

# Relaxation Techniques

## Tip 1: Look at your worries in new ways

The core symptom of generalized anxiety is chronic worrying. It's important to understand what worrying is, since the beliefs you hold about worrying play a huge role in triggering and maintaining anxiety and stress.

### Understanding worrying

You may feel like your worries come from the outside—from other people, events that stress you out, or difficult situations you're facing. But, in fact, worrying is self-generated. The trigger comes from the outside, but an internal running dialogue maintains the anxiety itself.

When you're worrying, you're talking to yourself about things you're afraid of or negative events that might happen. You run over the feared situation in your mind and think about all the ways you might deal with it. In essence, you're trying to solve problems that haven't happened yet, or worse, simply obsessing on worst-case scenarios.

All this worrying may give you the impression that you're protecting yourself by preparing for the worst or avoiding bad situations. But more often than not, worrying is unproductive—sapping your mental and emotional energy without resulting in any concrete problem-solving strategies or actions.

How to distinguish between productive and unproductive worrying? If you're focusing on "what if" scenarios, your worrying is unproductive. Once you've given up the idea that your worrying somehow helps you, you can start to deal with your worry and anxiety in more productive ways. This may involve challenging irrational worrisome thoughts, learning how to postpone worrying, and learning to accept uncertainty in your life.

## Tip 2: Practice relaxation techniques

Anxiety is more than just a feeling. It's the body's physical "fight or flight" reaction to a perceived threat. Your heart pounds, you breathe faster, your muscles tense up, and you feel light-headed. When you're relaxed, the complete opposite happens. Your heart rate slows down, you breathe slower and more deeply, your muscles relax, and your blood pressure stabilizes. Since it's impossible to be anxious and relaxed at the same time, strengthening your body's relaxation response is a powerful anxiety-relieving tactic.

If you struggle with anxiety and stress, relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and meditation can teach you how to relax.

The key is regular practice. Try to set aside at least 30 minutes a day. As you [strengthen your ability to relax](#), your nervous system will become less reactive and you'll be less vulnerable to anxiety and stress. Over time, the relaxation response will come easier and easier, until it feels natural.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** When anxiety takes hold, progressive muscle relaxation can help you release muscle tension and take a "time out" from your worries. The technique involves systematically tensing and then releasing different muscle groups in your body. As your body relaxes, your mind will follow.
- **Deep breathing.** When you're anxious, you breathe faster. This hyperventilation causes symptoms such as dizziness, breathlessness, lightheadedness, and tingly hands and feet. These physical symptoms are frightening, leading to further anxiety and panic. But by breathing deeply from the diaphragm, you can reverse these symptoms and calm yourself down.
- **Meditation.** Many types of meditation have been shown to reduce anxiety. Mindfulness meditation, in particular, shows promise for anxiety relief. Research shows that mindfulness meditation can actually change your brain. With regular practice, meditation boosts activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of serenity and joy.

## Tip 3: Learn to calm down quickly

Many people with anxiety and stress don't know how to calm and soothe themselves. But it's a simple, easy technique to learn, and it can make a drastic difference in your anxiety symptoms.

The best methods for self-soothing incorporate one or more of the physical senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Try the following sensory-based, self-soothing suggestions when your anxiety and stress symptoms are acting up:

- **Sight** – Take in a beautiful view. Go to an art museum. Walk around a pretty neighborhood. Look at treasured photos or an interesting picture book.
- **Sound** – Listen to soothing music. Enjoy the sounds of nature: birds singing, ocean waves crashing on the beach, wind rustling through the trees.
- **Smell** – Light scented candles. Smell the flowers in a garden. Breathe in the clean, fresh air. Stop by a bakery. Spritz on your favorite perfume.
- **Taste** – Cook a delicious meal. Slowly eat a favorite treat, savoring each bite. Enjoy a hot cup of coffee or tea.
- **Touch** – Pet your dog or cat. Take a warm bubble bath. Wrap yourself in a soft blanket. Sit outside in the cool breeze. Get a massage.

## To Cope with Anxiety, Remember A-W-A-R-E

The key to switching out of an anxiety state is to accept it fully. Remaining in the present and accepting your anxiety cause it to disappear.

**A: Accept the anxiety.** Welcome it. Don't fight it. Replace your rejection, anger, and hatred of it with acceptance. By resisting, you're prolonging the unpleasantness of it. Instead, flow with it. Don't make it responsible for how you think, feel, and act.

**W: Watch your anxiety.** Look at it without judgment – not good, not bad. Rate it on a 0-to-10 scale and watch it go up and down. Be detached. Remember, you're not your anxiety. The more you can separate yourself from the experience, the more you can just watch it.

**A: Act with the anxiety.** Act as if you aren't anxious. Function with it. Slow down if you have to, but keep going. Breathe slowly and normally. If you run from the situation your anxiety will go down, but your fear will go up. If you stay, both your anxiety and your fear will go down.

**R: Repeat the steps.** Continue to accept your anxiety, watch it, and act with it until it goes down to a comfortable level. And it will. Just keep repeating these three steps: accept, watch, and act with it.

**E: Expect the best.** What you fear the most rarely happens. Recognize that a certain amount of anxiety is normal. By expecting future anxiety you're putting yourself in a good position to accept it when it comes again.

Adapted from: *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective* by Aaron Beck and Gary Emery

## Tip 4: Connect with others

Anxiety and stress gets worse when you feel powerless and alone, but there is strength in numbers. The more connected you are to other people, the less vulnerable you'll feel. The catch-22 is that anxiety and stress can lead to problems in your relationships.

For example, anxiety and constant worrying about your close relationships may leave you feeling needy and insecure. Perhaps you tend to read into what people say or assume the worst when a friend or partner doesn't respond the way you expected or hoped. As a result, you may need lots of reassurance from others or become paranoid and suspicious. These things can put a huge strain on your relationships.

- **Identify unhealthy relationship patterns.** Think about the ways you tend to act when you're feeling anxious about a relationship. Do you test your partner? Withdraw? Make accusations? Become clingy? Once you're aware of any anxiety-driven relationship patterns, you can look for better ways to deal with any fears or insecurities you're feeling.
- **Build a strong support system.** Human beings are social creatures. We're not meant to live in isolation. Connecting to others is vital to your emotional health. A strong support system doesn't necessarily mean a vast network of friends. Don't underestimate the benefit of a few people you can trust and count on to be there for you.
- **Talk it out when your worries start spiraling.** If you start to feel overwhelmed with anxiety, call a trusted family member or friend. Just talking out loud about your worries can make them seem less threatening. It's helpful to bounce your worries off someone who can give you a balanced, objective perspective.
- **Know who to avoid when you're feeling anxious.** Remember that there is a good chance that your anxious take on life is something you learned when you were growing up. If your mother is a chronic worrier, she is not the best person to call when you're feeling anxious—no matter how close you are. When considering who to turn to, ask yourself whether you tend to feel better or worse after talking to that person about a problem.

## Tip 5: Change your lifestyle

A healthy, balanced lifestyle plays a big role in keeping the symptoms of anxiety and stress at bay. Read on for a number of ways you can stop chronic anxiety and worry by taking care of yourself, and commit to making any necessary anxiety-reducing lifestyle changes.

