

# **When Coping Takes Everything You've Got**

*A practical guide to stress, exercise, and support for women*

**Sarah Ford**

Counsellor | Researcher | Exercise Professional

## **Introduction: Why This Guide Exists**

This guide is for women who are managing their lives, meeting responsibilities, and continuing to function, while also feeling that the level of stress they are carrying is becoming harder to live with.

On the surface, things may appear to be fine, with work continuing as normal, daily tasks being completed, and responsibilities still being met. However, internally it can feel very different. You may notice increased sensitivity, irritability, or a level of exhaustion that does not fully lift, even after rest.

There is often no single event that explains this. Life simply continues, while the effort required to keep going slowly increases. Recovery feels incomplete. Small demands take more out of you than they once did. Enjoyment can lessen, even when life looks good on paper.

This experience can be difficult to name. It can also be hard to explain, because nothing appears obviously wrong. Yet inside, you may feel close to tears at times, more reactive than usual, and deeply tired in a way that is hard to put into words.

The way in which we cope plays an important role here. Coping mechanisms, whether they are good or bad, develop because they work at the time. They help us adapt, respond, and keep going when demands are high. Over time, however, relying on coping alone can begin to take more out of you than it gives back.

The purpose of this guide is to help make sense of that experience. It offers an understanding of what happens in the body and mind when stress becomes ongoing, how exercise can support mental health, and how counselling can sit alongside movement in a way that feels manageable rather than overwhelming.

## How to Use This Guide

This guide is not designed to be read quickly or consumed in one sitting. It is intended to be returned to, paused with, and reflected on over time.

You may find that certain sections resonate more strongly than others depending on where you are right now. That is expected. Stress, coping, and recovery do not follow a neat or linear path.

You do not need to agree with everything in this guide, and you do not need to act on everything at once. The purpose is to help you understand what has been happening in your body and mind, so that choices about movement, rest, and support can be made with more clarity and less self-judgement.

Some women read this guide in small sections. Others come back to particular chapters when things feel heavier. There is no correct way to use it. Take what feels relevant, leave what does not, and return to it when needed.

---

### ***Disclaimer:***

*This guide is not a therapy program and does not provide a diagnosis. It is intended as a general educational resource to help you understand some of the psychological and physical responses associated with ongoing stress. It is not designed to replace medical advice, psychological treatment, or individualised care. If you have concerns about your physical or mental health, you are encouraged to seek advice from a qualified health professional. This guide is offered to support understanding and reflection, not as a substitute for professional assessment or treatment.*

## **Chapter 1: The Cost of Coping**

How we cope is often associated with how strong we are. If we are coping, we are perceived as being capable, dependable, and well organised.

What is less visible is the cost of sustained coping. Coping asks the body and mind to stay alert and responsive for long periods of time. When this continues without enough opportunity to properly rest or recover, the strain begins to build.

You may notice that fatigue becomes more familiar, emotional tolerance reduces, or flexibility in daily life starts to narrow. These changes are often gradual, which makes them easy to dismiss or push through.

There are times in life when pushing through is unfortunately necessary. It is when coping becomes the main way of dealing with stress over extended periods, without enough recovery, that difficulties appear.

At a physical level, coping involves staying ready to respond. Energy is directed toward managing what needs to be done. When demands continue, that energy has little opportunity to be restored.

This explains why someone can continue to function while feeling increasingly worn down. The question at this point is how long this can continue before it becomes necessary to recognise the signals, stop pushing, and consider how an individual can feel better supported.

## **Chapter 2: Coping and Resilience**

Coping and resilience are often spoken about as though they are the same thing. In practice, they describe different processes.

Coping refers to how you manage stress in the moment. It is about responding to demands, meeting expectations, and getting through what needs to be done.

Resilience relates to what happens afterwards. It describes how well you are able to recover, regain energy, and feel more like yourself once pressure eases.

It is possible to cope well and still feel depleted. This usually happens when demands remain high and recovery is limited. Life continues, responsibilities are met, but there is little opportunity to properly rest or reset.

