Stress is the body’s natural response to a potentially dangerous or challenging situation. It gives us the ability to perform as effectively as possible when facing a challenge or danger by confronting it or running away — the ‘fight or flight’ response.

So the stress response can be a beneficial thing — we all need enough to allow us to achieve peak performance when required, and to help us be more aware, concentrated and effective.

Too much stress, however, can be harmful. This happens when the demands made on us outstrip our resources, strengths or time, or when we can’t act upon our natural stress responses. This is when we experience the negative reactions to stress, and what is generally meant when we say we are ‘stressed’.

KEY THINGS TO HELP MANAGE STRESS AND ANXIETY

- Eat and drink healthily (see card 7).
- Exercise — even three 20 minute sessions of moderate exercise per week will help keep you healthy and reduce stress and anxiety.
- Make sure you are sleeping well (see card 6).
- Build in time for relaxation and fun.
- Talk to people you trust — don’t bottle things up.
We can also create stress and anxiety by thinking and saying negative (and usually untrue) things to and about ourselves. To develop a positive, more realistic (and less stressful!) approach, think of the following:

• Notice when you are thinking and saying negative things to yourself. If you are experiencing unpleasant feelings such as anxiety or sadness, try checking out what you are thinking or saying to yourself at the time.

• Ask yourself the following questions:
  – Is there really any evidence for thinking this way?
  – Are there other ways of thinking about this situation?
  – Is my thinking faulty? (e.g. am I concentrating on my weaknesses and ignoring my strengths?)
  – How is thinking in this way affecting me?

• Replace the negative thought with a realistic positive thought — something you can believe in.

Finally: Tackling and eliminating the things in our lives that cause us unnecessary stress is a good thing, but it is important that you go about it in the right way, otherwise you will be adding to your stress burden, rather than reducing it. So remember:

• **deal with one problem at a time.**

• **take it steadily.**

• **and stick to it!**