

STRESS MANAGEMENT GUIDE

Art Based Solutions for Social Integration of Migrant Women

Lead Organisation: Welcome Home International (Belgium)

Purpose of this guide

This practical guide supports migrant and adult women in recognising stress, strengthening coping skills, practising emotional regulation and building realistic self-care routines. It is designed for individual use and for educators, trainers, NGOs and community organisations working with women in diverse adult-learning settings.

Important note

This guide provides wellbeing and self-help strategies. It is not a substitute for medical, psychological or emergency care. If stress becomes overwhelming, persistent, or is linked to thoughts of self-harm, violence, abuse or immediate danger, seek appropriate professional or emergency support.

1. Understanding Stress

Stress is a normal human response to pressure, uncertainty or change. It can appear when demands feel greater than the resources, time or support available to manage them. A certain amount of stress can help us react quickly, focus attention or complete an important task. Problems arise when stress is intense, continues for a long time, or is combined with many different pressures at once.

For migrant women, stress may be connected to ordinary daily responsibilities as well as to the experience of adapting to a new environment. Language learning, finding work, caring for children, understanding unfamiliar systems, financial pressure, separation from family or friends, discrimination, uncertainty about the future, and changes in social or professional identity can all place additional demands on wellbeing.

Stress does not look the same for everyone. Two people can experience the same situation and react differently. Culture, previous experiences, health, personality, available support, sleep, financial security and family circumstances can all affect how stress is experienced.

Key message

Stress is not a personal failure. It is information. Learning to notice the signs early can make it easier to respond before stress becomes overwhelming.

1.1 Common signs of stress

Stress can affect the body, thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Common signs may include:

Body	Thoughts	Emotions	Behaviour
Headaches	Racing thoughts	Irritability	Withdrawing
Muscle tension	Difficulty concentrating	Anxiety	Avoiding tasks
Fast heartbeat	Worrying	Sadness	Eating more or less
Tiredness	Forgetfulness	Frustration	Using alcohol or other
Stomach discomfort	Negative predictions	Feeling overwhelmed	substances to cope
Poor sleep	Feeling mentally overloaded	Feeling numb	Arguing more Restlessness

1.2 Short-term and long-term stress

Short-term stress is often linked to a specific situation: an appointment, exam, difficult conversation, journey, deadline or unexpected problem. When the situation ends, the body usually settles again. Long-term stress is different. It can develop when uncertainty, financial strain, family responsibilities, isolation or other pressures continue for weeks or months without enough recovery.

The goal of stress management is not to remove every difficult feeling. Life will always contain uncertainty and challenge. The goal is to recognise what is happening, reduce unnecessary pressure, strengthen recovery and choose coping strategies that support rather than harm wellbeing.

2. Stress During Migration and Adaptation

Migration can involve major changes in language, routines, social networks, work, family roles, legal or administrative systems and sense of identity. Even positive changes can be stressful because the mind and body must adjust to unfamiliar situations.

Some women may have actively chosen to move and still experience loneliness, uncertainty or loss. Others may have experienced displacement, conflict, separation or difficult journeys. Practitioners should never assume that all migrant women have experienced trauma, but they should recognise that some participants may be carrying experiences that are not visible.

2.1 Adaptation stress

Adaptation stress can occur when ordinary tasks require more effort than before. Shopping, making an appointment, speaking with a child's school, using public transport, completing forms or looking for work may require new vocabulary, new rules and new confidence. A person who was highly independent before migration may suddenly need help with everyday tasks. This can be frustrating and may affect self-esteem.

It is useful to distinguish between a lack of ability and a lack of familiarity. Not knowing how a new system works does not mean a person is incapable. Confidence often returns as routines become more familiar and social support increases.

2.2 Identity and role changes

Migration can also affect how a woman sees herself. A professional qualification may not be recognised. A person who previously worked may become financially dependent. Family responsibilities may increase. Social status may change. Language limitations can make it difficult to express humour, knowledge or personality in the same way as before.

Stress management therefore includes more than relaxation. It can also involve rebuilding routines, using existing strengths, asking for support, reconnecting with meaningful activities, and creating realistic goals that restore a sense of direction.

2.3 Social connection as a protective factor

Supportive relationships can make stress easier to manage. This does not mean a person needs a large social network. One or two trusted people can make a meaningful difference. Support may come from family, friends, neighbours, peer groups, community organisations, colleagues, professionals, religious communities, online communities or other women with similar experiences.