This distinction helps explain why capable women can feel emotionally flat, easily overwhelmed, or persistently tired. It is not a failure of coping. It reflects what happens when recovery does not match the level of demand being placed on the body and mind.

Resilience is not built by trying harder or pushing through for longer. It is supported by experiences that allow the body and mind to slow down, restore energy, and feel safe enough to let go of constant alertness.

This is where movement, rest, reflection, and supportive therapeutic work begin to play an important role.

### **Chapter 3: Why This Shows Up for Women**

Ongoing stress rarely comes from one single source. It usually builds over time through a combination of responsibilities that sit alongside one another, rather than appearing one at a time.

Women often find themselves managing work, caring roles, relationships, and emotional responsibilities all at once. These pressures frequently overlap, with very little space between them. There are rarely genuine breaks, and time to properly recover is often delayed or put aside.

Over time, this places sustained pressure on emotional, mental, and physical resources. Energy is spread across many areas, leaving little opportunity to fully switch off or reset.

Midlife can add another layer to this experience. Changes in hormones can affect sleep, energy levels, and emotional responses. At the same time, women may be supporting children, helping ageing parents, navigating career demands, or adjusting to changes in identity and roles. Stress becomes something that accumulates, rather than something that comes and goes.

This experience does not reflect a lack of strength or ability. It reflects prolonged exposure to demand without enough opportunity to properly recover. When there is little space for rest, enjoyment, or letting go of stress, coping strategies that once worked well can start to feel less effective.

A common response to increased demand is to increase effort. Many women try to become more organised, plan more carefully, and hold themselves to higher standards. Their expectations of themselves increase, and mistakes can feel harder to tolerate.

This can help maintain functioning in the short term. However, it also places additional strain on areas that are already under pressure, including energy levels, emotional tolerance, sleep, and the ability to respond flexibly to everyday challenges.

Understanding how stress builds in this way helps shift the focus away from self-criticism. Stress responses begin to make sense when viewed in context, rather than as personal failure.

## **Chapter 4: The Nervous System and Ongoing Stress**

The nervous system plays a central role in how stress is experienced and managed. Its role is to respond quickly when something feels unsafe and to prepare the body for action when needed.

When the nervous system senses threat or pressure, the body moves into what is commonly known as a fight or flight response. Heart rate increases, muscles tense, and attention narrows. This response is designed to help us deal with immediate danger or demand.

In short bursts, this system works well. The body responds, the situation passes, and things are able to settle again. Energy can be restored and balance returns.

Ongoing stress changes this pattern. When pressures continue without relief, the nervous system does not receive a clear signal that it is safe to slow down. The body remains in a state of readiness, even during periods of rest. Recovery is no longer sufficient to fully reset the system.

This can affect sleep, mood, concentration, and emotional tolerance. Irritability, tearfulness, vigilance, and ongoing tiredness are not signs of weakness. They reflect a system that has been required to stay alert for too long.

The body often reacts before conscious thought. Understanding a situation logically does not automatically change how the nervous system responds. This is why someone can know they are safe or supported, yet still feel tense, reactive, or worn down.

Helping the nervous system slow down again involves experiences that signal safety and predictability. Regular routines, consistent sleep patterns, physical movement, and clear boundaries between effort and rest all contribute to this process.

Exercise can be particularly helpful here. Movement allows the body to use built-up energy and then release it. Over time, this can reduce the sense of being constantly on edge and support clearer thinking and emotional balance.

Understanding how the nervous system responds to ongoing stress allows these reactions to be viewed with more compassion. This makes it easier to seek support rather than continuing to push through.

## **Chapter 5: Exercise and Its Positive Influence on Mental Health**

Exercise has a strong and well-established relationship with mental health. This connection is clearly shown across a wide body of research and is consistently seen in both clinical and community settings.

This relationship is not about motivation, discipline, or mindset. It is about how the body responds to movement.

