



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Stress

A self help guide

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What is stress?

“I just don’t get a task finished any more before I move on to the next thing. I keep forgetting where I’m up to, I have 20 things on the go at once and I’m not getting anywhere with any of them...”

“I keep meaning to get a little time for myself but I never manage to. Someone always asks me to help out and I never have the heart to say no, but I end up feeling really tired and irritable ...”

“It just seems to be one crisis after the next in my life. I’ve got a constant headache and stomach problems, I keep expecting something else to go wrong, I’m at the end of my tether ...”

“I find it really hard to relax and unwind and my mind is racing all the time, I just can’t stop worrying”

If you recognise any of these feelings then you may be suffering from too much stress. Stress is what we feel when we are under pressure. It is a completely normal response which we all experience from time to time and is our body's reaction to feeling under threat; the fight or flight response. It is not dangerous. In fact a certain amount of pressure can be quite helpful and motivating. If we have too much pressure for too long, we run the risk of a more severe stress reaction. This can be quite unpleasant in the short term, but also if stress continues and is not managed, can be really bad for our health.

How can this guide help me?

This booklet will tell you more about stress, and help you to see if stress is a problem for you. It makes simple suggestions about how to manage stress and what other help may be available.

What are the signs of stress?

The signs of stress vary from person to person. The physical symptoms are mostly linked to our ancient survival strategy, the fight or flight response. This releases hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline into our body, literally preparing us to fight or

flee. The pressures we face nowadays are not usually helped by this response. We can't fight or flee from debt, deadlines or stressful life events! Many people are quite worried when they feel these symptoms, and think they may be signs of a serious physical or mental health problem, such as having a heart attack or cracking up. They are not dangerous and are in fact very common. **Do you recognise any of these signs in yourself?**

How you feel physically (please tick if appropriate)

When stressed, people commonly have:

- Frequent headaches
- Muscle tension and aches and pains
- Churning stomach
- Sweating
- Blurred vision, tired eyes
- Feeling sick, dizzy and faint
- Bowel and bladder problems
- Changes in breathing, fast, shallow, sometimes breathless
- Tingling hands
- Racing heart
- Dry mouth
- Feelings of tiredness and exhaustion

How you feel emotionally

If we are stressed regularly our emotions will usually be affected. People often feel:

- Angry, irritable and wound up
- Anxious and full of dread
- Unhappy, upset and tearful
- Lacking in interest
- Overwhelmed and frustrated
- Guilty and worthless

Effects on what you do

Stress can affect how we behave in everyday situations such as home, relationships and work:

- Snappy and irritable
- Drinking more than usual
- Smoking more than usual
- Eating too much or too little
- Withdrawing from activities usually enjoy
- Avoiding people, places and situations
- Putting things off
- Becoming unreasonable
- Making silly mistakes
- Rushing around and doing too much
- Not sleeping
- Biting nails
- Grinding teeth

Effects on your thinking

When we feel stressed we tend to see things very negatively. Stressed people often:

- Worry all the time
- Have racing thoughts that won't switch off
- Expect the worse
- Think negatively about everything
- Criticise themselves and others
- Have poor concentration and memory

If you have some of these signs it may be you are experiencing stress. These are some of the short-term signs but long-term health risks from stress can be more serious. For example, heart disease, high blood pressure, severe depression, stroke, migraine, severe anxiety, asthma, low resistance to infection, bowel problems, stomach problems especially ulcers, have all been linked to stress. It is therefore very important to learn ways to manage stress.

What causes stress?

There is no simple answer to this question. What is stressful varies from person to person, and throughout our lifetime. There can be many sources of stress. Sometimes it can be one or two big life events or changes, and other times it can be a build up of smaller things. Very often it may be both. As well as the things that happen to us and around us (external stress), our stress levels are also affected by what happens inside us (internal stress). So all of the signs mentioned above affect each other and add to our stress. For example:



Although we can't always control the external stress in our life, we can break the vicious cycle of getting more stressed by better understanding our stress and changing our response to it.