### Adopt healthy eating habits

Start the day right with breakfast, and continue with frequent small meals throughout the day. Going too long without eating leads to low blood sugar, which can make you feel anxious and irritable. Eat plenty of complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Not only do complex carbs stabilize blood sugar, they also boost serotonin, a neurotransmitter with calming effects.

### Limit caffeine and sugar

Stop drinking or cut back on caffeinated beverages, including soda, coffee, and tea. Caffeine can increase anxiety, interfere with sleep, and even provoke panic attacks. Reduce the amount of refined sugar you eat, too. Sugary snacks and desserts cause blood sugar to spike and then crash, leaving you feeling emotionally and physically drained.

### Exercise regularly

Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment. For maximum relief for anxiety and stress try to get at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity on most days. Aerobic exercise relieves tension and stress, boosts physical and mental energy, and enhances well-being through the release of endorphins, the brain's feel-good chemicals.

### Avoid alcohol and nicotine

Alcohol temporarily reduces anxiety and worry, but it actually causes anxiety symptoms as it wears off. Drinking for anxiety and stress relief also starts you on a path that can lead to alcohol abuse and dependence. Lighting up when you're feeling anxious is also a bad idea. While it may seem like cigarettes are calming, nicotine is actually a powerful stimulant. Smoking leads to higher, not lower, levels of anxiety.

### Get enough sleep

Anxiety and worry can cause [insomnia](#), as anyone whose racing thoughts have kept them up at night can attest. But lack of sleep can also contribute to anxiety. When you're sleep deprived, your ability to handle stress is compromised. When you're well rested, it's much easier to keep your emotional balance, a key factor in coping with anxiety and stopping worry.

### When to seek professional help for anxiety and stress treatment

Self-help strategies are enough for many people with anxiety and stress. Others need additional therapy and support to get anxiety under control. If you can't seem to shake your worries and fears, despite trying the self-help treatment tips, it may be time to seek professional help. But remember that professional treatment doesn't replace self-help. In order to control your anxiety and stress symptoms, you'll still want to make lifestyle changes and look at the ways you think about worrying.

### Is it really anxiety and stress?

When seeking professional treatment, it's important to make sure that your symptoms are truly due to anxiety and stress. If you've struggled with anxiety and fears your whole life, it's likely that your anxiety symptoms are due to anxiety and stress.

However, if your anxiety symptoms are relatively new, this could be a sign of a different problem. For example, many medical conditions and medications can cause anxiety. Traumatic experiences can also cause symptoms similar to that of anxiety and stress.

To get an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment, it's best to see a mental health professional. Anxiety and stress are often accompanied by other problems, such as depression, substance abuse, and other anxiety disorders. For treatment to succeed, it's important to get help for all of the problems you're dealing with.

### Therapy for anxiety and stress

Therapy is a key component of treatment for anxiety and stress. Many studies show that therapy is as effective as medication for most people. And best of all, therapy for anxiety and stress are side-effect free.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one type of therapy that is particularly helpful in the treatment of anxiety and stress. Cognitive-behavioral therapy examines distortions in our ways of looking at the world and ourselves.

Your therapist will help you identify automatic negative thoughts that contribute to your anxiety. For example, if you catastrophize—always imagining the worst possible outcome in any given situation—you might challenge this tendency through questions such as, “What is the likelihood that this worst-case scenario will actually come true?” and “What are some positive outcomes that are more likely to happen?”.

### Cognitive-behavioral therapy for anxiety and stress involves five components:

- **Education.** CBT involves learning about anxiety and stress. It also teaches you how to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful worry. An increased understanding of your anxiety encourages a more accepting and proactive response to it.
- **Monitoring.** In CBT for anxiety and stress, you learn to monitor your anxiety, including what triggers it, the specific things you worry about, and the severity and length of a particular episode. This helps you get perspective, as well as track your progress.
- **Physical control strategies.** Deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation help decrease the physical over-arousal of the “fight or flight” response that maintains the state of fear and anxiety. CBT for anxiety and stress trains you in these techniques.
- **Cognitive control strategies.** Through CBT, you learn to realistically evaluate and alter the thinking patterns that contribute to anxiety and stress. As you challenge these negative thoughts, your fears will begin to subside. CBT also teaches you to test the beliefs you have about worry itself, such as “Worry is uncontrollable” or “If I worry, bad things are less likely to happen.”
- **Behavioral strategies.** Instead of avoiding situations you fear, CBT teaches you to tackle them head on. You may start by imagining the thing you're most afraid of. By focusing on your fears without trying to avoid or escape them, you will begin to feel more in control and less anxious. Time management and problem-solving skills are also effective behavioral techniques for anxiety and stress.



Worrying can be helpful when it spurs you to take action and solve a problem. But if you're preoccupied with "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, worry becomes a problem. Unrelenting doubts and fears can be paralyzing. They can sap your emotional energy, send your anxiety levels soaring, and interfere with your daily life. But chronic worrying is a mental habit that can be broken. You can train your brain to stay calm and look at life from a more positive perspective.

#### Why is it so hard to stop worrying?

Constant worrying takes a heavy toll. It keeps you up at night and makes you tense and edgy during the day. You hate feeling like a nervous wreck. So why is it so difficult to stop worrying?

For most chronic worriers, the anxious thoughts are fueled by the beliefs—both negative and positive—they hold about worrying.

On the negative side, you may believe that your constant worrying is harmful, that it's going to drive you crazy or affect your physical health. Or you may worry that you're going to lose all control over your worrying—that it will take over and never stop.

On the positive side, you may believe that your worrying helps you avoid bad things, prevents problems, prepares you for the worst, or leads to solutions.

Negative beliefs, or worrying about worrying, add to your anxiety and keep worry going. But positive beliefs about worrying can be just as damaging. It's tough to break the worry habit if you believe that your worrying protects you. In order to stop worry and anxiety for good, you must give up your belief that worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realize that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can regain control of your worried mind.

#### Why you keep worrying

You have mixed feelings about your worries. On one hand, your worries are bothering you—you can't sleep, and you can't get these pessimistic thoughts out of your head. But there is a way that these worries make sense to you. For example, you think:

- Maybe I'll find a solution.
- I don't want to overlook anything.
- If I keep thinking a little longer, maybe I'll figure it out.
- I don't want to be surprised.
- I want to be responsible.

You have a hard time giving up on your worries because, in a sense, your worries have been working for you.

Source: *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* by Robert L. Leahy, Ph.D.

### Worry and anxiety self-help tip #1: Create a worry period

It's tough to be productive in your daily life when anxiety and worry are dominating your thoughts. But what can you do? If you're like many chronic worriers, your anxious thoughts feel uncontrollable. You've tried lots of things, from distracting yourself, reasoning with your worries, and trying to think positive, but nothing seems to work.

#### Why trying to stop anxious thoughts doesn't work

Telling yourself to stop worrying doesn't work—at least not for long. You can distract yourself or suppress anxious thoughts for a moment, but you can't banish them for good. In fact, trying to do so often makes them stronger and more persistent.

You can test this out for yourself. Close your eyes and picture a pink elephant. Once you can see the pink elephant in your mind, stop thinking about it. Whatever you do, for the next five minutes, don't think about pink elephants!

