “Relaxation” Doing Well booklet with a relaxation CD included.

## IDENTIFY NEGATIVE THINKING

The first step to thinking differently is to identify negative thoughts you have. When we are stressed, we often have negative thoughts about ourselves and the situation,

*“Things are so awful right now.”*

*“I can’t cope with this.”*

*“I shouldn’t be feeling this way, I must be a weak person.”*

We also often make negative predictions about the future,

*“I will never manage that.”*

*“If I go to that event, I will have a terrible time.”*

*“Things are never going to get better.”*

Sometimes the way we think about a situation can make us feel worse and adds to the pressure we are under. The more negatively we think about a situation, the worse we feel. The worse we feel, the more negatively we think, and so on.

The important thing to remember is that our thoughts are opinions and not facts. This means that, particularly when we are stressed, our thoughts may not be totally accurate. They can also be unhelpful and can make us feel worse.

Try to identify your negative thoughts and what situations cause you to have these thoughts. Try asking yourself the questions below to help you to challenge your thoughts.

| Situation   | Thought  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Where were you?</b><br/> <b>Who were you with?</b><br/> <b>What was happening?</b></p> <p>I am sitting at work and my boss gives me another piece of work to do for the end of the week and I already have a pile of work on my desk.</p> <p>I come home and find an expensive bill and I don't have the money for it.</p> <p>I am on the phone and I have an argument with my brother.</p> | <p><b>What words or images were going through your head?</b></p> <p>“I can't cope with all of this, I am losing control.”</p> <p>“Things are just getting worse and worse, they will never get better.”</p> <p>“Everything just keeps going wrong, I don't know what to do.”</p> |

- ❖ Is there any evidence that does not support this thought?
- ❖ What would you say to a friend who was in a similar situation?
- ❖ What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?
- ❖ How will you feel about this situation in six months or a year's time?
- ❖ What is another way of looking at this situation?

# ACTING DIFFERENTLY - GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

When we are stressed, we often stop doing things that give us pleasure or a sense of closeness to others. Try to make sure that there is a balance of activities in your life. Ideally, there should be an equal balance of activities that you give you a sense of achievement, enjoyment and closeness to others as these things can all help to improve mood. Here are some examples, try to write your own below:

| <b>Achievement</b>                                       | <b>Pleasure</b>           | <b>Closeness to others</b>      |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Doing some ironing                                       | Having a nice hot bath    | Calling a friend for a chat     |
| Getting a report completed for work                      | Watching a favourite film | Visiting relatives              |
| Dealing with bills and letters you have been putting off | Having a bar of chocolate | Going to a social group or club |

## **ACTING DIFFERENTLY - OVERCOMING AVOIDANCE**

When something makes us feel stressed, sometimes the most tempting thing to do is to avoid it. However, when we avoid things, we don't give ourselves the opportunity to test out our predictions about what might have happened. We might miss out on things that we would enjoy or that might be important to us.

To overcome avoidance, try breaking down the task into manageable steps.

- ❖ Try making a list of tasks or activities that you have been avoiding, for instance:
  1. Complete the housework
  2. Start a new exercise class
  3. Telephone the bank
  4. Prepare for a work meeting
  5. Visit the dentist
- ❖ To make these tasks less overwhelming and more manageable, try selecting the easiest or most important task to focus on
- ❖ Break this task down into manageable steps. For instance, if the task is to complete the housework, you might break this down into:
  1. Wash and dry the dishes
  2. Clean the kitchen worktops
  3. Hoover the lounge
  4. Dust the surfaces
  5. Put a load of washing on
- ❖ Then reward yourself, for example, with a cup of tea and a chocolate biscuit!

Try to do this yourself now on the next page.

❖ Write a list of the tasks you have been avoiding here:

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

❖ What one is the most important or the easiest that you would like to start first?

1. ....

❖ What are the steps you need to carry out?

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

❖ Work your way through the steps, if one is too hard; try going back one step or breaking the step down. If you have a set-back, don't be put off. Try again soon or make the step a bit easier. Congratulate and reward yourself when you have done well!

❖ What will you do to reward yourself?

- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

## ACTING DIFFERENTLY - MANAGING YOUR TIME

Managing your time effectively can be a very effective way to gain control of your stress levels, at home or at work. Here are some tips to help you do this:

❖ Set yourself **SMART** goals:

**S**pecific

**M**easurable

**A**chievable

**R**ealistic

**T**ime-limited

- ❖ Rank priorities - identify what tasks are most important
- ❖ Plan your work. This may take up time but in the long-term it can keep you focussed on what you need to do
- ❖ Spend time organising your environment
- ❖ Don't procrastinate - putting off tasks just gives you more to do the next day
- ❖ Identify when you are most productive and try to complete the most demanding tasks then
- ❖ Keep a balance - make sure you have a balance of activities are enjoyable and relaxing



# ACTING DIFFERENTLY - LIFESTYLE

## Diet

A healthy diet helps us to cope better with stress. When we are stressed we often rush about to try and get things done and this sometimes means we skip meals or eat convenience foods. It is important to set some time aside to sit down and enjoy our food. Eating should be pleasurable and relaxing. When we are stressed we often eat foods high in sugar and fat as they give us a short-term surge of energy. However, these types of foods can result in irritability and mood swings. Try to cut down on foods high in sugar and fat. Instead, try to eat a balanced diet that includes plenty of fruit and vegetables

## Alcohol

We often assume that alcohol will make us feel better after a stressful day, but alcohol can actually act as a depressant, lowering mood and can increase anxiety and stress levels if consumed in excess. Alcohol can also affect sleep as it is stressful for our body to process alcohol. You might find that you have a disturbed sleep if you consume alcohol before bed. Try not to consume alcohol two hours before going to bed.

Try to stick to the recommended guidelines for alcohol intake. According to current guidelines, women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units per day. Men should not regularly drink more than 3-4 units per day.

A small glass of wine (125ml) has 1.6 units of alcohol.

A regular beer, lager or cider has 1.8 units of alcohol.

A 25ml single spirit and mixer has 1 unit of alcohol.

## Caffeine

Caffeine can be a helpful way to give us a boost when we are feeling tired. But we respond to caffeine in a similar way as we do to stress. This means that caffeine can sometimes lead to higher levels of anxiety, agitation and headaches. The effects of caffeine can last for six hours so try to not consume caffeine in the late afternoon and evening. Caffeine is found in energy drinks, coffee, tea, some painkillers, chocolate, hot chocolate and some soft drinks. You can get decaffeinated versions of many of these items.

## Physical Exercise

There are a lot of benefits of regular physical exercise. Stress produces adrenaline and regular exercise can help to use up these adrenaline resources. Regular exercise can help to reduce muscle tension. Exercise produces natural anti-depressants and can improve mood. There are also lots of health benefits of regular exercise.

The ideal amount of exercise is 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. It is a good idea to start slowly and build up the intensity. Try to think of ways to exercise by doing something that you enjoy, like taking up a sport you used to play or going for a walk with a friend.

## Acting differently - asking for help

When we are stressed, we often feel alone like we are the only person that feels like this. We also often feel like we “should” be able to sort these things on our own. Sometimes we don’t want to tell other people how we are feeling because we don’t want to be a burden to them. It is really important to share how you are feeling with someone that you trust. Having support from others is a really helpful way of coping better. It means that you can get some ideas of advice and ways to cope with your difficulties. It can also make you feel better to share how you are feeling and you might find that other people feel in a similar way or have had similar experiences in the past.

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT:

### Useful Contacts

For information on mental services, supports, opportunities or self-help information call:

- ❖ North Lanarkshire: Well Informed 0800 073 0918
- ❖ South Lanarkshire: Lanarkshire Association for Mental Health Information Line: 0330 3000 133

For further information on mental health and well-being, visit Lanarkshire's Elament website: [www.elament.org.uk](http://www.elament.org.uk)

Remember, should your problems persist or you feel you need help urgently please contact your GP. The following organisations can also prove useful in and out of hours.