Taking stock of the **external stress** in our life can be really helpful. This can help us to understand why we are feeling stressed, and to be kinder to ourselves in recognising what we are dealing with. If you have had one or more of the life events below over the last year, then you are more likely to be stressed and should try to avoid further stressful events where possible. Take extra care of yourself to boost your resilience.

(Please tick if appropriate)

- Death or illness in the family
- Death or illness of close friend
- Death of a pet
- Serious or chronic health problems
- Being a carer
- Divorce or relationship breakdown
- Getting married
- Pregnancy/childbirth
- Moving job
- Severe work related stress
- Promotion at work
- Self or partner losing job
- Money worries, large debts
- Moving house
- Major dispute with family or friends
- Extreme problems with neighbours/noise
- Family gatherings for holidays/Christmas
- Other...

It is not always possible to avoid stress, but learning more about our stress can allow us to understand the causes of stress and reduce the effect it has on us. Keeping a **stress diary** can be really helpful here. What is going on for you at the moment that is making you stressed? Keep a brief note of where, what and who is making you stressed. Try to identify the triggers for your stress. Note what you feel, think or do, and what you notice in your body. This can be an important first step in making some changes.

How can we manage stress in our body?

As the stress response is largely physical, our body is one of the first things to be affected. **Controlled breathing, deep muscle relaxation, mindful breathing and relaxing activity** can all help in reducing tension and switching off some of the physical signs of stress.

Controlled breathing

To begin with, choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed. You can do this exercise sitting or standing with your eyes open or closed. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly in through your nose and out through your lips. Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Imagine you are filling a bottle from the bottom up, so the hand on your stomach moves first then your hand on your chest. You are filling and emptying your lungs with each breath. It may help to count in -two-three and out -two-three. Once you have mastered the controlled breathing try saying to yourself 'calm' as you breathe in and 'relax' as you breathe out. Controlled breathing can be used any time and anywhere to switch off the body's stress response.

Deep muscle relaxation

It is helpful to read through these instructions a few times first and eventually learn them by heart. Start off by sitting or lying somewhere warm and comfortable, where you won't be disturbed. This relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups in the body, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. Don't tense your muscles too tightly. It should not be uncomfortable or painful. Each time you relax a group of muscles notice how they feel when they are relaxed. Don't try too much to relax but just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they are tense compared to when they are relaxed.

It is useful to stick to the same order, as you work through the muscle groups:

Breathing – Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly in two-three and out two-three. Say the word 'calm' to yourself as you breathe in and 'relax' as you breathe out.

Hands – Start with your hands. Clench one fist first and notice the tension in your hand and forearm. Hold it and study the tension for a minute...and then relax. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop.

Arms – Bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.

Neck – Press your head back and roll it gently from side to side. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.

Face – There are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.

Shoulders – This is where we hold a lot of tension. Shrug your shoulders up – then relax them. Notice the tension ease away as you drop your shoulders down. Circle your shoulders slowly and let go of any remaining tension.

Chest – Take a deep breath, hold it in for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.

Stomach – Tense your stomach muscles as tightly as you can and relax.

Buttocks – Squeeze your buttocks together and relax.

Legs – Straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face then relax.

Feet – Point your toes to the floor, hold it for a few seconds, then wiggle your toes. Imagine you are letting go of the last bit of tension through your feet.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. There are also many free relaxation resources online or to buy.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practice daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense your muscles first, just focus on the muscles and let the tension go.
- Use some relaxation techniques to help in difficult situations, e.g. breathing slowly, dropping your shoulders.
- Practice in public situations (on the bus, in a queue etc).
- Use the deep, slow breathing, with the word calm to instantly relax where ever you are.
- Slow down.
- Don't try too hard, just let it happen

Mindful breathing

This is a different approach to managing stress. The goal of mindful breathing is calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is to concentrate only on the present moment, not the past and not the future. Much of our stress is linked to thoughts and feelings about the past and the future, so just being in the here and now can be very helpful.