How did you do? Did thoughts of pink elephants keep popping in your brain?

"Thought stopping" backfires because it forces you to pay extra attention to the very thought you want to avoid. You always have to be watching for it, and this very emphasis makes it seem even more important.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing you can do to control your worry. You just need to try a different approach. This is where the strategy of postponing worrying comes in. Rather than trying to stop or get rid of an anxious thought, give yourself permission to have it, but put off thinking any more about it until later.

#### Learning to postpone worrying:

1. **Create a "worry period."** Choose a set time and place for worrying. It should be the same every day (e.g. in the living room from 5:00 to 5:20 p.m.) and early enough that it won't make you anxious right before bedtime. During your worry period, you're allowed to worry about whatever's on your mind. The rest of the day, however, is a worry-free zone.
2. **Postpone your worry.** If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it on paper and postpone it to your worry period. Remind yourself that you'll have time to think about it later, so there's no need to worry about it right now. Save it for later and continue to go about your day.
3. **Go over your "worry list" during the worry period.** Reflect on the worries you wrote down during the day. If the thoughts are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry about them, but only for the amount of time you've specified for your worry period. If the worries don't seem important any more, cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

Postponing worrying is effective because it breaks the habit of dwelling on worries in the present moment. Yet there's no struggle to suppress the thought or judge it. You simply save it for later. As you develop the ability to postpone your anxious thoughts, you'll start to realize that you have more control over your worrying than you think.

### Worry and anxiety self-help tip #2: Ask yourself if the problem is solvable

Research shows that while you're worrying, you temporarily feel less anxious. Running over the problem in your head distracts you from your emotions and makes you feel like you're getting something accomplished. But worrying and problem solving are two very different things.

Problem solving involves evaluating a situation, coming up with concrete steps for dealing with it, and then putting the plan into action. Worrying, on the other hand, rarely leads to solutions. No matter how much time you spend dwelling on worst-case scenarios, you're no more prepared to deal with them should they actually happen.

#### Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

If a worry pops into your head, start by asking yourself whether the problem is something you can actually solve. The following questions can help:

- Is the problem something you're currently facing, rather than an imaginary what-if?
- If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic?
- Can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control?

Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away. For example, if you're worried about your bills, you could call your creditors to see about flexible payment options. Unproductive, unsolvable worries are those for which there is no corresponding action. "What if I get cancer someday?" or "What if my kid gets into an accident?"

If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming. Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of. Try not to get too hung up on finding the perfect solution. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control. After you've evaluated your options, make a plan of action. Once you have a plan and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less worried.

#### Dealing with unsolvable worries

But what if the worry isn't something you can solve? If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. In such cases, it's important to tune into your emotions.

As previously mentioned, worrying helps you avoid unpleasant emotions. Worrying keeps you in your head, thinking about how to solve problems rather than allowing yourself to feel the underlying emotions. But you can't worry your emotions away. While you're worrying, your feelings are temporarily suppressed, but as soon as you stop, the tension and anxiety bounces back. And then, you start worrying about your feelings, "What's wrong with me? I shouldn't feel this way!"

The only way out of this vicious cycle is by learning to embrace your feelings. This may seem scary at first because of negative beliefs you have about emotions. For example, you may believe that you should always be rational and in control, that your feelings should always make sense, or that you shouldn't feel certain emotions, such as fear or anger.

The truth is that emotions—like life—are messy. They don't always make sense and they're not always pleasant. But as long as you can accept your feelings as part of being human, you'll be able to experience them without becoming overwhelmed and learn how to use them to your advantage. The following tips will help you find a better balance between your intellect and your emotions.

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### Worry and anxiety self-help tip #3: Accept uncertainty

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The inability to tolerate uncertainty plays a huge role in anxiety and worry. Chronic worriers can't stand doubt or unpredictability. They need to know with 100 percent certainty what's going to happen. Worrying is seen as a way to predict what the future has in store—a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work.

Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. You may feel safer when you're worrying, but it's just an illusion. Focusing on worst-case scenarios won't keep bad things from happening. It will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present. So if you want to stop worrying, start by tackling your need for certainty and immediate answers.

#### Challenging intolerance of uncertainty: The key to anxiety relief

Ask yourself the following questions and write down your responses. See if you can come to an understanding of the disadvantages and problems of being intolerant of uncertainty.

- Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?
- What are the advantages of requiring certainty, versus the disadvantages? Or, how is needing certainty in life helpful and unhelpful?
- Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? Is this a reasonable thing to do? What is the likelihood of positive or neutral outcomes?
- Is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen, given its likelihood is very low?

Adapted from: *Accepting Uncertainty, Centre for Clinical Interventions*

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#### Worry and anxiety self-help tip #4: Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more dangerous than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every negative thought as if it were fact. You may also discredit your own ability to handle life's problems, assuming you'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions.

Although cognitive distortions aren't based on reality, they're not easy to give up. Often, they're part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring, you must retrain your brain.

Start by identifying the frightening thought, being as detailed as possible about what scares or worries you. Then, instead of viewing your thoughts as facts, treat them as hypotheses you're testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and fears, you'll develop a more balanced perspective.

##### Stop worry by questioning the worried thought:

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

**All-or-nothing thinking** – Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground. “If I fall short of perfection, I'm a total failure.”

**Overgeneralization** – Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever. “I didn't get hired for the job. I'll never get any job.”

**The mental filter** – Focusing on the negatives while filtering out all the positives. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right.

**Diminishing the positive** – Coming up with reasons why positive events don't count. “I did well on the presentation, but that was just dumb luck.”

**Jumping to conclusions** – Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader, “I can tell she secretly hates me.” Or a fortune teller, “I just *knows* something terrible is going to happen.”

**Catastrophizing** – Expecting the worst-case scenario to happen. “The pilot said we're in for some turbulence. The plane's going to crash!”

**Emotional reasoning** – Believing that the way you feel reflects reality. “I feel frightened right now. That must mean I'm in real physical danger.”

**'Shoulds' and 'should-nots'** – Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn't do and beating yourself up if you break any of the rules

**Labeling** – Labeling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings. “I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser.”

**Personalization** – Assuming responsibility for things that are outside your control. “It's my fault my son got in an accident. I should have warned him to drive carefully in the rain.”

#### Worry and anxiety self-help tip # 5: Be aware of how others affect you

How you feel is affected by the company you keep, whether you're aware of it or not. Studies show that emotions are contagious. We quickly “catch” moods from other people—even from strangers who never speak a word (e.g. the terrified woman sitting by you on the plane; the fuming man in the checkout line). The people you spend a lot of time with have an even greater impact on your mental state.

- **Keep a worry diary.** You may not be aware of how people or situations are affecting you. Maybe this is the way it's always been in your family, or you've been dealing with the stress so long that it feels normal. You may want to keep a worry diary for a week or so. Every time you start to worry, jot down the thought and what triggered it. Over time, you'll start to see patterns.
- **Spend less time with people who make you anxious.** Is there someone in your life who drags you down or always seems to leave you feeling stressed? Think about cutting back on the time you spend with that person or establish healthier relationship boundaries. For example, you might set certain topics off-limits, if you know that talking about them with that person makes you anxious.

