

ECZEMA'S PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT: the role of self-help strategies

PART 2: Managing stress

In the second of two articles on self-help psychological strategies (see the December 2017 issue of *Exchange* for Part 1 on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), **Dr Helen Mortimer**, Clinical Psychologist at Solihull Hospital, explains how relaxation and mindfulness exercises can help to relieve stress associated with eczema and how techniques such as habit reversal can help to break the itch-scratch cycle. Please note that all of these self-help strategies are intended to be used alongside – not instead of – topical and other prescribed eczema treatments.

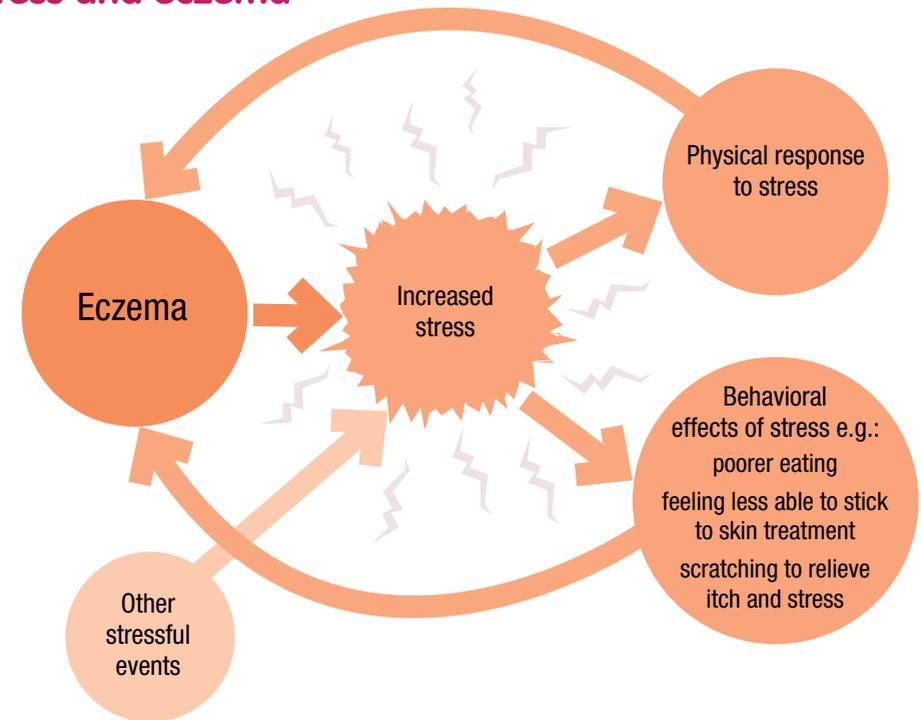
What are the effects of stress?

Generally speaking, when people are feeling stressed it's because they feel like they can't cope with or manage the demands that are placed upon them – either long term or short term. For example, this could be due to the pressure of exams, moving house, money worries, work problems, relationship difficulties or ill health. And, of course, having a skin condition such as eczema, living with a person with eczema or caring for a child with eczema can all be stressful too.

Stress itself is normal and isn't a cause for concern. Everybody experiences it – in fact, most (if not all) of us need a certain amount of stress in our lives to get going and do things. But if we experience too much stress, or too often, or for too long, problems can arise.

Stress affects the body and the mind. Feeling stressed triggers the brain to release hormones and chemicals into the bloodstream. These can affect all parts of the body. Typical signs of stress are physical symptoms such as skin inflammation, upset stomach, headache, tense muscles, loss of libido and feeling nauseous or tired. More serious symptoms can include cardiovascular and respiratory problems or a compromised immune system. Stress also affects mood – for example, feeling down, lethargic, irritated or angry, as well as anxious. People who are stressed might find it difficult to switch off and relax, and they might also experience changes to their sleep pattern and appetite.