Follow these instructions:

- Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed or lowered and your back straight.
- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Observe the natural rhythm of your breathing. Every time you breathe in, notice what it feels like. Where do you feel the breath? How does it feel? Each time you breathe out, notice your lungs deflate. Notice the sensations as your lungs fill and empty. Breathe in through your nose and out through your lips.

- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the mind does. You don't need to dwell on them though. Just notice the thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You may notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, but again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Don't follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts to be there. Just notice those thoughts, and let them drift on by bringing your attention back to your breathing.

Thoughts will enter your awareness, and your attention will follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. The more you can practice this exercise the better you will get at being in the present moment. You can then start to be **mindful** in everyday situations, bringing your full focus of attention to whatever you are doing. Be it washing the dishes, having a shower or being out for a walk.

There are many websites online with further information about mindfulness.

Relaxing activity

Exercise: Taking exercise regularly has great benefits for both our physical and psychological health, but it is also very relaxing and a great way to relieve stress and physical tension. Exercise can reduce levels of the body's stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. It also stimulates the production of serotonin and endorphins, our body's natural feel-good hormones. From a health point of view, it is recommended that you are active for at least 30 minutes each day, 5 days a week. You don't have to join a gym to become more active. Going for a brisk walk, a cycle, a swim or a jog are all good sources of exercise and can help to combat stress. The main thing is that you find a form of exercise that you enjoy, as this will make it much easier to motivate yourself.

Hobbies: Anything we do that absorbs, calms and interests us can help reduce the physical effects of stress on our body: photography, painting, knitting, cross stitch, dancing, singing, baking, are just a few examples of things that may help you to physically relax.

Not all hobbies and activities calm and relax us, however. Watching your favourite team being beaten for example, can increase your stress levels. As can playing very competitive sports. Increasing your awareness by keeping a stress diary can be very helpful to work out which sort of activities are best for reducing stress in your body.

Self care: There are so many ways to calm and soothe ourselves: Relaxing in a warm bath with some scented candles; having an aromatherapy massage; drinking a cup of our favourite tea; practising yoga; eating healthily; watching a favourite film; seeing friends; having a laugh; reading a good book, stroking a pet. The list is endless, you just need to find what works for you!

How can we manage our stressful thoughts?

The good news is that because our body and mind are linked, **controlled breathing, deep relaxation, mindful breathing and relaxing activity** all help to calm a stressed mind as well as a stressed body. There are some other simple things that may help. For example, **changing our stressed thoughts** can have a big effect on how we feel and behave. We all have stressed thoughts from time to time, but when we have too much stress, sometimes our thoughts become a big part of the problem. Our thoughts can convince us that we are not coping, that we are useless and that there is no point in trying to beat our stress. Stressed thoughts can also make us avoid things that could be helpful, such as seeing friends, taking exercise, doing fun things.

A really simple way of **challenging our stressed thoughts** is to imagine we are advising a stressed friend. Most of us are very good at this. Keep a diary for a few weeks writing down any thoughts that are stressing you out in one column. In another column, take a few minutes to be your own 'wise friend', and write down what you might say if you were advising someone else. You will be amazed how good your own advice can be!

The following questions and answers might further help you to **challenge your stressed thoughts**:

Q: Are you expecting too much of yourself and aiming to be perfect? Perhaps trying to achieve the impossible?

A: Aim for good enough. Don't compare yourself with others in an unhelpful way.

Q: Are you focusing on your weaknesses and ignoring your good points?

A: Write a list of all your strengths and achievements and keep it close to hand. Remind yourself of what you are good at. It is easy to forget this when feeling stressed.

Q: Are you taking responsibility or blame for something that isn't really in your control?