- ❖ **Breathing Space** - 0800 83 85 87  
(Mon - Thu, 6pm - 2am; Fri 6pm - Mon 6am)  
[www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk](http://www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk)
- ❖ **Samaritans** - 116 123 (24hrs) [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)
- ❖ **NHS24** - 111 (Out of hours) [www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com)
- ❖ **Healthy Working Lives** - 08452 300 323 (Local),  
0800 019 2211 (National),  
[www.healthyworkinglives.com](http://www.healthyworkinglives.com)
- ❖ **Childline** - 0800 11 11 (24hrs) [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- ❖ **NHS Inform** - 0800 22 44 88 [www.nhsinform.co.uk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk)
- ❖ **Parentline Scotland** - 0808 800 22 22  
[www.children1st.org.uk/parentline](http://www.children1st.org.uk/parentline)
- ❖ **National Debt Line Scotland** - 0808 808 4000  
[www.nationaldebtline.co.uk/scotland](http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk/scotland)
- ❖ **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** - 0800 027 1234

## WHAT IS WELL CONNECTED?

Well Connected is a new programme in Lanarkshire, sometimes referred to as social prescribing or community referral. It makes it easier for us and people we know to take part in and benefit from activities and services that we know improve our well-being which means how we feel about ourselves and our lives. There are a number of Well Connected areas available to us and we can benefit from more than one:

- ❖ Physical activity and leisure opportunities
- ❖ Volunteering
- ❖ Employment
- ❖ Arts and culture
- ❖ Benefits, welfare and debt advice
- ❖ Learning opportunities
- ❖ Stress Control Classes in communities
- ❖ Health Walks
- ❖ Mindfulness Classes.

For information on any of the above call:

- ❖ North Lanarkshire: Well Informed 0800 073 0918
- ❖ South Lanarkshire: Lanarkshire Association for Mental Health Information Line: 0330 3000 133
- ❖ Visit: [www.elament.org.uk/self-help-resources/well-connected-programme.aspx](http://www.elament.org.uk/self-help-resources/well-connected-programme.aspx)

## HEALTHY READING

All public libraries have a healthy reading section making it easier to access mental health and well-being leaflets, books, CDs, DVDs and web-based support. All libraries across Lanarkshire have resources to help us get the most from life such as living life to the full, sleeping better and becoming more confident or overcoming and coping with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, stress, dementia and panic. There are also resources for all ages including supporting young people, adults and older people as well as items on positive parenting. Simply pop into your local library.

## GUIDED SUPPORT:

### Stress Control Classes

Stress Control classes will help develop skills and techniques to manage common issues caused by modern day living such as stress, anxiety or low confidence.

The classes are delivered in local community facilities and consist of six sessions lasting 90 minutes each. We will not need to speak about our issues during the class. Just sit back and listen about helpful stress control techniques. Feel free to bring someone along with you for support. To find your nearest class and book a place, call **0300 303 0447**.

### Living Life to the Full - Online Course

Living Life to The Full is a free web-based life skills course that aims to help us tackle and respond to issues/demands which we all meet in our everyday lives. It will explore issues such as understanding why we feel the way we do, problem solving, noticing and challenging unhelpful thoughts and behaviours and anxiety control. You can register for the course at **[www.lltff.com](http://www.lltff.com)** and complete as many or as few modules as you wish.

If you feel you need additional help, the Living Life to The Full course is also available with support from self help coaches (via Action on Depression Scotland). To find out more visit **[www.aod.lltffionline.co.uk](http://www.aod.lltffionline.co.uk)**

### Living Life: Guided Self Help and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy - Telephone Support

Living Life is a free telephone support service for people suffering from low mood, mild to moderate depression, symptoms of anxiety or a combination of both. Trained Self-help coaches and therapists will guide us through a range of workbooks over a series of telephone sessions. For more information or to make a telephone appointment, call **0800 328 9655** (Mon–Fri 1–9pm).



**NHS Lanarkshire** - for local services and the latest health news visit [www.nhslanarkshire.org.uk](http://www.nhslanarkshire.org.uk)  
NHS Lanarkshire General Enquiry Line: 0300 3030 243

**NHS inform** - The national health information service for Scotland.  
[www.nhsinform.co.uk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk)  
Tel No: 0800 22 44 88

If you need this information in another language or format, please contact the NHS Lanarkshire General Enquiry Line on 0300 3030 243 or e-mail [info2@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:info2@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)



[www.patientopinion.org.uk](http://www.patientopinion.org.uk)

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