



AbilityNet Factsheet – May 2019

## **How computers can help reduce stress**

Work and study pressures, together with the 'always on' culture, can be significant causes of stress. If not managed, stress can lead to long-term sickness, anxiety and depression.

There are many ways you can use your computer, tablet and/or smartphone to become better organised, more productive – and hopefully therefore less stressed. Small changes to how your computer is set up, and to the software you use, can make significant differences.

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## 1 What is stress?

Although there is no clear medical definition of stress, we have all experienced feeling stressed at some time – for example, when situations or events place us under significant pressure, or at times when we feel we don't have much control over events. It can affect us both emotionally and physically.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) describe stress as “the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them.”

Being under some pressure is a normal part of life. However, if you start to feel overwhelmed by stress it can make existing problems worse and, potentially, lead to a mental health problem like anxiety or depression.

## 2 Why is it important to reduce stress?

People who are feeling stressed are unable to operate very effectively. Employees' work and students' studies will suffer if they are feeling tired and anxious; their concentration, focus and decision-making abilities are also likely to be adversely affected by stress.

Statistics from the Labour Force Survey show that work-related stress, anxiety or depression account for a large proportion of work-related illnesses. Around 15.4 million working days were lost due to stress, anxiety or depression in 2017/18, with an average of 25.8 days per case.

## 3 What causes stress?

According to the HSE, the six key risk factors for work related stress are:

- the demands of your job
- your control over your work
- the support you receive from managers and colleagues
- your relationships at work
- your role in the organisation
- change and how it's managed.

Technology can help or hinder all of the above and, while problems with technology can be very frustrating at the best of times, they can be particularly difficult when you're feeling under pressure. Disabled people may experience these kinds of stressors even more acutely if they compound any additional challenges accompanying a condition.

## 4 How can computers help reduce stress?

Setting up and working with technology appropriately can help to substantially increase your organisation and control. Even small adjustments to how you work with your computer can make a significant difference to your efficiency and effectiveness, by boosting your:

- time management
- productivity
- work organisation and planning.

### My Computer My Way

It is essential that your device is set up suit you and the way that you work, especially if your capability may be affected by an impairment. *My Computer My Way* is a free tool developed by AbilityNet that shows you how to set up all the accessibility features built into your PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone, and all the major operating systems. You can use it for free at [/mcmw.abilitynet.org.uk/](http://mcmw.abilitynet.org.uk/)

## 5 How can you get better organised?

Improved work planning and organisation can help you to manage external demands and work pressures more successfully. One of the most effective ways of improving your time management and work organisation is to use personal information management software to:

- send, receive and manage emails
- create 'to do' lists and prioritise tasks
- keep a calendar, plan events and schedule projects
- store contact details.

### Email management

Combining your email, calendar and to-do lists in one place can be a great help with organisation. There are many providers, and most are available online, which means you can access the services from anywhere you have an internet connection. Most providers (such as Apple, Microsoft and Google) will also have an app or software that will run on your computer, tablet or smart phone.

When you do things like book tickets or make appointments, you'll often receive an email with a link that will add information to your calendar. You can then set email or text reminders for these calendar events so you don't need to worry about forgetting things.

## Health management apps and services

There are a host of apps and devices available to help you monitor and manage your health and wellbeing more effectively. These can help you to:

- measure your activity levels
- monitor your sleep patterns
- record what you eat and how many calories etc. you consume
- check your heart rate and blood pressure
- relax and try to relieve stress.

Taking advantage of these new technologies is about trial and error, as what works for one person is unlikely to work for all. As such we recommend you identify the key stressors you would like to work on and then experiment with the technologies recommended by sources you trust.

It's also important to realise that technology is only a small part of the equation in reducing stress, and that understanding the impact of other factor such as diet, exercise and sleep may also need to be considered. As such using technology to keep a record of what you eat, your rest patterns, and/or when you might feel fatigued or stressed may lead you to making changes unrelated to your life on-screen.

## 6 What other tools can help boost your productivity?

Speech recognition and mind-mapping software can also help employees and students to work more efficiently and become more productive.

### Speech recognition software

Speech recognition (also known as 'voice recognition' or dictation) software automatically translates spoken words into written text; this is typically much faster and more accurately than you can type. People with dyslexia (who may find writing particularly difficult or stressful) and for anyone suffering from a repetitive strain injury or with a physical disability.

*Dragon* speech-to-text software is widely considered to be the leading software for accuracy in dictation. Dragon software is also referred to as Dragon Dictate, Dragon Professional Individual or Dragon Naturally Speaking, these are version names. Dragon software will also enable you to control other elements of your computer, such as opening and interacting with programs or navigating the internet.

Windows-based PCs and Apple computers have free, built-in speech recognition software that can offer around 96% accuracy. *My Computer My Way* provides details of how to activate and use these features; [mcmw.abilitynet.org.uk/](http://mcmw.abilitynet.org.uk/)

## Mind-mapping software

Mind maps are a type of 'spider diagram' used to visually organise information. A mind map is often created around a single concept, drawn as an image in the centre of a blank page, with associated ideas branching out.

Mind mapping can serve a variety of purposes but is especially useful for brainstorming, note taking, planning, organising and revising. Utilising a simple, visual approach, mind maps can help users to structure reports and presentations, and to break complex projects down into far more manageable sections and tasks. Mind mapping can also be very helpful for people with dyslexia who often find information in a non-linear format much easier to process.

Mind maps can either be drawn by hand or by using specialist software. Software allows you to easily link ideas and concepts, and to use visual symbols as a memory aid. It is compatible with *Dragon* and enables you to export completed mind maps as PDF files or to *Word* or *PowerPoint*, so you won't need to re-do any work you've done. *XMind*, *MindView*, *Inspiration* and *MindJet MindManager* are commercial versions of mind mapping software.