A: Just remind yourself 'I can only do my best, it's out of my control'

Q: Are you worrying about something that might never happen?

A: Use your mindful breathing, and just let the thought go.

Q: Are you underestimating your ability to cope if the worst did happen?

A: Remind yourself of how you have coped in the past and got through other difficult situations.

Q: Are you focusing on the negative all the time and starting to feel quite low?

A: Keep a **Gratitude Diary** by your bedside, and every night, jot down three things which have gone well that you are grateful for that day. This simple act which shifts our attention to the positive has been found to improve mood and reduce stress.

What goes on in our mind when we are stressed not only involves our thoughts and feelings, but also has a huge impact on our behaviour. So to control our stress it helps to have a good look at our behaviour and see if there is anything we can change to reduce our stress.

How can we manage our stressed behaviour?

Many of the things mentioned so far that can help reduce the effects of stress on our body and mind, are of course behaviours. Unfortunately, not all of the things we do when we are stressed do help. In fact, a lot of stressed behaviours only make the problem worse.

Watch out for three sorts of behaviour. The 3 'A's:

Alcohol and other unhealthy behaviours. It is very common when we are feeling stressed to reach for the bottle. A glass of wine can be seen as the perfect solution to help us unwind and

'chill ' after a stressful day. Unfortunately, alcohol does not help when we are stressed. If anything, it can make us feel more stressed the next day and less likely to be able to deal with the things that may be stressing us. Other unhealthy behaviours such as: smoking more, eating too much or too little, buying things we can't afford, not looking after ourselves, zoning out in front of the TV for hours on end, all make things worse, not better. So if you feel you are drinking to cope with stress **do reduce your alcohol intake**. And if you possibly can, try to reduce any other unhealthy behaviours that may be making your stress worse.

Avoidance is something we all do when we become stressed. Sometimes ignoring problems or difficult situations feels like the only way we can cope. This does not help in the long run. Behaviours like not opening letters, not answering the phone, not seeing friends, not going out, can only make matters worse. Try to face up to anything you are avoiding. You don't have to do everything at once but it will really help you feel more in control if you stop avoiding things.

Start off by listing any problems you may be avoiding, such as debt, problems around the house, work based problems, relationship problems. Next take each in turn and make a plan to deal with the problem. This may be about getting help, such as from citizens advice, or another professional. Or it may be about simple steps you might take yourself to sort out problems that may have built up. You might also be avoiding some nice things that could make you feel better, because you are feeling too stressed, which takes us on to the next 'A' – Activity.

Activity: too little or too much?

Too little?

As part of the avoidance that happens when we are stressed, often we have a big reduction in our activity levels. Whereas we might normally exercise, see friends, go to the cinema, eat out; very often when stressed we reduce our enjoyable behaviours because we feel we don't have time, and are too stressed. It will

help your stress if you make a plan to increase your activity. In particular think about the things you value most. Are stress and fear getting in the way of you doing the things you value and enjoy? If so, make a plan to change this. Take a moment to list five things you really value, for example: staying fit and healthy, family, friends, relationship, art, nature, helping people, work, travel, religion, hobbies. Next, check whether you are currently doing things in line with your values. If you are, great, keep it up and if possible do more. If not, set yourself some goals to make sure you are increasing your valued activities. This should have the immediate effect of improving your mood and reducing your stress.

Too much?

It may be that rather than (or as well as) having reduced some activity, you feel like you are rushing around doing too much and spinning too many plates. Sometimes the answer here is to stop, take a step back and ask yourself: Are you on the go all the time? Do you feel you are doing more and more but achieving less and less? Do you find yourself saying yes all the time, when it would be much better for you to say no? If so, then your over activity may be making your stress worse. Try to slow down and relax more. Use the relaxation techniques described earlier in the booklet. Challenge thoughts that tell you you have to be on the go all the time. Allow yourself to say no sometimes.