Reflection

Who are the people you can contact when you need practical help? Who can you talk to when you need emotional support? These may be different people, and that is completely normal.

3. The Stress Cycle: Notice - Pause - Respond - Recover

A simple way to work with stress is to use four steps: Notice, Pause, Respond and Recover. These steps can be used during a stressful moment or as part of a daily routine.

3.1 Notice

Notice what is happening before automatically reacting. Ask: What am I feeling in my body? What am I thinking? What emotion is present? What is the situation asking from me? Simply naming the experience can create a small amount of distance from it.

Quick check-in

Right now I notice... in my body. I feel... emotionally. The thought that keeps returning is... What I need most at this moment may be...

3.2 Pause

A pause does not need to be long. Thirty seconds of slower breathing, putting both feet on the floor, drinking water, looking out of a window or stepping outside can interrupt the automatic stress response enough to make the next choice more deliberate.

3.3 Respond

Ask what kind of problem you are facing. Is it something you can act on now? Something that needs a plan? Something you need help with? Or something you cannot control today? Different problems need different responses.

- If action is possible: choose one small next step.
- If the problem is complex: write a short plan and identify who can help.
- If information is missing: identify where reliable information can be found.
- If the situation cannot be changed today: focus on protecting your energy and returning attention to what is within your control.

3.4 Recover

Recovery is the part people often forget. After a stressful event, the body may remain activated even when the problem is over. Recovery can include rest, food, sleep, walking, music, stretching, talking to someone, creative activity, prayer or meditation, time in nature, or simply a period without demands.

Remember

Coping is not only what you do during a difficult moment. Recovery between stressful moments is equally important.

4. Breathing and Grounding Techniques

Breathing and grounding techniques are simple tools for helping attention return to the present moment. They can be useful when someone feels tense, distracted, overwhelmed or caught in repetitive worry. They should feel comfortable; if a breathing exercise causes dizziness or discomfort, stop and return to normal breathing.

4.1 Longer exhale breathing

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable position.
2. Breathe in gently through the nose for a count of 3 or 4.
3. Breathe out slowly for a slightly longer count, for example 5 or 6.
4. Do not force the breath or try to take very deep breaths.
5. Repeat for one to three minutes.

The purpose is not to breathe perfectly. The aim is simply to slow the rhythm and give the body a signal that it can begin to settle.

4.2 5-4-3-2-1 grounding

Look around and gently notice:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel or touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste, or one slow breath

Grounding can be especially helpful when the mind is pulled into worries about the future or difficult memories. It brings attention back to the immediate environment.

4.3 Feet on the floor

Place both feet firmly on the floor. Notice the pressure under the heels and toes. Slowly press the feet down for a few seconds and release. Look around the room and name three neutral objects. This can be done discreetly in a meeting, classroom, public transport or waiting room.

4.4 Tension and release

Stress often creates muscle tension. Gently tighten one group of muscles for three to five seconds and then release. Try the hands, shoulders, jaw or legs. Do not use this exercise on an injured or painful area. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

5. Emotional Regulation: Working With Difficult Feelings

Emotional regulation does not mean suppressing feelings or forcing yourself to be positive. It means recognising an emotion, understanding what it may be telling you, and choosing a response that supports you.

5.1 Name the emotion

Instead of saying only 'I feel bad', try to identify the emotion more precisely: worried, angry, disappointed, lonely, ashamed, frustrated, exhausted, afraid, confused or sad. Naming an emotion can make it feel more understandable and can help identify what kind of response is needed.

5.2 Separate feelings from facts

Stress can make thoughts feel completely certain. For example: 'I will never manage this', 'Everyone thinks I am stupid', or 'Nothing will improve'. A useful question is: Is this a fact, or is this a stress thought?

Try this reframe

Stress thought: 'I cannot manage anything.'

More balanced thought: 'I am under a lot of pressure today. I can choose one thing to deal with first.'

5.3 Allow feelings without letting them decide everything

It is possible to feel anxious and still make a phone call. It is possible to feel discouraged and still attend a class. It is possible to feel angry and still choose not to send a message immediately. Emotional regulation means making room for a feeling while keeping some choice over behaviour.

5.4 The 90-second pause

6. Stop if it is safe to do so.
7. Notice where the emotion is felt in the body.
8. Take several slow, comfortable breaths.
9. Avoid making an important decision in the most intense moment.
10. Ask: What response will help me one hour from now, not only for the next ten seconds?