Stress and eczema



Why does eczema itch? Unfortunately, we do not know the whole answer to this question. What we do know is that skin affected by eczema releases certain chemical mediators (messengers that stimulate the nerves). There are many chemical mediators that are released into the skin and that can make us itch. These nerves then pass on the sensation of itch to the brain and – before you know it – you are scratching. This is called a **neurogenic itch**, due to nerve pathways being activated.

There is, however, another type of itch, called a **psychogenic itch**. This means that the itch is also stimulated by psychological factors. These may be conscious or unconscious urges to scratch, brought about by habit or in response to stress.

Many people report that stress makes their eczema worse and increases the itch, and there may be both physical and psychological reasons for this. Scratching temporarily relieves feelings of itchiness and can be pleasurable. Some people also find that scratching can help to relieve feelings of stress. Unfortunately, scratching inevitably leads to further itchiness and skin damage, which causes more stress, distress, anger and frustration.

When stress becomes overwhelming, it can affect a person's capacity to deal with their eczema. They might feel that they're unable to cope with the discomfort and may lose the motivation or energy to continue with their treatments or whatever they need to do to make things better for themselves. Stress isn't the only emotion that can influence these factors. Feeling low, tired, irritable or angry can have similar consequences.

What can you do to relieve stress?

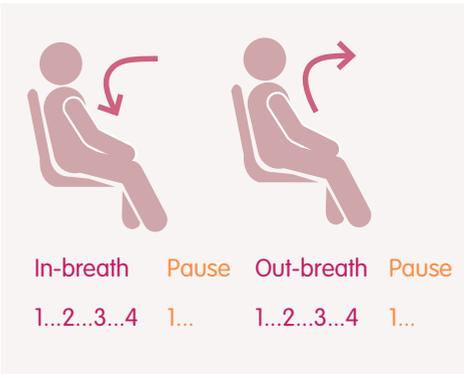
Even if you can't change the situational factors that contribute to stress, there are many ways you can manage it.

- **Talk to someone and share your concerns about feeling stressed.** This could be your partner, a trusted friend or relative, a colleague at work, or your GP, nurse or psychological counsellor.
- **Make some lifestyle changes.** Exercise, a healthy diet, and a balance of work, rest and play can all play a part. Often, just finding a way to create balance in your life is effective – although you can't eradicate stress from your life, it may be possible to reduce the amount of stress and adjust the balance between stress and relaxation or pleasure.
- **Try to find new perspectives and solutions to difficult problems.** When we're in a very stressful or difficult situation, it can be hard to see how things could be different, but that doesn't mean that it can't be. By using some techniques from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, for example (see the December 2017 *Exchange* article) – either alone, or with the help of a professional – it is possible to find different ways of viewing things in order to relieve stress.
- **Make a list of things that you know work for you, personally.** Try to make time for and prioritise these replenishing activities (like walking in the countryside, coffee with friends, visiting an art gallery, drawing, watching a favourite movie, having a massage, or gardening).
- **Try some relaxation exercises.** There are many to choose from, but I will describe below a few exercises that I find particularly useful and like to share with people.

Relaxation exercises

RELAXED BREATHING

When we feel anxious or stressed our body releases chemicals such as adrenaline. This results in a range of different physical responses, including shallow, quicker breathing. **Relaxed breathing** (also known as abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing) lets the body know that it is safe to relax. Relaxed breathing is slower and deeper than normal breathing, and takes place in the lower abdominal area rather than in the chest. Try to practise relaxed breathing for around 5–10 minutes regularly throughout the day.