- **Choose your confidantes carefully.** Know who to talk to about situations that make you anxious. Some people will help you gain perspective, while others will feed into your worries, doubts, and fears.

#### Worry and anxiety self-help tip #6: Practice mindfulness

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Worrying is usually focused on the future—on what might happen and what you'll do about it. The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present. In contrast to the previous techniques of challenging your anxious thoughts or postponing them to a worry period, this strategy is based on observing and then letting them go. Together, they can help you identify where your thinking is causing problems, while helping you get in touch with your emotions.

- **Acknowledge and observe your anxious thoughts and feelings.** Don't try to ignore, fight, or control them like you usually would. Instead, simply observe them as if from an outsider's perspective, without reacting or judging.
- **Let your worries go.** Notice that when you don't try to control the anxious thoughts that pop up, they soon pass, like clouds moving across the sky. It's only when you engage your worries that you get stuck.
- **Stay focused on the present.** Pay attention to the way your body feels, the rhythm of your breathing, your ever-changing emotions, and the thoughts that drift across your mind. If you find yourself getting stuck on a particular thought, bring your attention back to the present moment.

Using mindfulness meditation to stay focused on the present is a simple concept, but it takes practice to reap the benefits. At first, you'll probably find that your mind keeps wandering back to your worries. Try not to get frustrated. Each time you draw your focus back to the present, you're reinforcing a new mental habit that will help you break free of the negative worry cycle.



## Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief

### Finding the Relaxation Exercises That Work for You



For many of us, relaxation means zoning out in front of the TV at the end of a stressful day. But this does little to reduce the damaging effects of stress. To effectively combat stress, we need to activate the body's natural relaxation response. You can do this by practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, rhythmic exercise, and yoga. Fitting these activities into your life can help reduce everyday stress and boost your energy and mood.

#### The relaxation response: Bringing your nervous system back into balance

Stress is necessary for life. You need stress for creativity, learning, and your very survival. Stress is only harmful when it becomes overwhelming and interrupts the healthy state of equilibrium that your nervous system needs to remain in balance. Unfortunately, overwhelming stress has become an increasingly common characteristic of contemporary life. When stressors throw your nervous system out of balance, relaxation techniques can bring it back into a balanced state by producing the *relaxation response*, a state of deep calmness that is the polar opposite of the stress response.

When stress overwhelms your nervous system your body is flooded with chemicals that prepare you for "fight or flight." While the stress response can be lifesaving in emergency situations where you need to act quickly, it wears your body down when constantly activated by the stresses of everyday life. The relaxation response puts the brakes on this heightened state of readiness and brings your body and mind back into a state of equilibrium.

#### Producing the relaxation response

A variety of different relaxation techniques can help you bring your nervous system back into balance by producing the relaxation response. The relaxation response is not lying on the couch or sleeping but a mentally active process that leaves the body relaxed, calm, and focused.

Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques isn't difficult, but it does take practice. Most stress experts recommend setting aside at least 10 to 20 minutes a day for your relaxation practice. If you'd like to get even more stress relief, aim for 30 minutes to an hour. If that sounds like a daunting commitment, remember that many of these techniques can be incorporated into your existing daily schedule—practiced at your desk over lunch or on the bus during your morning commute.

#### Finding the relaxation technique that's best for you

There is no single relaxation technique that is best for everyone. When choosing a relaxation technique, consider your specific needs, preferences, fitness level, and the way you tend to react to stress. The right relaxation technique is the one that resonates with you, fits your lifestyle, and is able to focus your mind and interrupt your everyday thoughts in order to elicit the relaxation response. In many cases, you may find that alternating or combining different techniques will keep you motivated and provide you with the best results.

How you react to stress may influence the relaxation technique that works best for you:

#### Do you tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up?

You may respond best to relaxation techniques that quiet you down, such as meditation, deep breathing, or guided imagery

### Do you tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out?

You may respond best to relaxation techniques that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system, such as rhythmic exercise

### Do you tend to freeze-speeding up internally, while slowing down externally?

Your challenge is to identify relaxation techniques that provide both safety and stimulation to help you “reboot” your system. Techniques such as mindfulness walking or power yoga might work well for you

### Do you need alone time or social stimulation?

If you crave solitude, solo relaxation techniques such as meditation or progressive muscle relaxation will give you the space to quiet your mind and recharge your batteries. If you crave social interaction, a class setting will give you the stimulation and support you’re looking for. Practicing with others may also help you stay motivated.

### Relaxation technique 1: Breathing meditation for stress relief

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple, yet powerful, relaxation technique. It’s easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

#### Practicing deep breathing meditation

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.

### Relaxation technique 2: Progressive muscle relaxation for stress relief

Progressive muscle relaxation involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of stress relief.

#### Practicing progressive muscle relaxation

Before practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation, consult with your doctor if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems, or other serious injuries that may be aggravated by tensing muscles.

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face. For a sequence of muscle groups to follow, see the box below.

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you’re relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you’re ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence

The most popular sequence runs as follows:

- |                |                      |                        |
|----------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Right foot* | 6. Left thigh        |                        |
| 2. Left foot   | 7. Hips and buttocks | 11. Right arm and hand |
| 3. Right calf  | 8. Stomach           | 12. Left arm and hand  |
| 4. Left calf   | 9. Chest             | 13. Neck and shoulders |
| 5. Right thigh | 10. Back             | 14. Face               |

\* If you are left-handed you may want to begin with your left foot instead.

## Relaxation technique 3: Body scan meditation for stress relief

A body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation except, instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the sensations in each part of your body.

### Practicing body scan meditation

- Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes, until you start to feel comfortable and relaxed.
- Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then move through the neck and throat, and finally all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine yourself hovering above yourself.
- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly. Take a moment to stretch, if necessary.

For a guided body scan meditation, see the Resources section below.

## Relaxation technique 4: Mindfulness for stress relief

**Mindfulness** is the ability to remain aware of how you're feeling right now, your "moment-to-moment" experience—both internal and external.

Thinking about the past—blaming and judging yourself—or worrying about the future can often lead to a degree of stress that is overwhelming. But by staying calm and focused in the present moment, you can bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness can be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or meditation.

Meditations that cultivate mindfulness have long been used to reduce overwhelming stress. Some of these meditations bring you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words, or flickering light from a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations.

### Practicing mindfulness meditation

Key points in mindfulness meditation are:

- **A quiet environment.** Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship, or in the great outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions.
- **A comfortable position.** Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may lead to you falling asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position.
- **A point of focus.** This point can be internal—a feeling or imaginary scene—or something external - a flame or meaningful word or phrase that you repeat it throughout your session. You may meditate with eyes open or closed. Also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.
- **An observant, noncritical attitude.** Don't worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you're doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don't fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

## Relaxation technique 5: Visualization meditation for stress relief

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that requires you to employ not only your visual sense, but also your sense of taste, touch, smell, and sound. When used as a relaxation technique, visualization involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety.

Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether it's a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen. You can do this visualization exercise on your own in silence, while listening to soothing music, or with a therapist (or an audio recording of a therapist) guiding you through the imagery. To help you employ your sense of hearing you can use a sound machine or download sounds that match your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

#### Practicing visualization

Find a quiet, relaxed place. Beginners sometimes fall asleep during a visualization meditation, so you might try sitting up or standing. Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible, using at least three of your senses. When visualizing, choose imagery that appeals to you; don't select images because someone else suggests them, or because you think they should be appealing. Let your own images come up and work for you.

If you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake, for example:

- Walk slowly around the dock and notice the colors and textures around you.
- Spend some time exploring each of your senses.
- See the sun setting over the water.
- Hear the birds singing.
- Smell the pine trees.
- Feel the cool water on your bare feet.
- Taste the fresh, clean air.

Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation that envelopes you as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present.

Don't worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a guided imagery session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of stiffness or heaviness in your limbs, minor, involuntary muscle-movements, or even cough or yawn. Again, these are normal responses.

#### Relaxation technique 6: Yoga and tai chi for stress relief

**Yoga** involves a series of both moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. As well as reducing anxiety and stress, yoga can also improve flexibility, strength, balance, and stamina. Practiced regularly, it can also strengthen the relaxation response in your daily life. Since injuries can happen when yoga is practiced incorrectly, it's best to learn by attending group classes, hiring a private teacher, or at least following video instructions.

##### What type of yoga is best for stress?

Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement, deep breathing, and gentle stretching are best for stress relief.

- **Satyananda** is a traditional form of yoga. It features gentle poses, deep relaxation, and meditation, making it suitable for beginners as well as anyone primarily looking for stress reduction.
- **Hatha yoga** is also a reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners. Alternately, look for labels like *gentle*, *for stress relief*, or *for beginners* when selecting a yoga class.
- **Power yoga**, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

If you're unsure whether a specific yoga class is appropriate for stress relief, call the studio or ask the teacher.

##### Tai chi

If you've ever seen a group of people in the park slowly moving in synch, you've probably witnessed tai chi. Tai chi is a self-paced, non-competitive series of slow, flowing body movements. These movements emphasize concentration, relaxation, and the conscious circulation of vital energy throughout the body. Though tai chi has its roots in martial arts, today it is primarily practiced as a way of calming the mind, conditioning the body, and reducing stress. As in meditation, tai chi practitioners focus on their breathing and keeping their attention in the present moment.

Tai chi is a safe, low-impact option for people of all ages and levels of fitness, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. Like yoga, once you've learned the basics of tai chi or qi gong, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your sessions as you see fit.

#### Making relaxation techniques a part of your life

The best way to start and maintain a relaxation practice is to incorporate it into your daily routine. Between work, family, school, and other commitments, though, it can be tough for many people to find the time. Fortunately, many of the techniques can be practiced while you're doing other things.

##### Rhythmic exercise as a mindfulness relaxation technique

Rhythmic exercise—such as running, walking, rowing, or cycling—is most effective at relieving stress when performed with relaxation in mind. As with meditation, mindfulness requires being fully engaged in the present moment, focusing your mind on how your body feels right now. As you

exercise, focus on the physicality of your body's movement and how your breathing complements that movement. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, gently return to focusing on your breathing and movement.

If walking or running, for example, focus on each step—the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath while moving, and the feeling of the wind against your face.

#### Tips for fitting relaxation techniques into your life

- **If possible, schedule a set time to practice each day.** Set aside one or two periods each day. You may find that it's easier to stick with your practice if you do it first thing in the morning, before other tasks and responsibilities get in the way.
- **Practice relaxation techniques while you're doing other things.** Meditate while commuting to work on a bus or train, or waiting for a dentist appointment. Try deep breathing while you're doing housework or mowing the lawn. Mindfulness walking can be done while exercising your dog, walking to your car, or climbing the stairs at work instead of using the elevator. Once you've learned techniques such as tai chi, you can practice them in your office or in the park at lunchtime.
- **If you exercise, improve the relaxation benefits by adopting mindfulness.** Instead of zoning out or staring at a TV as you exercise, try focusing your attention on your body. If you're resistance training, for example, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you raise and lower the weights.
- **Avoid practicing when you're sleepy.** These techniques can relax you so much that they can make you very sleepy, especially if it's close to bedtime. You will get the most benefit if you practice when you're fully awake and alert. Do not practice after eating a heavy meal or while using drugs, tobacco, or alcohol.
- **Expect ups and downs.** Don't be discouraged if you skip a few days or even a few weeks. It happens. Just get started again and slowly build up to your old momentum.

#### Stress Relief in the Moment

##### Using Your Senses to Quickly Change Your Response to Stress



Ever wish a stress superhero could save you from traffic jams, chaotic meetings, or a toddler's tantrums? Well, you can be your own stress-busting superhero. Everybody has the power to reduce the impact of stress as it's happening in the moment. With practice, you can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds. Learning quick stress relief won't happen overnight. Like any skill, it takes time, self-exploration and above all, practice. But think of it as an education with a huge payoff.

#### Learn to recognize stress

Recognizing stress is the first step in lessening its impact. Many of us spend so much time in a stressed state, we have forgotten what it feels like to be fully relaxed and alert. Being stressed out feels normal.

What does it feel like to be calm and stress-free? You can see that “just right” inner balance in the smile of a happy baby—a face so full of joy it reminds adults of the balanced emotional state that most of us have misplaced. In adulthood, being balanced means maintaining a calm state of energy, alertness, and focus. Calmness is more than just feeling relaxed; being alert is an equally important aspect of finding the balance needed to withstand stress.

If you don't feel calm, alert, productive, and focused most of the time in your daily life, then too much stress may be a problem for you.

#### Tips for recognizing when you're stressed

Hush the voice that's telling you, “Oh, I'm fine.” Notice how you're breathing has changed. Are your muscles tense? Awareness of your physical response to stress will help regulate the tension when it occurs.

When you're tired, your eyes feel heavy and you might rest your head on your hand. When you're happy, you laugh easily. And when you are stressed, your body lets you know that too. Try to get in the habit of paying attention to your body's clues.

- **Observe your muscles and insides.** Are your muscles tight/sore? Is your stomach tight or sore? Are your hands clenched?



- **Observe your breath.** Is your breath shallow? Place one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Watch your hands rise and fall with each breath. Notice when you breathe fully or when you "forget" to breathe.

### Identify your body's stress response

Internally, we all respond to stress the same: blood pressure rises, the heart pumps faster, and muscles constrict. When stressed, our bodies work hard and drain our immune system. Externally, however, people tend to respond to stress in three different ways: some become angry and agitated, others space out or withdraw, and still others freeze up.

The best way to quickly relieve stress may relate to your specific stress response.

#### How do you act when stressed?

When it comes to managing and reducing stress quickly in the middle of a heated situation, it's important to be familiar with your specific stress response.

- **Overexcited stress response** – If you tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that quiet you down.
- **Under excited stress response** – If you tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system.
- **Frozen stress response (both overexcited and under excited)** – If you tend to freeze—speeding up in some ways while slowing down in others—your challenge is to identify stress relief activities that provide both safety and stimulation to help you “reboot” your system.

