Migraine Trigger Guide:

Stress

Explanation

Stress in its many forms is one of the most significant factors for those with migraine.

Stress can come from strong emotions, both negative and positive. But it can also descend into anxiety, panic attacks and even depression.

Stress can easily creep up on you. You get used to it. It can feel familiar or even normal without realizing the heavy toll it takes.

Stress can be helpful, but beyond a certain point it starts causing major damage to your health, particularly with migraine conditions.

Trigger causes

Stress triggers are highly individual. What triggers stress in one person may not in another.

Common causes for stress are often internal and external.

Internal causes:

- Chronic worry
- Pessimism
- Negative self-talk
- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- “All or nothing” attitude
- Unrealistic expectations or perfectionism

External causes of stress:

- Major life changes
- Being too busy
- Financial problems
- Relationships
- Work or school
- Health issues
How do you know if this is an issue?

Stress can manifest in many ways. Often it becomes an issue when you experience prolonged exposure to your body’s stress response. Stress can be helpful in small bursts but sustained, ongoing stress is where things can become troublesome.

If stress is allowed to build up, we can experience anxiety, even when not facing difficult situations.

Our body doesn’t distinguish between physical and psychological threats. When you’re stressed over a traffic jam or argument with a friend, your stress response is similar to the response experienced if you were facing a life-or-death situation.

What are your options?

You may feel like stress is out of your control, but you can always choose your response. Effective stress management is all about taking charge of our:

- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Schedule
- Environment
- Way of dealing with issues.

Successful stress management involves:

- changing the stressful situation when you can
- changing your reaction when you can’t
- taking care of yourself
- making time for R&R (rest and relaxation)

If in doubt, remember the 4 A’s:

1. Avoid unnecessary stress;
2. Alter the situation;
3. Adapt to the stressor; and
4. Accept the things you can’t change.

- Avoid unnecessary stress
  - Not all stress is avoidable, but understanding your limits and saying “no” at work or in your personal life is important. Taking on more than you can handle is a recipe for stress.
  - Steer clear of people or situations that trigger stress.
Control your environment. If the evening news makes you anxious, turn off the TV. If traffic makes you tense, take an alternate route or leave at a different time.

Reduce your to-do list. Distinguish between a must-do and a should-do. Drop tasks that aren’t truly necessary to the bottom or off the list entirely.

- Alter the situation
  - If you can’t avoid a stressful situation, alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the issue doesn’t reappear.
  - Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If you don’t, resentment can build and the situation will likely remain the same.
  - Compromise. If you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you’re both willing to accommodate a little, you’ll have a better chance of finding a happy middle ground.
  - Be more assertive. Don’t take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you’ve got work early tomorrow morning and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk.
  - Manage your time better. Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you’re stretched too thin and running behind, it’s hard to stay calm and focused. But if you plan ahead and make sure you don’t overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you’re under.

- Adapt to the stressor
  - If you can’t change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.
  - Reframe problems. Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.
  - Look at the big picture. Put the stressful situation into perspective. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
  - Adjust your standards. Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.”
  - Focus on the positive. When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy
can help you keep things in perspective.

- How you think can have a profound effect on your emotional and physical well-being. Each time you think a negative thought about yourself, your body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation. If you see good things about yourself, you are more likely to feel good; the reverse is also true. Eliminate words such as "always," "never," "should," and "must." These are telltale signs of self-defeating thoughts.

- Accept the things you can’t change

  - Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can’t prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it’s easier than railing against a situation you can’t change.
  
  - Don’t try to control the uncontrollable. Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control, such as the way you choose to react to problems.
  
  - Look for the upside. When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
  
  - Share your feelings. Talk to a trusted friend face-to-face or make an appointment with a therapist. The simple act of expressing what you’re going through can be therapeutic, even if there’s nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Opening up is not a sign of weakness and it won’t make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your bond.
  
  - Learn to forgive. Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

You can also better cope with the symptoms of stress by adopting a healthier lifestyle and making time for fun and relaxation.

- Adopt a healthy lifestyle

  - Exercise regularly. Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. Nothing beats aerobic exercise for releasing pent up stress and tension.
  
  - Eat a healthy diet. Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with
breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day.

- Reduce caffeine and sugar. The temporary “highs” caffeine and sugar deliver often end in with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in your diet, you’ll feel more relaxed and you’ll sleep better.

- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don’t avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind.

- Get enough sleep. Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.

**Make time for fun and relaxation**

- Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you’ll be in a better place to handle life’s stressors.

- Don’t get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

- Set aside relaxation time. Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don’t allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.

- Connect with others. Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will buffer you from the negative effects of stress.

- Do something you enjoy every day. Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or working on your hobby.

- Keep your sense of humor. This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

**Watch-outs**

There are unhealthy ways to cope with stress. These may temporarily reduce stress, but cause more damage in the long run:

- Smoking
- Drinking too much
- Overeating comfort foods such as chocolate or ice cream
- Using pills or drugs to relax
• Watching hours of TV or zoning out on the computer
• Withdrawing from family, friends and activities
• Sleeping too much
• Procrastinating
• Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
• Taking out stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence).

Healthy ways to relax and recharge:

• Go for a walk.
• Spend time in nature.
• Call a good friend.
• Sweat out tension with a good workout.
• Write in a journal.
• Take a long bath.
• Light scented candles.
• Savor a warm cup of tea (ideally decaf or herbal).
• Play with a pet.
• Work in your garden.
• Get a massage.
• Curl up with a good book.
• Listen to music.
• Watch a comedy
• Relaxation techniques – see resources section below for more.

Resources
• Visit Dawnbuse.com for free guided meditations especially for migraine patients.
• Headspace.com goes into the detail and science of meditation. You can learn for free.