When stress has been present for a long time, the body often holds onto tension and remains on high alert. Exercise gives the body a clear way to use this built-up energy and then allow it to settle afterwards. In simple terms, the body gets a chance to work and then rest, rather than staying switched on all the time.

Changes often begin physically before they are noticed emotionally or mentally. As the body feels less tense, thinking can become clearer and emotional responses feel easier to manage. This happens because the body is no longer carrying the same level of strain.

Actively engaging in exercise does not remove stress from life. Rather, it changes how stress is processed. Participating in regular physical activity can support sleep, energy levels, and emotional balance, making daily stress easier to handle.

Regular movement is also helpful because it provides predictability. Knowing when you will move and knowing that rest follows helps the body feel less reactive and more settled over time, particularly when life feels demanding or uncertain.

Intensity is not the most important factor. Movement that feels achievable and sustainable is more supportive than exercise that leaves you feeling exhausted. The aim is not to push harder, but to support the body in a way that can be maintained.

It is important to acknowledge that while exercise is a powerful form of support, it does not replace other forms of care. However, participating in physical activity often gives women the confidence to access additional support when the body feels calmer and more settled. Reflection and therapeutic work can then feel more approachable and less demanding.

## **Chapter 6: Exercise, Stress, and Emotional Readiness**

Long periods of stress do not always come from one clear or dramatic event. Pressure can build quietly over time, through work, responsibility, and the ongoing need to manage daily life. When this happens, the body can begin to lose its sense of safety and predictability.

When stress is high, most of the body's energy is directed toward getting through the day. There is little left over for reflection or emotional processing. Thinking things through can feel tiring, and emotional conversations may feel harder to engage in. This does not reflect avoidance or unwillingness. It reflects what the body is able to manage at that time.

Physical activity can help support this stage. Movement builds physical confidence and provides a clear way for the body to release built-up tension. It also helps the body experience effort followed by rest, which can gradually reduce the feeling of being constantly on edge.

Over time, this can help the body feel safer and less reactive. When the body is not under constant strain, there is often more room to slow down, think clearly, and notice emotions without feeling overwhelmed.

The aim is not to push through exhaustion. Supportive movement increases what feels manageable while still allowing enough rest. This helps rebuild resilience in a way that feels realistic and sustainable.

As life begins to feel less overwhelming, many women notice that they have more space to reflect. Thoughts feel less crowded, and emotions feel easier to sit with. At this point, counselling or other reflective support can feel more accessible.

Exercise does not create insight on its own. What it often does is create the space for insight by helping the body feel calmer and more supported.

## **Chapter 7: Counselling, Reflection, and Supporting Resilience**

Counselling can be helpful when stress has been present for a long time and managing on your own starts to feel heavy. It provides a space to slow down and make sense of experiences that may have been carried quietly for years.

Counselling is not about fixing or analysing everything. It focuses on understanding patterns — how stress has shown up over time, how responses have developed, and what has helped or hindered recovery along the way.

A consistent counselling relationship can help the body and mind feel more settled over time. When sessions are predictable and supportive, it often becomes easier to talk, reflect, and think things through without feeling overwhelmed.

Reflection does not need to be complicated. Simple noticing can be enough. This might involve becoming aware of when you feel more drained, when things feel slightly easier, or which situations increase tension. These observations build understanding without adding pressure.

Writing by hand can support this process. Using pen and paper to briefly note thoughts or experiences can help slow thinking and reduce mental clutter. Research suggests that writing by hand engages attention differently to typing, which can support focus and emotional processing.

Breathing practices can also be supportive, particularly when stress feels immediate or intense. Slow, gentle breathing helps the body calm down and reduces the sense of urgency or overwhelm. The aim is not to change emotions, but to help the body feel safer in the moment.

Gratitude practices may also support resilience over time. Noticing small things that feel supportive or meaningful does not ignore difficulty. It simply helps balance attention, so the body is not focused only on pressure or threat.

Counselling works best alongside everyday supports such as movement, rest, and reflection. Together, these approaches support recovery without adding more demands.

