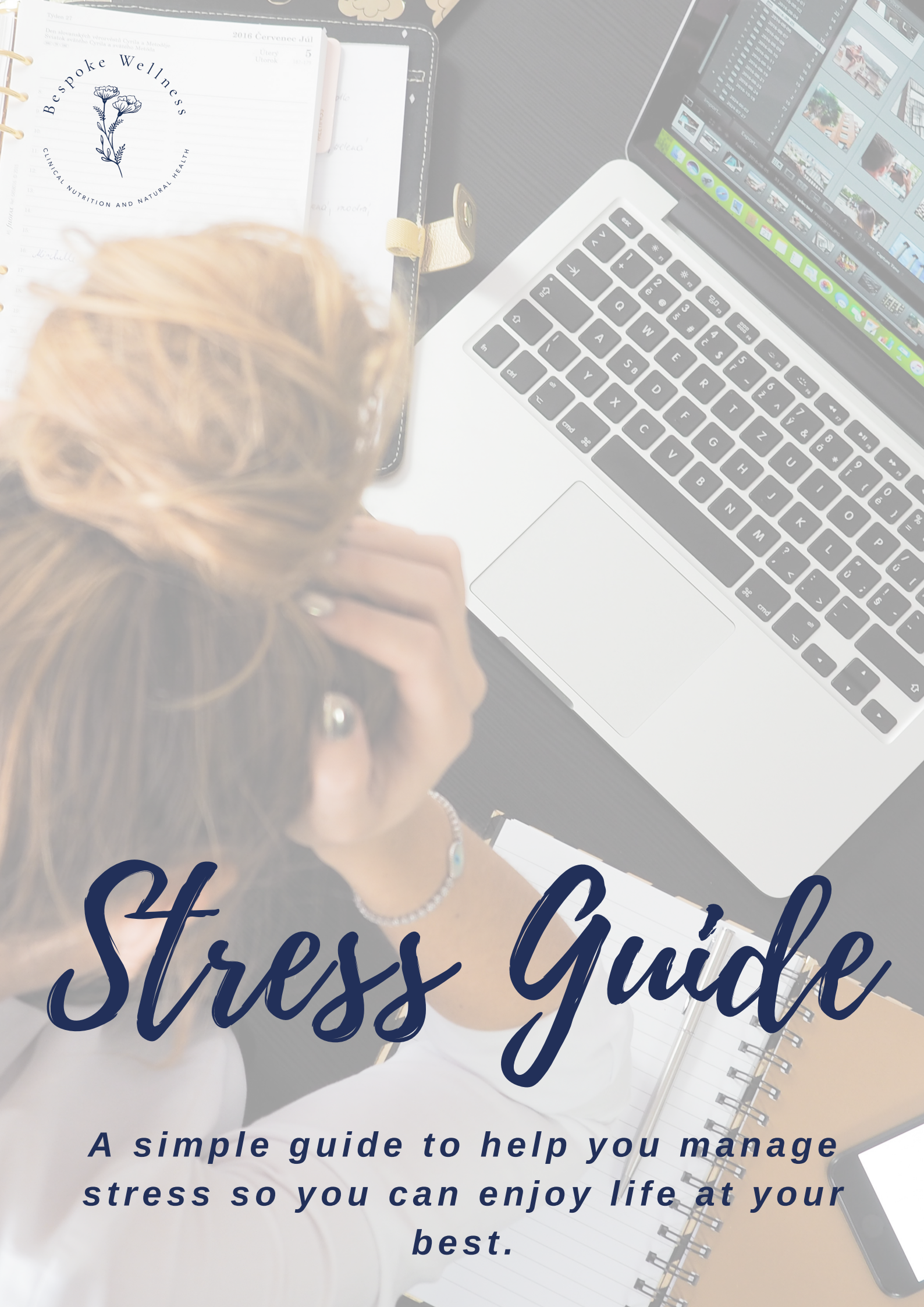

Stress Guide

A simple guide to help you manage stress so you can enjoy life at your best.

What drives Stress?

Stress acts to motivate and sharpen your focus in situations where immediate action is required. The greater the intensity or urgency of the situation, the greater your stress response will be. For example, if you are faced with danger, your body switches on your acute stress response (also called the ‘flight or fight’ response) to give you a burst of energy and to help you deal with the danger by either running away or fighting back. However, in the modern world, with emotional triggers seemingly around every corner, many people are faced with ongoing stressors, such as work deadlines, being stuck in traffic, endless emails and negative news stories.