## Note-taking software

Trying to take notes while listening closely to information being presented at meetings, presentations, lectures and seminars can be stressful. *Sonocent Audio Notetaker* and *NTEHub* from Conversor, capture live recordings (or imported audio) and allow you to review them in your own time. You can add short notes as you listen and then write them up when you review your recording, or record and listen and write notes up later.

Note taking software provides a 'visual workspace' for capturing and organising audio, text, slides, images and web pages. It is also a very useful tool for preparing and practising your own presentations.

*Sonocent Audio Notetaker* and *NTEHub* both have app versions of the software to enable you to record and annotate live speech on a smartphone or tablet which can be shared with the desktop or hub versions of the software.

## 7 How important is training?

The potential software 'solutions' outlined in this factsheet will be of greatest benefit if combined with some form of training in addition to allowing you allowing sufficient opportunity to develop your familiarity and confidence with the software.

A wide range of private and voluntary organisations offer computer training services. The AbilityNet factsheet on *Technical help and training resources* gives

contact details for many organisations that provide ICT training and support for disabled people.

## 8 Useful Contacts

HSE (Health and Safety Executive) - [www.hse.gov.uk/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/)  
Nuance (Dragon) - [www.nuance.com/en-gb/dragon.html](http://www.nuance.com/en-gb/dragon.html)  
Matchware (MindView) - [www.matchware.com/mind-mapping-software](http://www.matchware.com/mind-mapping-software)  
MindJet (MindManager) - [www.mindjet.com/mindmanager/](http://www.mindjet.com/mindmanager/)  
Inspiration - [www.inspiration.com/](http://www.inspiration.com/)  
XMind - [www.xmind.net/](http://www.xmind.net/)  
Sonocent (Audio Notetaker) - [sonocent.com/audio-notetaker/](http://sonocent.com/audio-notetaker/)  
Conversor (NTEHub) - [notetakingexpress.uk/](http://notetakingexpress.uk/)

## 9 How can AbilityNet help?

AbilityNet is a leading authority on accessibility and assistive technologies. We can assist individuals, charities and employers by providing:

- free advice and information
- free home visits
- workplace assessments
- consultancy services

### Free advice and home visits

Our free helpline offers trustworthy, independent one-to-one advice about technology for anyone with any disability of any age. We take calls every day from disabled people, their friends, employers, teachers, colleagues and anyone else who wants to know how technology can help people achieve their goals.

We also have a network of friendly disclosure checked ITCanHelp volunteers who can offer free computer support to older people and people with disabilities.

You may have a problem with viruses, need some help installing software or be confused about updates or error messages. Our friendly, trustworthy volunteers have relevant IT skills and can help with computer systems, laptops, tablets and smartphones.

Our volunteers can help in all sorts of ways, including:

- choosing equipment to meet your particular needs, with suggestions on computer, adaptations, software or broadband
- helping install and set up new software, arranging settings and adjusting accessibility options
- diagnosing problems, malfunctions, viruses or software updates
- helping you get more from your computer, such as online shopping, video calls to friends, playing music or games....

To find out more about our IT support at home visit [www.abilitynet.org.uk/at-home](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/at-home) or call our free helpline on 0800 269 545.

## **My Computer My Way**

*My Computer My Way* is a free, interactive tool developed by AbilityNet that makes any computer, tablet and smartphone easier to use. It can help you ensure that your equipment is set up the best way possible to suit your particular needs. It covers all the accessibility features built into your computer, laptop, tablet, Chromebook or smartphone, and all the major operating systems – Windows, MacOS, iOS, Chrome and Android.

*My Computer My Way* shows you how to adjust your computer to assist with:

- vision – help seeing your screen
- hearing – help with sounds and audio
- motor – help with your keyboard and mouse
- cognitive – help with reading, spelling and understanding

You can use it for free at [www.mycomputermyway.com](http://www.mycomputermyway.com)

## **Workplace Assessment Service**

When it comes to computing solutions, one size does not fit all. We believe that each case is unique, and that individual attention is vital. Our Workplace Assessment Service integrates personal, technical and organisational considerations to arrive at sound and realistic suggestions, documented in a report.

To find out more about AbilityNet's Workplace Assessment Service, please visit [www.abilitynet.org.uk/workplace](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/workplace) or call 01926 465 247.

## **Consultancy services**

Our expert consultants are also available to assist employers who wish to take a broad, longer-term view in designing computer systems and associated work processes. Our experience and expertise can help you to achieve safe, healthy and productive working procedures.

To find out more about AbilityNet's consultancy services, call 01962 465 247 or email [sales@abilitynet.org.uk](mailto:sales@abilitynet.org.uk)

## **DSA / Student assessments**

If you have a disability and are in higher or further education, you may qualify for a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). If you are eligible you will receive a free assessment and may qualify for a grant towards any adjustments that you might require. This could help with the costs of buying a new computer or any other specialist equipment you might need.

For information, please visit [www.abilitynet.org.uk/dsa](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/dsa) or call 01926 464 095.

## 10 About AbilityNet

AbilityNet is the national charity that supports people with any disability, of any age. Our specialist services help disabled people to use computers and the internet to improve their lives, whether at work, at home or in education.

### Support us

Visit [www.abilitynet.org.uk/donate](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/donate) to learn how you can support our work.

### Contact us

Telephone 0800 269 545

Email [enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk)

Web: [www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)

We are always keen to help share knowledge about accessibility and assistive technology. If you have any questions about how you may use the contents of this factsheet, please contact us at AbilityNet and we will do all we can to help.

## 11 Copyright information

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