## **Closing: What This Gives You**

Living with ongoing stress often means spending long periods of time responding to what needs to be done. Over time, effort can become automatic, even when you are tired and need rest.

Understanding what has been happening in your body and mind can change how this experience is viewed. Stress responses begin to make sense. Fatigue feels less confusing. Emotional reactions feel less personal.

This understanding creates options. It allows you to slow things down slightly, step back, and consider what might be helpful, rather than continuing to respond in the same way out of habit or necessity.

Everyone's needs change over time and according to their circumstances. What feels supportive at one point may not be what is needed later, and there is no single pathway that suits everyone.

This guide has been written to offer a foundation for understanding stress, coping, and recovery. With that understanding, you can begin to consider what support feels appropriate for you now.

## **Reflective Tools: Putting This Into Practice**

The following pages are designed to help you gently apply what you have read. These are not tasks to complete perfectly. They are prompts to support awareness and reflection.

You may choose to write responses, make brief notes, or simply think through the questions.

---

### **1. Noticing Your Current Load**

Take a moment to consider the following:

- What currently takes the most energy in my life?
- Where do I notice tension or fatigue most often?
- When do I feel most stretched or depleted?

You do not need detailed answers. A few words is enough.

---

### **2. Coping Patterns**

Consider how you typically respond when things feel demanding:

- How do I usually cope when stress increases?
- Which coping strategies have helped me in the past?
- Which ones feel less helpful now?

This is about understanding, not judgement.

---

### **3. Movement Reflection**

After physical activity, notice:

- Do I feel more settled or more exhausted?
- Does this support my sleep or energy?
- Does this feel sustainable for me right now?

These reflections can guide how movement fits into your life at this stage.

---

### **4. A Brief Grounding Breathing Practice**

Try this once or twice a day, or when stress feels heightened:

- Breathe in slowly through your nose for four counts
- Breathe out gently through your mouth for six counts

Repeat for one to two minutes.

The aim is not relaxation but creating a brief pause.

---

### **5. Writing by Hand**

Using pen and paper, try completing one sentence:

- “Right now, what I need more of is...”
- “Right now, what feels hardest is...”
- “One small support that helps is...”

Writing by hand can slow thinking and support clarity.

## 6. Considering Support

You might ask yourself:

- What support feels appropriate for me at this point?
- Would movement, counselling, rest, or reflection be most helpful right now?
- What feels realistic, rather than ideal?

There is no urgency here. Awareness comes first.

---

### Closing Note

This guide is intended to support understanding, not to push action. Insight often comes before change. When stress has been ongoing, slowing down and making sense of your experience is a meaningful step by itself.

If, while reading this guide, you notice that you would benefit from additional support, counselling may be one option to consider. Some women find that having a structured, supportive space to reflect can help them better understand their stress responses and make sense of their experiences.

My work sits at the intersection of counselling, stress recovery, and movement. Alongside counselling, I have a long professional background in exercise and have seen how physical activity can support mental health when it is approached in a sustainable and informed way. If you would like more information about my work, you are welcome to visit my website to learn more or make contact. There is no expectation or pressure — this guide is intended to stand on its own.

Further information about my work can be found on my website.



## **About the Author**

Sarah Ford is a counsellor, researcher, and long-time exercise professional working in the areas of mental health, stress, and recovery.

Her professional background includes counselling practice alongside extensive experience delivering exercise programs across a range of settings, including gyms, community programs, and group-based environments. Movement has been a consistent part of both her professional work and her personal life.

Sarah's approach is grounded in ethical practice and informed by research, clinical training, and lived experience. She has worked with women experiencing ongoing stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma, and has seen how combining movement with reflective and therapeutic support can improve wellbeing over time.

Her current research focuses on how women engage with exercise as a way of coping with stress and trauma, particularly during midlife, and how readiness and capacity influence participation and recovery.

Sarah's work aims to support women to better understand their stress responses, feel less self-critical, and make informed choices about movement, counselling, and support.