In response to stress, your body releases the hormone cortisol – a chemical that allows you to stay in an active, attentive state for long periods of time in order to handle the stress at hand. Chronic stress strongly affects every system in your body, with ongoing or poorly managed stress increasing the risk of experiencing potential health consequences.

Stress may affect:

- Mental wellbeing and mood Sleeping patterns (e.g. your ability to fall asleep and stay asleep)
- Energy levels
- Digestive function
- Cardiovascular function, such as your heart rate and blood pressure
- Reproductive hormones

Stress can manifest in many ways and is different for each individual. You may identify with one or a combination of these different presentations. Nervous tension and anxiety: Frequent and persistent tension and anxiety may manifest as excessive fear and worry, restlessness, tightening of the chest, racing heartbeat, and in extreme cases, panic attacks.This negatively impacts quality of life and normal day-to-day functioning.

What does stress feel like for you?

Wired and tired: When stress is ongoing, your brain may perceive this as an ongoing threat, mounting a stress response to keep you alert or 'wired'. This can reduce your ability to relax and wind-down, resulting in feeling not only wired but tired too – a sensation of being unable to switch-off in spite of being exhausted.

Exhausted and flat: In some individuals, exposure to ongoing stress may physically change the way their brain is able to respond. In these circumstances, the person is left feeling both physically and mentally exhausted, affecting performance at work and in everyday life.

Low mood and lethargic: Ongoing stress can lead to structural changes to brain tissues, changing the way the brain functions. Ongoing stress can also impact their resilience. This can affect the activity of brain chemicals leading to feelings of poor mood and may manifest as feelings of overwhelm, vulnerability, and lead to teary, weepy moments.

Insomnia: Stress can negatively impact sleep quality and quantity. This may manifest as an inability to unwind and fall asleep due to ruminating thoughts about your day, frequent waking, and/or feeling unrefreshed upon waking.

Symptoms of stress include:

Inflammation: Inflammation can be an invisible, but very active process, impacting your brain and nervous system. Left unmanaged, inflammation and the molecules it produces can become chronic and cause changes in mood and behaviour, by negatively influencing nervous system function and brain health.

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Symptoms of stress

Oxidative stress: Oxidative stress can cause damage to cells – leading to fatigue and poor concentration. Brain cells and membranes are rich in fat, which is particularly susceptible to stress and damage.

Gut disturbances: An imbalance of good and bad bacteria in the gut, otherwise known as dysbiosis, can contribute to both inflammation and oxidative stress. In addition, gastrointestinal disturbances, such as food intolerances, may be linked to mood disorders.

Sex hormone and thyroid imbalance: Thyroid and sex hormones help to create balance in your body. If either, or both, are out of balance – this will impact your ability to handle stress.

Weight management: Weight management and being worried about your weight can lock you in a vicious cycle, with an unbalanced mood often leading to poor eating and exercise habits.

Poor sleep: Many people suffer from sleep disturbances, finding it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep. Without restorative sleep, your body is unable to recover each night from the previous day and you won't be functioning at your best.

Healthy eating to support stress

What you consume is what fuels your body!

By ensuring you are receiving the core nutritional foundation that provides healthy brain and nervous system structures, as well as brain chemistry, this can ensure you're getting all the nutrients you require to help you resist and healthily manage stress. An optimal diet can also reduce inflammation and oxidative stress – giving you the best chance at supporting optimal mental wellbeing. If stress is impacting your state of wellbeing, it is essential to work on following a supportive diet to ensure you are minimizing any foods that exacerbate symptoms of stress, and are engaging in regular movement and relaxation to help balance your response to stress.

Certain foods are of particular benefit for healthy mood, therefore I would recommend you eat more foods that are high in:

- Protein, Essential Fatty Acids, Magnesium and B Vitamins.

These are foods such as;

- Avocado, Bananas, Beef, Berries, Brazil Nuts, Cheddar Cheese, Chia Seeds, Chicken and Turkey, Citrus Fruits, Dark Chocolate (>70% Cacao), Eggs, Fish, Flax Seeds, Leafy Greens, Lentils, Beans, Nutritional Yeast, Nuts and Seeds, Pork, Prunes, Quinoa, Red Meat, Salmon, Sardines, Seafood, Shellfish, Sweet Potatoes, Tofu, Walnuts and Whole Grains.

Foods to limit to improve symptoms of stress:

- Caffeine, alcohol, Refined carbohydrates, such as sugar, white bread, rice and pasta. Unhealthy fats, such as deep-fried foods or margarine, Allergenic foods (foods that trigger an allergic response).