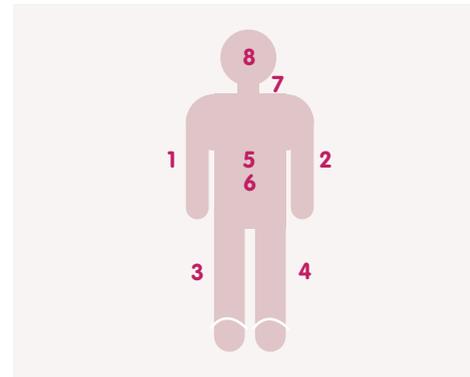


- Sit or lie comfortably. You can close your eyes if you wish.
- Try to breathe in through your nose rather than through your mouth.
- Breathe in to a count of four, pause for a moment, then breathe out to a count of four, keeping your inhalation and exhalation smooth and steady.
- Check that you are breathing deeply from the belly by putting one hand on your stomach and the other hand on your chest. With relaxed breathing, your top hand remains still and your breath only moves your bottom hand.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCULAR RELAXATION

Stress can also result in increased muscle tension. Purposefully forcing the muscles to relax therefore also triggers the body and mind to relax. In **progressive muscular relaxation**, each muscle group is tensed in turn and then released.

- Lie flat on your back on a firm mattress, sofa or on the floor, using a pillow or cushion to support your head and neck. Alternatively, sit on a comfortable chair, with your head and neck supported. Close your eyes if you wish.
- Turn your attention to different parts of your body, as follows:
Tense each area, hold for a few moments, then release.
Lightly tense and release.
Release only (focus on each muscle group and decide to relax it).
- Repeat the sequence three times.



- 1 **Right hand and arm** (clench your fist and tense your arm muscles)
- 2 **Left hand and arm** (as above)
- 3 **Right leg** (tense your leg, lifting the knee slightly)
- 4 **Left leg** (as above)
- 5 **Abdomen and chest** (tense all the muscles in turn)
- 6 **Back** (pull your shoulders back slightly)
- 7 **Neck** (push your head back slightly into the pillow)
- 8 **Face** (scrunch up your facial muscles)

HELPING YOUR CHILD TO MANAGE STRESS

If your child is stressed, it's important to encourage or facilitate a conversation about how they are feeling. How this works in practice will depend on the age of the child, but try to find non-threatening ways in. For example, a direct question such as **'Are you stressed?'** might not work for a teenager, but saying **'Oh, I do wonder about how such and such is affecting you'** might make it easier for them to open up and talk about it, and eczema might be that way in. Noticing how your child might be feeling and giving them the words can help them identify potential ways of feeling so that they can confirm, deny or elaborate. Try to convey interest and openness, but avoid judgement or being told off. Asking questions, making comments and observations to fuel the conversation, and validating feelings and concerns (even if you don't always agree) are useful strategies – for example: **'Yeah, I get it. I understand why you feel like that. It is hard/horrible, etc.'** You can help your child think about ways to problem-solve a particular difficulty, and if necessary you can help them find somebody who can assist them with that.

Finally, there is the broader system of stress. Having a child with eczema can be stressful for parents too! If you can find ways to manage your own stress, you can avoid passing it on to your child; you can even teach them some of those stress-busting strategies you have learned. **Remember, you've got to care for yourself in order to care for another.**

Mindfulness exercises

Mindfulness is based on the idea that we are present in the here and now in a non-judgemental way. By developing our skills in mindfulness, we can learn to become better able to respond to stress.

TAKE 10 BREATHS

Mindful breathing is different to the relaxed breathing exercise described above in that it does not require you to change your breath but rather to notice your breath and focus your attention on it. The idea is for your mind to focus on the intricacies of the breath and to really explore it so you are forcing your mind to notice what is happening in the here and now. Whenever troubling thoughts come into your mind – which inevitably will happen – just notice them, acknowledge that they're there and then let them go and bring your mind back to the breath.

- Take 10 slow deep breaths in and out.
- Notice the sensation as your lungs fill with air and then empty, how your chest and stomach rise and fall, and the way your shoulders move.
- Let your thoughts come and go, like cars driving past your house.
- Expand your awareness to your breathing and your body. Notice the things that are making contact with you. Look around and notice the sights, sounds and smells.