### The basics of quick stress relief

There are countless techniques for preventing stress. [Yoga](#) and [mindfulness meditation](#) work wonders for improving coping skills. But who can take a moment to chant or meditate during a job interview or a disagreement with your spouse? For these situations, you need something more immediate and accessible. That's when quick stress relief comes to the rescue.

The speediest way to stamp out stress is by engaging one or more of your senses—your sense of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, or movement—to rapidly calm and energize yourself.

The key to practicing quick stress relief is learning what kind of sensory input helps your particular nervous system find calm and focus quickly.

Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so an awareness of your preferences is essential for reducing stress.

#### Talking to someone who listens: a rapid stress reducer

Want to know a quick social stress reliever? Talk to someone! It's true, talking about your stress with a calm and balanced listener will make you feel better instantly. Although it's not always realistic to have a pal close by to lean on, building and maintaining a friendship network is ultimately good for your mental health. Between quick stress relief techniques and good listeners, you'll have all your bases covered.

### Bring your senses to the rescue

Here comes the fun part. Remember exploring your senses in elementary school? Grownups can take a tip from grade school lessons by revisiting the senses and learning how they can help us prevent stress overload. Use the following exercises to identify the sensory experiences that work quickly and effectively to reduce stress for you.

As you experiment, be as precise as possible. What is the most perfect image, the specific kind of sound, or type of movement that affects you the most? For example, if you're a music lover, listen to many different artists and types of music until you find the song that instantly lifts and relaxes you.

**The examples listed below are intended to be a jumping-off point. It's up to you to hone in on them and come up with additional things to try.**

#### Sights



If you're a visual person, try to manage and relieve stress by surrounding yourself with soothing and uplifting images. You can also try closing your eyes and imagining the soothing images. Here are a few visually-based activities that may work as quick stress relievers:

- Look at a cherished photo or a favorite memento.
- Bring the outside indoors; buy a plant or some flowers to enliven your space.
- Enjoy the beauty of nature—a garden, the beach, a park, or your own backyard.
- Surround yourself with colors that lift your spirits.
- Close your eyes and picture a situation or place that feels peaceful and rejuvenating.

#### Sound





Are you sensitive to sounds and noises? Are you a music lover? If so, stress-relieving exercises that focus on your auditory sense may work particularly well. Experiment with the following sounds, noting how quickly your stress levels drop as you listen:

- Sing or hum a favorite tune. Listen to uplifting music.
- Tune in to the soundtrack of nature—crashing waves, the wind rustling the trees, birds singing.
- Buy a small fountain, so you can enjoy the soothing sound of running water in your home or office.
- Hang wind chimes near an open window.

#### Smell & Scents



If you tend to zone out or freeze when stressed, surround yourself with smells that are energizing and invigorating. If you tend to become overly agitated under stress, look for scents that are comforting and calming.

- Light a scented candle or burn some incense.
- Lie down in sheets scented with lavender.
- Smell the roses—or another type of flower.
- Enjoy the clean, fresh air in the great outdoors.
- Spritz on your favorite perfume or cologne.

#### Touch



Experiment with your sense of touch, playing with different tactile sensations. Focus on things you can feel that are relaxing and renewing. Use the following suggestions as a jumping-off point:

- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket.
- Pet a dog or cat.
- Hold a comforting object (a stuffed animal, a favorite memento).
- Soak in a hot bath.
- Give yourself a hand or neck massage.
- Wear clothing that feels soft against your skin.

#### Taste



Slowly savoring a favorite treat can be very relaxing, but mindless eating will only add to your stress and your waistline. The key is to indulge your sense of taste mindfully and in moderation. Eat slowly, focusing on the feel of the food in your mouth and the taste on your tongue:

- Chew a piece of sugarless gum.
- Indulge in a small piece of dark chocolate.
- Sip a steaming cup of coffee or tea or a refreshing cold drink.
- Eat a perfectly ripe piece of fruit.
- Enjoy a healthy, crunchy snack (celery, carrots, or trail mix).

#### Movement



If you tend to shut down when you're under stress, stress-relieving activities that get you moving may be particularly helpful. Anything that engages the muscles or gets you up and active can work. Here are a few suggestions:

- Run in place or jump up and down.
- Dance around.
- Stretch or roll your head in circles.
- Go for a short walk.
- Squeeze a rubbery stress ball.

### The power of imagination

Sensory-rich memories can also quickly reduce stress. After drawing upon your sensory toolbox becomes habit, try simply *imagining* vivid sensations when stress strikes. Believe it or not, the sheer memory of your baby's face will have the same calming or energizing effects on your brain as seeing her photo. So if you can recall a strong sensation, you'll never be without access to quick stress relief tools.

### Tips for finding sensory inspiration

Inspiration is everywhere, from sights you see on your way to work to smells and objects around your home. Explore a variety of sensations so that no matter where you are you'll always have something you can do to relax yourself. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **Memories.** Think back to what you did as a child to calm down. If you had a blanket or stuffed toy, you might benefit from tactile stimulation. Try tying a textured scarf around your neck before an appointment or keeping a piece of soft suede in your pocket.
- **Watch others.** Observing how others deal with stress can give you valuable insight. Baseball players often pop gum in their mouth before going up to bat. Singers often chat up the crowd before performing. Ask around about what people you know do to stay focused under pressure—it could work for you too.
- **Parents.** Think back to what your parents did to blow off steam. Did your mother feel more relaxed after a long walk? Did your father do yard work after a hard day? Try some of the things they did to unwind; they might work for you too.

### Take a break from technology

Taking a short hiatus from the television, computer, and cell phone will give you insight on what your senses respond to best. Here are some "unplugging" tips:

- Try tuning into relaxing music instead of talk radio during your commute. Or try riding in silence for 10 minutes.
- Stuck in a long line at the grocery store? Instead of talking on your cell phone, take a moment to people watch. Pay attention to what you hear and see.
- Instead of checking e-mail while waiting for a meeting to begin, take a few deep breaths, look out the window, or sip some aromatic tea.
- While waiting for an appointment, resist the urge to text and give yourself a hand massage instead.

### Make quick stress relief a habit

Let's get real. It's not easy to remember to use our senses in the middle of a mini—or not so mini—crisis. At first, it will feel easier to just give into pressure and tense up. The truth is, quick stress relief takes practice, practice, and more practice. But with time, calling upon your senses will become second nature. Here's how to make it habit:

Learning to use your senses to quickly manage stress is a little like learning to drive or to play golf. You don't master the skill in one lesson; you have to practice until it becomes second nature. Once you have a variety of sensory tools you can depend on, you'll be able to handle even the toughest of situations.

- **Start small.** Instead of testing your quick stress relief tools on a source of major stress, start with a predictable low-level source of stress, like cooking dinner at the end of the day or sitting down to balance your checkbook.
- **Identify and target.** Think of just one low-level stressor that you know will occur several times a week, such as commuting. Vow to target that particular stressor with quick stress relief every time. After a few weeks, target a second stressor. After a few weeks more, target a third stressor and so on.
- **Test-drive sensory input.** Experiment with as much sensory input as possible. If you are practicing quick stress relief on your commute to work, bring a scented handkerchief with you one day, try music another day, and try a movement the next day.
- **Make "have fun" your motto.** If something doesn't work, don't force it. Move on until you find your best fit.
- **Talk about it.** Verbalizing your quick stress relief work will help integrate it into your life. It's bound to start a fascinating conversation—everyone relates to the topic of stress.