What if my stress is work related?

We have described some very simple ways to manage stress. These can be equally useful at home and at work. Work related stress is increasingly common however, and is now the biggest reason for sickness absence in the UK. Sometimes stress is too much for us to deal with on our own. If you feel your stress is mostly **work related**, then it may be useful to seek support at work. Your manager, HR and your Occupational Health Department if you have one, should all be able to help. **Work related stress** is not just your issue but is an issue for your employer too.

It may be that the demands of your job are unreasonable, or that you feel you have very little control at work. Sometimes not knowing what your role is, or constant change, can be very stressful. Other times it may be tricky relationships with your colleagues or bullying that may be the issue. The Health and Safety Executive have identified stress as a potential risk at work and every employer is obliged to keep you safe at work. Sometimes changes may be made at work to help deal with stress. A good manager is one of the most helpful sources of support for work related stress. Many work places have stress management courses and counselling available for employees. The first step is to recognise you are stressed, and the next to seek help.

If your stress continues, and you are not seeing any change in your stress levels from using this booklet then speak to your GP, who may be able to make further suggestions or refer you on for help.

So bringing it all together, here are some final tips on

How to beat stress:

Hhealth and self care are very important in managing stress. Look after your health. Try to plan breaks throughout the year with a change in activities and surroundings where possible. Make looking after yourself top priority.

Organise yourself as best you can. Being organised will help your stress levels. If you don't cram too much in to the day, you will be able to deal with crises if they arise.

Work may be the problem. If so what aspects are stressful? Could you delegate? Could you get more support? Do you need some training? Should you speak to your manager?

Try not to take on too much. Be realistic about what you can achieve setting yourself reasonable goals.

Own up to yourself that you are feeling stressed – half the battle is admitting it!

Be in the moment where possible. Focus on the here and now. Don't dwell on the past or future worries as this will increase your stress.

Eat a balanced diet. Eat slowly and mindfully, allowing at least half an hour for each meal. Don't eat on the run or whilst doing other activity.

Alcohol does not help stress. Reduce your alcohol intake if you feel you are drinking as a way to cope with stress.

Time for things you value is vital. Plan some valued activities in your life. When stressed sometimes we lose sight of what is most important. Make time for what matters most and you will manage your stress better.

Solve problems rather than burying your head in the sand. Write down the problems in your life that may be causing stress, and as many possible solutions as you can. Make a plan to deal with each problem.

Talk things over with a friend or family member or someone else you can trust and share your feelings with. **Relationships are key to our resilience.**

Relaxation or leisure time each day is important. Use the relaxation techniques described in this booklet or try some new ways to relax such as aromatherapy or reflexology.

Exercising regularly is a great stress buster. At least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on five or more occasions per week is excellent for stress control. **Walking**, running, cycling, dancing, yoga, exercise classes, tennis. It doesn't matter what the exercise is but it helps if you enjoy it!

Say no and don't feel guilty.

Seek professional help if you have tried these things and still your stress is a problem.

Summary

Stress is not an illness in itself, but if it goes on for a long time, and symptoms are severe it can lead to more serious health problems. Stress affects our body, our mind and our behaviour. Understanding more about the causes of stress and how it affects us can be helpful in learning ways to cope with stress. A number of techniques are described that can help you manage your stress, but if you feel your stress is mainly work related, it may be that in addition you need some support from work. If you are concerned about ongoing stress speak to your GP.

Useful organisations

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

Tel: 01455 883 300

www.bacp.co.uk

Offers an information service providing contacts for counselling in England and Wales.

- **Healthwatch**

www.healthwatch.co.uk

Healthwatch England is the independent consumer champion for health and social care in England. Working with local Healthwatch networks, we ensure that the voices of consumers and those who use services reach the ears of the decision makers.

- **Health and Safety Executive**

www.hse.gov.uk/stress/

- **International Stress Management Association (ISMA)**

www.isma.org.uk

Provides information about recognising and reducing stress.

