

The Stress Bucket

Everyone experiences stress throughout their lives. Some stress can help us focus and drive us to achieve, whilst too much can cause us to feel overwhelmed. If prolonged, stress can also lead to physical or mental health issues.

What is the Stress Bucket?

The Stress Bucket is a useful tool to help us understand and manage stress (Brabban & Turkington, 2002).



The stress bucket represents your capacity to handle stress, pressure, and challenges in your life. Above the bucket are rain clouds (stressors) — the aspects that are causing you stress and gradually filling up your bucket. Everyone's stress bucket and rain clouds are different.

Rain clouds can be expected and others take you by surprise, and the amount of rainfall can also vary. If the rain clouds don't go away, your bucket could exceed capacity and overflow — resulting in stress.



Examples of rain clouds that cause stress

- Ill health
- Poor sleep
- Money worries
- Workload
- Relationship issues
- Family conflict
- Housing concerns
- Future uncertainty
- News anxiety
- Exam pressure
- Life events, such as bereavement.

If you can't control the rain clouds, the only way to reduce the level in your stress bucket is to let water out. Taps at the bottom of the bucket represent your coping strategies. Once these taps are turned on, the water can return to a manageable level again.

Examples of healthy ways to open the tap and reduce stress

- Take time out
- Connect with nature
- Talk to family or friends
- Learn new technique, e.g. time management
- Use a helpful tool, e.g., journalling
- Practice mindfulness or meditation
- Be physically active
- Find a hobby.

At times, you might engage in unhealthy coping strategies which provide short-term relief from stress. These strategies may briefly reduce the water but it can flow back in again. Being aware of these unhelpful coping strategies will help you understand how to avoid them and find other ways to cope.

Examples of unhelpful coping strategies

- Avoidance, isolation, and withdrawal
- Using alcohol or drugs to numb emotions
- Over-analysing issues or over-focusing
- Over-working, over-spending.

You may have new stressors, as well as other coping strategies learned so repeating this exercise can be helpful to learn more about yourself.

Often, we underestimate how well we cope and the skills we've developed to maintain the levels in our bucket.

By using this tool to reflect on your coping strategies you may highlight an area you could address or understand further.

Complete your own stress bucket on the next page, using this page as a guide.



What's your stress bucket like? Take a moment to reflect on your stress bucket and consider the following:

What size is your stress bucket?

What level is the water in your bucket most days and what can tip it to become overwhelmed?

Are there any more healthy coping taps you can add to your bucket?

What unhelpful coping strategies do you use?



Self-care and support

If you find yourself repeatedly stressed, do reach out for support because it can take a toll on your physical and mental health. You could share how you are feeling with a trusted friend, parent, or guardian. If stress is taking its toll on your daily life, you could contact your local GP or healthcare professional for further support.

What are the signs your bucket's getting full?

How do you know when your bucket is filling up and is near to overflowing?
Examples are overleaf if you need pointers.

Physical signs:

Mental or cognitive signs:

Emotional signs:

Behavioural signs:

Remember

- Your mental health is as important as your physical health.
- Seeking help from others is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Stress management is a skill that develops with practice.
- Your stress bucket's size can change with support and self-care.

The Stress Bucket

What's filling your bucket?

Fill in the labels in the rain clouds to indicate what stressors you are experiencing, such as workload pressures, relationship issues, etc.

What taps can you open to reduce the water level?

Fill in the labels below the healthy coping

tap, to capture the ways you can reduce your stress level to make it more manageable.

What taps do you have open that could be unhelpful?

Fill in the labels that run next to the hose, to capture the unhealthy behaviours that you use copy with stress.