### Quick acting stress-busting tips

The best part of quick stress relief is the awareness that you have control over your surroundings. Even if you share a work area, you can personalize your space to serve as a “stress prevention zone” or to put quick stress relief within arm’s reach. We all have our stress hotspots. Where are yours?

#### Quick stress relief at home

- **Entertaining.** Prevent pre-party jitters by playing lively music. Light candles. The flicker and scent will stimulate your senses. Wear clothes that make you feel relaxed and confident instead of stiff and uncomfortable.
- **Kitchen.** Cool the kitchen commotion by breathing in the scent of every ingredient you use—even if you’re just opening cans. Delight in the delicate texture of an eggshell. Appreciate the weight of an onion.
- **Children and relationships.** Prevent losing your cool during a spousal spat by breathing and squeezing the tips of your thumb and forefinger together. When your toddler has a tantrum, rub lotion into your hands then breathe in the scent.
- **Sleep.** Too stressed to snooze? Try using a white noise machine for background sound or a humidifier with a diffuser for a light scent in the air.
- **Creating a sanctuary.** If clutter is upsetting, spend 10 minutes each day to tidy and organize. Paint the walls with a fresh coat of your favorite calming color. Display photos and images that make you feel happy. Throw open the curtains and let in natural light whenever possible.

#### Quick stress relief at work

- **Meetings.** During stressful sessions, stay connected to your breath. Massage the tips of your fingers. Wiggle your toes. Sip coffee.
- **On the phone.** Inhale something energizing, like lemon, ginger, peppermint or coffee beans. While talking, stand up or pace back and forth to burn off excess energy. Conduct phone business outside when possible.
- **On the computer.** Work standing up. Do knee-bends in 10-minute intervals. Wrap a soft scarf around your neck. Suck on a peppermint.
- **Lunch breaks.** Take a walk around the block or in the parking lot. Listen to soothing music while eating. Have a quick chat with someone you love.
- **Your workspace.** Place family photos on your desk and display images and mementos that remind you of your life outside the office.

### Stress Management

#### How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress



It may seem that there’s nothing you can do about stress. The bills won’t stop coming, there will never be more hours in the day, and your career and family responsibilities will always be demanding. But you have more control than you might think. In fact, the simple realization that you’re in control of your life is the foundation of stress management. Managing stress is all about taking charge: of your thoughts, emotions, schedule, and the way you deal with problems.

#### Identify the sources of stress in your life

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn’t as easy as it sounds. Your true sources of stress aren’t always obvious, and it’s all too easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, you may know that you’re constantly worried about work deadlines. But maybe it’s your procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that leads to deadline stress.

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

- Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can’t remember the last time you took a breather?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that’s all”).
- Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control.

#### Start a Stress Journal

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, keep track of it in your journal. As you keep a daily log, you will begin to see patterns and common themes. Write down:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you’re unsure)
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally
- How you acted in response
- What you did to make yourself feel better

#### Look at how you currently cope with stress

Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. Your stress journal can help you identify them. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

#### Unhealthy ways of coping with stress

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

- Smoking
- [Drinking too much](#)
- Overeating or undereating
- [Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer](#)
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- [Using pills or drugs to relax](#)
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)

#### Learning healthier ways to manage stress

If your methods of coping with stress aren’t contributing to your greater emotional and physical health, it’s time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it’s helpful to think of the four As: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no “one size fits all” solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

#### Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A’s

##### Change the situation:

- Avoid the stressor
- Alter the stressor

##### Change your reaction:

- Adapt to the stressor
- Accept the stressor

#### Stress management strategy #1: Avoid unnecessary stress

Not all stress can be avoided, and it’s not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

- **Learn how to say “no”** – Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.
- **Avoid people who stress you out** – If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can’t turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.
- **Take control of your environment** – If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic’s got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.
- **Avoid hot-button topics** – If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it’s the topic of discussion.
- **Pare down your to-do list** – Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you’ve got too much on your plate, distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts.” Drop tasks that aren’t truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

## Stress management strategy #2: Alter the situation

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- **Express your feelings instead of bottling them up.** If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- **Be willing to compromise.** When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good 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 an exam to study for 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.

## Stress management strategy #3: 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.** Take perspective of the stressful situation. 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.

### Adjusting Your Attitude

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 marks of self-defeating thoughts.

## Stress management strategy #4: 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.** As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." 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 very cathartic, 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.

## Stress management strategy #5: 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.

### 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.
- Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea.
- Play with a pet.
- Work in your garden.
- Get a massage.

- Write in your journal.
- Take a long bath.
- Light scented candles.
- Curl up with a good book.
- Listen to music.
- Watch a comedy.

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 bike.
- **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.

#### Stress management strategy #6: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

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You can increase your resistance to stress by strengthening your physical health.

- **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 provide 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.



## Caregiver Stress and Burnout

### Tips for Recharging and Finding Balance



The demands of caregiving can be overwhelming, especially if you feel you have little control over the situation or you're in over your head. If the stress of caregiving is left unchecked, it can take a toll on your health, relationships, and state of mind—eventually leading to burnout. When you're burned out, it's tough to do anything, let alone look after someone else. That's why making time to rest, relax, and recharge isn't a luxury—it's a necessity. Read on for tips on how to regain balance in your life.

#### Caregiver stress and burnout: What you need to know

Caring for a loved one can be very rewarding, but it also involves many stressors: changes in the family dynamic, household disruption, financial pressure, and the added workload. So is it any wonder that caregivers are some of the people most prone to burnout?

Caregiver stress can be particularly damaging, since it is typically a chronic, long-term challenge. You may face years or even decades of caregiving responsibilities. It can be particularly disheartening when there's no hope that your family member will get better. Without adequate help and support, the stress of caregiving leaves you vulnerable to a wide range of physical and emotional problems, ranging from heart disease to depression.

When caregiver stress and burnout puts your own health at risk, it affects your ability to provide care. It hurts both you and the person you're caring for. The key point is that caregivers need care too. Managing the stress levels in your life is just as important as making sure your family member gets to his doctor's appointment or takes her medication on time.

#### Signs and symptoms of caregiver stress and burnout

Learning to recognize the signs of caregiver stress and burnout is the first step to dealing with the problem.

##### Common signs and symptoms of caregiver stress

- Anxiety, depression, irritability
- Feeling tired and run down
- Difficulty sleeping
- Overreacting to minor nuisances
- New or worsening health problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling increasingly resentful
- Drinking, smoking, or eating more
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Cutting back on leisure activities

##### Common signs and symptoms of caregiver burnout

- You have much less energy than you once had
- It seems like you catch every cold or flu that's going around
- You're constantly exhausted, even after sleeping or taking a break
- You neglect your own needs, either because you're too busy or you don't care anymore
- Your life revolves around caregiving, but it gives you little satisfaction
- You have trouble relaxing, even when help is available
- You're increasingly impatient and irritable with the person you're caring for
- You feel helpless and hopeless

Once you burn out, caregiving is no longer a healthy option for either you or the person you're caring for. So it's important to watch for the warning signs of caregiver burnout and take action right away when you recognize the problem.

