



LIFESTYLE AS MEDICINE

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BY DR JEN WEST JEN.WEST@NHS.NET

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Last time we looked at stress: what it is, how it affects us, and ways in which we can begin to quantify our own levels of stress.

Stress is widespread in society. Think about the people you encountered yesterday — patients, colleagues, members of staff, your own family and friends. How many of them were living with chronic stress?

How much of what we see in general practice — and indeed what we see in our families and among our friends — is happening in a body under stress?

There isn't a straightforward answer to that question in the published research, so I'm not going to invent one. What we do know is that around **two-fifths of GP consultations have a psychosocial component**, while other studies suggest that around **one in four consultations has a mental-health component**.

But I want to turn this on its head.

From my experience, both as a human being and as a GP, I wonder whether the true influence of stress is much greater. Could **three-quarters or more of what we see in general practice have some connection with stress?** There is no research to back this up. Stress is difficult to measure.

Think about the range of presentations: from the parent bringing in a well child for an urgent appointment because they vomited two days ago, to the person developing troublesome IBS symptoms during a period of organisational restructuring at work — and everything in between.

I'm not suggesting that stress is the *cause* of all these problems. Rather, I'm suggesting that there may be a **stress component** to far more of what we see than we routinely acknowledge.

And if that is true, what does stress do to the other pillars of Living Well?

**Stress doesn't just sit
alongside the other Living
Well pillars.**

It reaches into all of them



1. Sleep — stress disrupts sleep

Stress activates the sympathetic nervous system and the HPA axis, keeping us physiologically alert. That can make it harder to fall asleep, cause night waking and reduce restorative sleep.

Then the relationship becomes circular:

Stress → poor sleep → poorer emotional regulation and resilience → greater susceptibility to stress.

2. Exercise — stress can make us want to move less

The acute stress response actually prepares us for physical activity: heart rate rises, blood glucose becomes more available, and muscles are primed for action.

Chronic stress is different. Persistent stress can leave people **fatigued, poorly rested and lacking motivation**, so exercise becomes another thing on an already overwhelming list.

Yet physical activity can itself help regulate the stress response.

So again:

Stress → less movement → reduced resilience → more stress.

And conversely:

Movement → improved mood, sleep and physiological regulation → greater resilience.

3. Food and nutrition — stress changes both appetite and behaviour

Stress can affect appetite in either direction. For some people it suppresses appetite; for others, particularly during prolonged stress, it increases cravings for highly palatable foods.

But there's also a behavioural effect. When we're stressed, we're more likely to be tired, time-poor and focused on immediate solutions, making shopping, cooking and thoughtful food choices more difficult.

And chronic stress can affect glucose regulation and other metabolic processes.

So it's not simply: *"I'm stressed, therefore I eat badly."*

Stress affects our bodies → different decisions about food → fewer healthy choices → increased stress

4. Social connection — stress can make us withdraw

When people are overwhelmed, they often reduce social contact. It can feel like another demand when what they really want is to retreat.

But social connection is itself protective. Feeling safe, supported and connected can reduce the impact of stress.

This can create a particularly unpleasant cycle:

Stress → withdrawal → isolation → less emotional support → more stress.

And social connection doesn't necessarily mean a busy social life. Sometimes one trusted person is enough.

5. Purpose — stress narrows our world

This may be the most interesting relationship.

When we're under sustained stress, our attention tends to become focused on **the immediate problem**: getting through today, dealing with the next crisis, answering the next email.

It becomes harder to think about the bigger picture — *What matters to me? What am I looking forward to? What gives my life meaning?*

In other words:

Stress can make our world smaller. Purpose makes it bigger.

And having something that matters to us can itself provide resilience when life becomes difficult.

6. Risky substances — stress can change the way we use them

Alcohol, nicotine and other drugs can become ways of trying to regulate difficult feelings or switch off. The problem is that what provides short-term relief can contribute to longer-term problems — including poorer sleep, mood changes, dependence and, potentially, more stress.

How it's done

So, you've read the newsletter. It rings true, and you want to try offering a '**stress intervention**'. What might that look like in practice?

1. **Introduce the concept of chronic stress — prolonged or repeated activation of the body's stress response, often accompanied by psychological and physical symptoms**
2. **Acknowledge that tackling the stress itself may feel overwhelming.** Yet stress can affect every area of life, so it may be easier to start somewhere else. Also consider whether alcohol, nicotine or other substances have become part of the way the person is coping with stress. These may provide short-term relief but can contribute to the cycle in the longer term.
3. **Consider the Living Well pillars.**
 - Sleep
 - Movement / exercise
 - Nutrition
 - Social connection
 - Purpose
 - Risky substances
4. **There is no prescribed order, but choosing one can be useful place to start:** for sleep, think about daylight, daytime movement and a consistent bedtime routine. For movement, don't aim for a marathon: build activity into the day with a 10-minute walk, some stretching or whatever feels achievable. The **We Are Undefeatable** website has some great ideas for people living with health conditions.
5. **Build in accountability.** This might be a friend or family member, or a planned telephone call, message or follow-up appointment.
6. **Be kind.** To yourself and to your client. Getting out of a 'stress hole' can be hard. But small changes really can make a difference.

And Finally

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that the Living Well pillars are not seven separate boxes to tick. They are interconnected, and stress can affect all of them — sometimes without us even recognising it.

When life feels overwhelming, we don't have to tackle everything at once. We can start with whatever feels most achievable: better sleep, a walk, a nourishing meal, time with someone we trust, something that gives us purpose, or looking at how we use alcohol, nicotine or other substances to cope.

Strengthening one pillar can make the others a little easier.

We don't always have to tackle stress head-on. Sometimes, taking care of one part of our wellbeing can help us cope with the rest.

Jen

26 Lifestyle Messages for Healthcare Workers – 2026

1. **Lifestyle medicine is core medicine** – everyday habits drive most chronic disease risk and recovery.
2. **Small changes matter** – modest, consistent improvements often outperform radical short-term interventions.
3. **Health is more than biomarkers** – patient wellbeing, function, and quality of life matter just as much as numbers.
4. **Food is foundational** – whole, minimally processed foods support metabolic health, inflammation reduction, and energy.
5. **Ultra-processed foods increase disease risk** – reducing them is a key preventive strategy.
6. **Movement is medicine** – regular physical activity improves insulin sensitivity, mental health, and longevity.
7. **Sitting less is as important as exercising more** – encourage frequent movement breaks during the day.
8. **Strength training is essential** – maintaining muscle supports glucose control, independence, and healthy ageing.
9. **Sleep is a clinical priority** – poor sleep worsens metabolic health, mood, and decision-making.
10. **Why we all need a bucket list**
11. **Morning Stiffness.** What is normal and what needs investigation?
12. **What is stress?**
13. **How does stress affect the other pillars of lifestyle medicine?**

Disclaimer: The information provided in this newsletter is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as medical advice. Always consult with a qualified healthcare provider before making any changes to your diet, exercise routine, or health care regimen. The content shared here is based on current research and best practices in lifestyle medicine, but individual needs and conditions may vary. The author is not responsible for any adverse effects or consequences resulting from the use of any suggestions, preparations, or procedures discussed in this newsletter. Jen West