6. Managing Worry and Overthinking

Worry is the mind's attempt to prepare for possible problems. Some worry is useful when it leads to planning. It becomes exhausting when the same thoughts repeat without producing action.

6.1 Worry or problem?

Ask two questions:

- Is there something practical I can do about this today?
- If yes, what is the smallest useful action?

If action is possible, turn worry into a task. If no action is possible right now, write the worry down and return attention to the present.

6.2 Scheduled worry time

If worries interrupt the whole day, try setting aside 15 minutes at a regular time. When a worry appears, write it down and tell yourself: 'I will return to this during my worry time.' During that period, review the list and decide whether each item needs action, information, support or acceptance.

6.3 Reduce information overload

Constant news, social media, messages and administrative information can keep the nervous system activated. Choose specific times to check important information. Use reliable sources and avoid repeatedly checking the same issue when there has been no new information.

6.4 Write the next three steps

When a problem feels too large, write only the next three actions. For example: 1) find the correct office; 2) collect the required documents; 3) ask a friend or adviser to check the form. Breaking a task into smaller steps reduces mental overload.

7. Everyday Stress Management

Small routines cannot remove major structural problems, but they can strengthen the body and mind's ability to cope. The aim is not to create a perfect lifestyle. The aim is to identify a few realistic habits that support recovery.

7.1 Sleep and rest

- Keep wake-up and bedtime reasonably consistent where possible.
- Reduce stimulating information shortly before sleep.
- Create a short wind-down routine: wash, stretch, tea, reading, calm music or breathing.
- If you cannot sleep, avoid turning the night into a battle. Resting quietly is still rest.

7.2 Movement

Movement can reduce physical tension and improve mood. It does not need to be formal exercise. Walking, stretching, dancing at home, cycling, gardening or playing with children can all count.

7.3 Food, water and caffeine

Stress can disrupt appetite. Regular meals and enough water support energy and concentration. Large amounts of caffeine can make some people feel more anxious or interfere with sleep, so notice how coffee, tea or energy drinks affect you personally.

7.4 Alcohol and other coping habits

Some coping strategies provide quick relief but create additional problems later. Alcohol, excessive screen use, gambling, overeating or avoiding all difficult tasks may reduce discomfort for a short time while increasing stress over the longer term. The purpose of noticing these habits is not self-criticism. It is to create more choices.

7.5 Micro-recovery

Recovery does not always require a free afternoon. Small moments repeated through the day can help: three slow breaths, five minutes outside, stretching between tasks, eating without looking at a screen, listening to one song, or making a short call to someone supportive.

Try today

Choose one two-minute recovery activity and repeat it three times today. Small and repeatable is often more useful than ambitious and unrealistic.

8. Self-Care Without Guilt

Self-care is sometimes presented as an individual luxury. In reality, self-care can be very ordinary: sleep, food, medication, movement, boundaries, social connection, medical appointments, asking for help, time alone, or doing something that reminds you of who you are beyond responsibilities.

Many women carry significant family and caregiving responsibilities. In that context, self-care can produce guilt. A more useful question than 'Do I deserve this?' is 'What helps me remain well enough to continue caring for the people and responsibilities that matter to me?'

8.1 The minimum-day plan

On difficult days, reduce expectations. Identify the minimum that keeps the day safe and manageable.

- One essential task
- One thing for the body: food, water, medicine, rest or movement
- One small connection with another person
- One thing that can wait until tomorrow

8.2 Boundaries

Boundaries are limits that protect time, energy, safety and dignity. They can be difficult when family expectations are strong or when a person feels dependent on others. Boundaries do not always require confrontation. Sometimes they are practical: turning off notifications, delaying a reply, limiting how many tasks are accepted, or asking another person to share responsibility.

8.3 Reconnecting with identity

Stress can make life feel like a list of obligations. Reconnecting with an old interest, skill, language, creative practice, profession or friendship can support a sense of continuity. This may be particularly meaningful when migration has changed a person's role or professional identity.

9. Building a Personal Stress Plan

A personal stress plan helps identify early warning signs and useful responses before stress reaches its highest level.

My signs	What helps me
Early signs	What can I do when I first notice stress?
Moderate stress	Who can I contact? What task can I reduce or postpone?
High stress	What grounding technique works for me? Where can I go to feel safer or calmer?
After a difficult event	What helps me recover physically and emotionally?