### Dealing with caregiver stress & burnout tip 1: Ask for help

Taking on all of the responsibilities of caregiving without regular breaks or assistance is a surefire recipe for burnout. Don't try to do it all alone. Look into [respite care](#). Or enlist friends and family who live near you to run errands, bring a hot meal, or "baby-sit" the care receiver so you can take a well-deserved break.

#### Tips for getting the caregiving help you need

- **Speak up.** Don't expect friends and family members to automatically know what you need or how you're feeling. Be up front about what's going on with you and the person you're caring for. If you have concerns or thoughts about how to improve the situation, express them—even if you're unsure how they'll be received. Get a dialogue going.
- **Spread the responsibility.** Try to get as many family members involved as possible. Even someone who lives far away can help. You may also want to divide up caregiving tasks. One person can take care of medical responsibilities, another with finances and bills, and another with groceries and errands, for example.
- **Set up a regular check-in.** Ask a family member, friend, or volunteer from your church or senior center to call you on a set basis (every day, weekly, or how ever often you think you need it). This person can help you spread status updates and coordinate with other family members.
- **Say "yes" when someone offers assistance.** Don't be shy about accepting help. Let them feel good about supporting you. It's smart to have a list ready of small tasks that others could easily take care of, such as picking up groceries or driving your loved one to an appointment.
- **Be willing to relinquish some control.** Delegating is one thing. Trying to control every aspect of care is another. People will be less likely to help if you micromanage, give orders, or insist on doing things your way.

### Dealing with caregiver stress & burnout tip 2: Give yourself a break

As a busy caregiver, leisure time may seem like an impossible luxury. But you owe it to yourself—as well as to the person you're caring for—to carve it into your schedule. Give yourself permission to rest and to do things that you enjoy on a daily basis. You will be a better caregiver for it.

There's a difference between being busy and being productive. If you're not regularly taking time-off to de-stress and recharge your batteries, you'll end up getting less done in the long run. After a break, you should feel more energetic and focused, so you'll quickly make up for your relaxation time.

- **Set aside a minimum of 30 minutes every day for yourself.** Do whatever you enjoy, whether it's reading, working in the garden, tinkering in your workshop, knitting, playing with the dogs, or watching the game.
- **Find ways to pamper yourself.** Small luxuries can go a long way in relieving stress and boosting your spirits. Light candles and take a long bath. Ask your hubby for a back rub. Get a manicure. Buy fresh flowers for the house. Or whatever makes you feel special.
- **Make yourself laugh.** Laughter is an excellent antidote to stress—and a little goes a long way. Read a funny book, watch a comedy, or call a friend who makes you laugh. And whenever you can, try to find the humor in everyday situations.
- **Get out of the house.** Seek out friends and family to step in with caregiving so you can have some time away from the home.
- **Visit with friends and share your feelings.** The simple act of expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic. If it's difficult to leave the house, invite friends over to visit with you over coffee, tea, or dinner. It's important that you interact with others. Sharing your feelings 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.

### Dealing with caregiver stress & burnout tip 3: Practice acceptance

When faced with the unfairness of a loved one's illness or the burden of caregiving, there's often a need to make sense of the situation and ask "Why?" But you can spend a tremendous amount of energy dwelling on things you can't change and for which there are no clear answers. And at the end of the day, you won't feel any better.

Try to avoid the emotional trap of feeling sorry for yourself or searching for someone to blame. Focus instead on accepting the situation and looking for ways it can help you grow as a person. As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

- **Focus on the things you can control.** You can't wish your mother's cancer away or force your brother to help out more. Rather than stressing out over things you can't control, focus on the way you choose to react to problems.
- **Find the silver lining.** Think about the ways caregiving has made you stronger or how it's brought you closer to person you're taking care of or to other family members. Think about how caregiving allows you to give back and show your love.
- **Share your feelings.** Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the situation. Talk to a friend or therapist about what you're going through as a family caregiver.
- **Avoid tunnel vision.** Don't let caregiving take over your whole life. It's easier to accept a difficult situation when there are other areas of your life that are rewarding. Invest in things that give you meaning and purpose—whether it's your family, church, a favorite hobby, or your career.

#### Dealing with caregiver stress & burnout tip 4: Take care of your health

Think of your body like a car. With the right fuel and proper maintenance, it will run reliably and well. Neglect its upkeep and it will start to give you trouble. Don't add to the stress of your caregiving situation with avoidable health woes.

- **Keep on top of your doctor visits.** It's easy to forget about your own health when you're busy with a loved one's care. Don't skip check-ups or medical appointments. You need to be healthy in order to take good care of your family member.
- **Exercise.** When you're stressed and tired, the last thing you feel like doing is exercising. But you'll feel better afterwards. [Exercise is a powerful stress reliever and mood enhancer.](#) Aim for a minimum of 30 minutes on most days. When you exercise regularly, you'll also find it boosts your energy level and helps you fight fatigue.
- **Meditate.** [A daily relaxation or meditation practice can help you relieve stress](#) and boost feelings of joy and well-being. Try yoga, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or mindfulness meditation. Even a few minutes in the middle of an overwhelming day can help you feel more centered.
- **Eat well.** Nourish your body with fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains, beans, lean protein, and healthy fats such as nuts and olive oil. Unlike sugar and caffeine—which provide a quick pick-me-up and an even quicker crash—these foods will fuel you with steady energy.
- **Don't skimp on sleep.** Cutting back on time in bed is counterproductive—at least if your goal is to get more done. [Most people need more sleep than they think they do](#) (8 hours is the norm). When you get less, your mood, energy, productivity, and ability to handle stress will suffer.

#### Dealing with caregiver stress & burnout tip 5: Join a support group

A caregiver support group is a great way to share your troubles and find people who are going through the same experiences that you are living each day. If you can't leave the house, many Internet groups are also available.

In most support groups, you'll talk about your problems and listen to others talk; you'll not only get help, but you'll also be able to help others. Most important, you'll find out that you're not alone. You'll feel better knowing that other people are in the same situation, and their knowledge can be invaluable, especially if they're caring for someone with the same illness as you are.

<p><b>Local support groups:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People live near each other and meet in a given place each week or month.</li><li>• You get face-to-face contact and a chance to make new friends who live near you.</li><li>• The meetings get you out of the house, get you moving provide a social outlet, and reduce feelings of isolation.</li><li>• Meetings are at a set time. You will need to attend them regularly to get the full benefit of the group.</li><li>• Since the people in the support group are from your area, they'll be more familiar with local resources and issues.</li></ul>	<p><b>Online support groups:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People are from all over the world and have similar interests or problems.</li><li>• You meet online, through email lists, websites, message boards, or social media.</li><li>• You can get support without leaving your house, which is good for people with limited mobility or transportation problems.</li><li>• You can access the group whenever it's convenient for you or when you need help most.</li><li>• If your problem is very unusual—a rare disease, for example—there may not be enough people for a local group, but there will always be enough people online.</li></ul>

To find a community support group, check the yellow pages, ask your doctor or hospital, or call a local organization that deals with the health problem you would like to address in a support group. To find an Internet support group, visit the website of an organization dedicated to the problem.