- **Mental Health Matters**

Tel: 0191 516 3500

www.mentalhealthmatters.com

A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.

- **Mind Infoline**

Tel: 0300 123 3393

Text: 86463

www.mind.org.uk

Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.

Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm.

- **National Debt Line**

Tel: 0808 808 4000

www.nationaldebtline.org

Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.

- **NHS Choices – Your health, your choices**
www.nhs.uk
 Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.
- **No Panic**
 Helpline: 0844 9674848
 Youth Helpline: 01753 840 393 (13-20 year olds)
www.nopanic.org.uk
 Support for sufferers of panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, general anxiety disorder and tranquilliser withdrawal.
- **Relate**
 Tel: 0300 100 1234
www.relate.org.uk
 Help with marital or relationship problems.
- **Rethink**
 Advice Line: 0300 500 0927
www.rethink.org
 Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.
- **Samaritans**
 Tel: 116 123
www.samaritans.org
 Email: jo@samaritans.org
 Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA
 Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

Useful books

- **Anxiety and depression: a practical guide to recovery**
Robert Priest Ebury Press 1996
Robert Priest has written this book especially to provide help for those feeling anxious and depressed. In particular, he covers the practical self-help methods to reduce stress and offers an explanation of the causes and effects of anxiety and depression.
- **Essential help for your nerves: recover from nervous fatigue and overcome stress and fear**
Clare Weekes HarperCollins 2000
Two-books-in-one edition which includes 'Peace from nervous suffering' and 'More help for your nerves.'
- **Manage Your Stress for a Happier Life**
Terry Looker, Olga Gregson McGraw-Hill 2011
Self-help step-by-step guide to dealing with stress, leading to a healthier, more relaxed and enjoyable way of life.
- **Overcoming Anxiety: Reassuring Ways to Break Free from Stress and Worry and Lead a Calmer Life**
Gill Hasson Capstone 2015
Explains how to manage anxiety and stop it from taking over; it teaches you the skills you need to lead a more peaceful, stress-free life.
- **Self help for your nerves: learn to relax and enjoy life again by overcoming stress and fear**
Clare Weekes HarperCollins 1995
Guide for everything you need to know to keep relaxed through every day life. Offers comprehensive insight and advice into coping with nervous stress.
- **Stress management: a comprehensive guide to your wellness**
Edward A. Charlesworth Souvenir 1997
This guide helps you identify the specific areas of stress in your life - familial, work-related, social, emotional - and offers proven techniques for dealing with every one of them.

- **The Happiness Trap**
Russ Harris Robinson 2008
Offers techniques using mindfulness skills to enable you to experience a full and happy life and to overcome depression and anxiety.
- **The Happiness Trap pocketbook: illustrated guide on how to stop struggling and start living**
Russ Harris Robinson 2014
Dr Harris joins forces with acclaimed illustrator and self-help author, Bev Aislett, to produce this illustrated, engaging and genuinely helpful guide to breaking free of 'the happiness trap' and finding a true sense of wellbeing.
- **The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook**
Martha Davis, Matthew McKay, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman
New Harbinger 2008
Easy-to-use, step-by-step instructions for using progressive relaxation, autogenics, self-hypnosis, visualization, mindfulness, acceptance, and more.

Mindfulness downloads

- **Franticworld.com Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World** – Free meditations and mindfulness resources.
- **www.headspace.com** – A free taster of mindfulness, with an opt-in to buy further sessions
- **www.freemindfulness.org** – A collection of free to download meditations

Relaxation downloads

- **<http://wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk/audio-resources/>**
- **www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/relax.php**

References

A full list of references is available on request by emailing pic@ntw.nhs.uk

Written by Dr Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron, Consultant Clinical Psychologists, The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust

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Student Support, University of Birmingham
Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT

0121 414 5130

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/studentservices/index.aspx>