DROP THE ANCHOR

This mindfulness technique uses your physical environment to focus awareness on yourself and your body in the moment – for example, if you are sitting on a chair, focus your mind on where your feet are touching the floor, where your arms are touching the armrests, where your bottom is on the seat, etc. It's the same principle that is used in mindful breathing – if your mind is focused on the here and now and your physicality, it's not getting caught up in stressful thoughts.

- In a standing position, push your feet down onto the floor and feel it supporting you.
- Notice how the muscles in your legs tense as you push down with your feet.
- Notice how your whole body feels, from top to toe.
- Finally, look at your surroundings and notice what you can see and feel.

NOTICE FIVE THINGS

In this mindfulness exercise, you focus your attention on the environment. Looking around you, notice and very closely observe five things, including ones that perhaps you'd never noticed before.

- Pause.
- Look around and notice five things you can see.
- Listen and notice five things you can hear.
- Notice five things you can feel touching your body.

Techniques, including habit reversal to help prevent or reduce scratching

As previously mentioned, scratching may occur subconsciously, so the first step is to become more aware of itching and scratching and when this is happening. You could use a tally chart or some sort of counting device to record how often you find yourself or your child scratching or reporting scratching. Having another person tell you that you are scratching may or may not be helpful for you (many people find it downright annoying!). Alternatively, a little nod or a signal of some kind might work, especially with children. The important thing is to make sure the individual doesn't feel like they're being told off.

Next, see if you can identify a pattern to the itching and scratching. For example, is there any particular place, time of day, situation or activity that influences it? Does it happen more when you are with certain people? Is it more likely to occur if you are stressed, or angry, or bored, or inactive? Do you scratch less when other people are around?

Habit-reversal therapy aims to encourage people to become more aware of when they're scratching and to replace the scratching behaviour with something incompatible with scratching – for example, you could try pinching your skin, squeezing your fists or doing something else that means you cannot scratch simultaneously.

If you've noticed things to do with your daily routine or the environment that act as triggers, can you make any changes there? For example, if you notice that you itch and scratch a lot more when you get home and change out of your work clothes, can you do something differently, like make a cup of tea before you go and get changed or do a couple of chores beforehand, just to alter the routine? If you think that anxiety and stress might be a factor, can you do something about that – either using the strategies outlined above or ones you have discovered from your own further reading and research?

Try to be kind to yourself and practise some sort of reassuring self-talk – for example, ***'It's okay if you want to scratch. That's okay, it's normal, it's understandable... But try not to... You can cope with it.'*** Try to avoid being self-critical – an approach that says ***'You can't scratch! What are you doing, you idiot? This is going to make it worse!'*** is actually likely to create more stress, tension, frustration and anger.

Feeling motivated can help, too – for example, you may want to have particularly good skin for a special event or occasion that's coming up. Make sure you acknowledge and praise progress – for yourself as well as others!

I hope that you have found this introduction to managing the psychological aspects of eczema useful. The information here is necessarily general and is an overview of the approaches and techniques available. I have included below suggestions for further self-help. If you feel like you need professional help, please do discuss this with your GP.

Getting further help

To find a therapist

NHS self-referral or referral through GP Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT): www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Psychological%20therapies%20%28IAPT%29/LocationSearch/10008

British Psychological Society (BPS): www1.bps.org.uk

British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP): www.babcp.com

British Association of Dermatologists (BAD)'s page on emotional support for skin conditions: www.skincareaction.org.uk

Apps

Self-help for Anxiety Management (SAM): <http://sam-app.org.uk>

Headspace: www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

Recommended reading

Overcoming Stress: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques (2009), by Lee Brogan & Gillian Todd. London: Little, Brown

Breathing: The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook (2008), by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robins Eshleman & Matthew McKay. Oakland: New Harbinger

The Mindful Way Workbook (2014), by John Teasdale, Mark Williams & Zindel Segal. New York: The Guildford Press

This article is based on a longer talk given by Dr Helen Mortimer at the National Eczema Society's public information event at Kidlington during National Eczema Week 2017.