9.1 My stress traffic light

Use a simple traffic-light system to notice your current level of stress.

- GREEN - I feel generally steady. Focus: maintain routines and recovery.
- YELLOW - I am more tense, tired, irritable or worried than usual. Focus: reduce pressure, use coping tools, ask for support early.
- RED - I feel overwhelmed or unable to cope safely. Focus: stop non-essential demands and seek appropriate support.

9.2 My support network

Write at least one name or service in each category:

- Someone I can talk to
- Someone who can help with practical problems
- A professional or organisation I can contact
- A place where I feel safe or calm
- An emergency option if I am in immediate danger

10. When to Seek Additional Support

Self-help tools are useful, but they are not appropriate for every situation. Professional support may be helpful when stress is persistent, interferes significantly with sleep or daily functioning, causes frequent panic or severe anxiety, leads to increasing use of alcohol or other substances, or is connected to depression, trauma, abuse or serious family conflict.

Support may come from a family doctor, mental-health professional, counsellor, social worker, women's support organisation, migrant support service, community health service or another trusted professional. The appropriate option depends on the country and situation.

If a person is in immediate danger, is at risk of harming herself or someone else, or is experiencing violence or abuse, the priority is safety and urgent professional or emergency support rather than a self-help exercise.

For educators and facilitators

Your role is to listen, respond respectfully, maintain appropriate boundaries and help the participant reach suitable support. You do not need to diagnose, investigate or provide therapy.

10.1 How to ask for help

Asking for help can feel difficult, especially if a person has had negative experiences with institutions or worries about being judged. A simple first sentence can make the process easier:

- "I have been under a lot of stress and it is affecting my daily life."
- "I am finding it difficult to sleep and manage my anxiety."
- "I need help understanding what support is available."
- "I do not feel safe and I need support."

11. Quick Coping Toolbox

Choose one or two tools rather than trying everything at once.

60-second reset: Put both feet on the floor. Look around. Breathe out slowly. Name one thing you need next.

5-4-3-2-1 grounding: Use the five senses to reconnect with the present environment.

One-step rule: When overwhelmed, choose only the smallest useful next action.

Water and movement: Drink water and move your body gently for two to five minutes.

Message someone: Send one short message to a trusted person instead of carrying everything alone.

Delay the decision: If emotions are very intense, postpone non-urgent decisions until you are calmer.

Write it down: Move repetitive thoughts from your head onto paper.

Reduce input: Pause news, social media or messages for a short period.

Kind inner voice: Speak to yourself as you would speak to a friend under the same pressure.

Recovery cue: Choose a small action that signals the day is ending: shower, tea, stretching, music or a walk.

Final message

Stress management is not about staying calm all the time. It is about recognising pressure, responding earlier, using practical tools, allowing recovery and knowing when support is needed. Small steps repeated consistently can make difficult periods feel more manageable.

Annexes - Printable Stress Management Worksheets

The following practical worksheets accompany this guide and will be designed as printable Canva annexes. They are intended to help participants reflect on stress, identify coping strategies and develop realistic personal wellbeing routines. Facilitators may use them individually or as part of group sessions.

Annex 1: My Stress Check-In: A simple check-in focused on body sensations, emotions, thoughts, current needs and one helpful next step.

Annex 2: My Stress Traffic Light: A visual green-yellow-red worksheet for recognising personal warning signs and identifying helpful responses at different stress levels.

Annex 3: Worry to Action: A worksheet for separating worries that can be acted on from those that cannot be changed immediately, and choosing one realistic next step.

Annex 4: My Personal Stress Plan: A personal plan covering triggers, early warning signs, coping tools, supportive people and actions to take when stress becomes high.

Annex 5: My Weekly Wellbeing and Recovery Plan: A weekly planning sheet for small, realistic actions related to rest, movement, social connection, quiet time, creativity and personal wellbeing.

Design note: The annex worksheets should use clear, accessible language, generous writing space and a calm visual layout. They should complement - rather than duplicate - the separate Wellbeing Journal.

References and Further Resources

- World Health Organization (WHO). Stress: questions and answers / mental health and wellbeing resources.
- World Health Organization (WHO). Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide.
- European Commission. Mental health and wellbeing information and EU public-health resources.
- Art Based Solutions for Social Integration of Migrant Women project materials and partner practice.