

When life gets more demanding, ADHD can feel harder to manage. That is not you slipping. Stress and ADHD pull on the same part of your brain.

This resource looks at why stress and ADHD affect the same thinking and feeling systems, why medication helps with some of it but not all of it, and small things that can take the pressure off.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Stress and ADHD share the same wiring

Behind your forehead sits a kind of control centre. It helps you hold things in mind, switch between tasks, pause before acting, and steady strong feelings. In ADHD, this system already works in a more variable way, sharp some days, patchy on others.

Stress pulls on that exact same system. When pressure builds, the control centre gets less of your brain's resources, so the very things ADHD already makes changeable, focus, organisation, managing emotions, become harder still.

This is why a stretch of pressure, a new job, a move, broken sleep, a busy season, can make ADHD feel like it has suddenly got worse. Nothing is broken. The load has gone up.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Ongoing stress is associated with reduced activity in the same front-of-brain regions involved in attention and self-regulation (Girotti et al., 2024; Arnsten, 2015). In adults, higher perceived stress and ADHD traits tend to rise together (Combs et al., 2015).

If you take medication, you may notice it helps with attention and holding things in mind, and research supports that (Isfandnia et al., 2024). What medication is not designed to do is lower how much stress is landing on you, or build the skills and supports around a full life. That part responds to different things.

WHEN IT FEELS LIKE THE MEDICATION STOPPED WORKING

A common experience is feeling a steady dose has stopped helping during a stressful patch. Often the medication has not changed, the stress load has. Naming that can be a relief, and it points to what will actually help.

WHAT YOU CAN TRY

Small ways to take the load off

You cannot always remove the stress, but you can lower how much it stacks onto the system ADHD already stretches. Start by noticing where the pressure is coming from.

Ask yourself:

- 1 What changed?** What has ramped up since things felt more manageable?
- 2 Where does it pile up?** Which part of the day feels like everything lands at once?
- 3 What gave way?** Has sleep, movement, or downtime quietly disappeared?

THE GOAL

Not to do more. To take pressure off a system that is already carrying a lot, so there is **more room to think and feel clearly**.

Other things that may help:

- Protect sleep.** Sleep loss and stress drain the same control system, so a steadier sleep routine gives it more to work with.
- Move regularly.** Physical activity is associated with lower stress and steadier attention across the day.
- Shrink the task, not yourself.** Lists, alarms, one thing at a time. This is working with your brain, not covering for a flaw.
- Build in recovery.** Short, real breaks between demands let the control centre reset instead of running flat out.
- Consider skills-based support.** Cognitive behavioural therapy is associated with reduced ADHD symptoms in adults, and it works on the organisation, planning, and emotion skills medication does not (Young et al., 2020).

N Notice

A harder patch is often about rising stress, not a personal failing. Naming the load is the first step to lifting it.

L Lighten

Take pressure off the system ADHD stretches: protect sleep and movement, build in recovery, and let lists and alarms carry the load.

S Support

Medication can help part of the picture. Skills, environment, and support address the rest. You do not have to hold it all alone.

If you need support now

LIFELINE

13 11 14

24/7 crisis support

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, please contact Lifeline (13 11 14) or attend your nearest emergency department.

BEYOND BLUE

1300 22 4636

24/7 mental health support

MINDSPOT

1800 61 44 34

Free assessment and treatment

This resource is for general information only. It does not constitute clinical advice and is not a substitute for consultation with a registered health professional. Please speak with your GP or a registered psychologist about what is right for your situation.

References: Arnsten, A. F. T. (2015). Stress weakens prefrontal networks. *Nature Neuroscience*, 18(10), 1376–1385. · Combs, M. A., et al. (2015). Perceived stress and ADHD symptoms in adults. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 19(5), 425–434. · Girotti, M., et al. (2024). Effects of chronic stress on cognitive function. *Neurobiology of Stress*. · Isfandnia, F., El Masri, S., Radua, J., & Rubia, K. (2024). The effects of chronic administration of stimulant and non-stimulant medications on executive functions in ADHD. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 162, 105703. · Young, Z., Moghaddam, N., & Tickle, A. (2020). The efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy for adults with ADHD. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 24(6), 875–888.