

Stress Management

Into each life some stress must fall. But when "some" turns into "too much", try a few stress-busting tips.

Stress can be related to happy and unhappy events. Trivial matters as well as major life crises can trigger it. It also builds up gradually when you have more things to do than time in which to do them. Some doctors believe that 90 percent of all illnesses are stress related. But stress is not necessarily bad. A life without it would be stagnant and boring.

There are many practical ways to avoid, reduce or relieve stress.

Relieving Stress

1. **Touch** - hold hands, stroke a pet, hug a loved one. Physical contact is the best stress reliever of all.
2. Find enjoyable ways to **Exercise**. Breathe deeply, stretch your muscles, jump rope, ride a bike, jog - do something.
3. **Get it off your chest**. Bottling up feelings increases stress. Feel free to complain, express disappointment, and tell people if they hurt your feelings.
4. **Talk** to a loving friend or relative. A sympathetic listener is always helpful. They become "band-aid friends". A band-aid friend helps you from bleeding to death. Find one!
5. Schedule more **Fun**. Don't give up seeing friends and doing the things you enjoy because you "have too much to do". Work goes faster and produces less stress when fun is part of your life.
6. Have a **Massage**. Treat yourself and see that tension melts away under the touch of experienced fingers. But a talented amateur - a friend - can do almost as well.
7. **Prepare yourself to wait**. Long lines in a post office or a delay at the dentist's office is almost pleasant with a good book in hand.
8. Find the **Humor** in it. Every disaster has something funny about it.
9. **Relax your standards**. Doing everything perfectly is not only unnecessary, it's boring. Ignore some of the dirt.
10. **Get help** with the jobs you hate. Whether it's paying bills, defrosting the refrigerator, cleaning the oven...beg, barter or pay for help...it's worth it.
11. Establish a **Serene Island** of your own - even if it is just a comfortable chair in a corner, or propped up in bed with a book or TV.
12. **Change your perspective**. Instead of worrying about what will happen if...try asking yourself "So what?" So what if a birthday gift is a few days late. Even if our worst fears are realized, they often turn out not to be as bad.
13. **Count your blessings**. No disaster is so bad that it couldn't be worse - and it helps to remember that.
14. **Unclutter your life**. Get rid of clothes and furniture you never use; activities you don't enjoy. Anything you can do to simplify your life helps reduce stress.
15. **Pamper Yourself**.
16. Get plenty of **rest and sleep**.
17. Learn to use **relaxation techniques**.

18. Find a new **hobby**.

Avoiding Stress

1. **Get up earlier** in the morning. Giving yourself an extra 15 minutes helps you to avoid morning mishaps.
2. **Prepare** for morning the night before.
3. **Never wear ill-fitting clothes**. Shoes that pinch or a waistband that binds can be stressful all day.
4. **Don't rely on your memory**. Practice making notes for yourself on things to do and remember.
5. **Practice preventative maintenance**. Keep cleaned and serviced; automobiles, heaters, air conditioners, washers, dryers, etc. You'll have fewer breakdowns.
6. **Make duplicates of all keys**. Exchange house and car keys with a trusted neighbor or hide them where you alone can get to them.
7. **Say "no" more often**. Learn to turn down invitations, requests and activities.
8. **Walk** everywhere you can. Exercise has a soothing effect.

Points to Remember

1. Trust your irritation level.
2. Be patient.
3. Take one step at a time.
4. There are unlimited options.
5. Coping skills are learned so they can be changed.
6. Increase your available skills.
7. Self-responsibility is required.

Manage Your Stress

Manage Your 'Self Talk'

Most of us think primarily with a combination of mental images and inner chatter - and get our feelings or emotions from this mental activity. (This is not the only source of our feelings but it's enough to start with.)

Become aware of your thoughts and begin managing them and you will be directly influencing your emotions.

Pay Attention to Your Negative Self Hypnosis

Begin to pay attention to your self-talk. That's the constant stream of chatter that goes on in your head (and mine, and everyone else's, by the way).

Notice what you say to yourself and how you say it. Do you constantly criticize yourself inside your head? Or do you constantly criticize others? Or complain about your life, your faults, or how life 'treats' you? Or internally rant about the injustices of life?

Do you constantly tell yourself you're at your wits end? Of that you can't cope with this much longer? Or that you'll fail at something? Or that you're going to have a panic attack?

Imagine that you had an 'invisible friend' that went around with you all day, every day, and was constantly whispering comments like these in your ear! How would you feel at the end of a day? At the end of a week? After a month of such indoctrination?

Well, guess what? You're already doing this to yourself - and in a far more effective manner than this invisible friend would do it. After all, if a friend treated you like that, you likely would tell them to stop or you'd seek more amenable friends.

But because you are doing this to yourself and have probably been running such mental 'programs' since childhood, you no longer even notice them and, as a result, they have a powerful impact on your mood and on your attitude towards yourself and towards life.

Our negative self-talk is pernicious and demoralizing and debilitating. And because we are so used to it we don't consciously pay attention to it and therefore do not challenge it. It goes on and on in the background and the effect is that we are giving ourselves powerful hypnotic suggestions to feel bad!

[Gently Replace the Negative Self-talk](#)

I suggest 'gently' because there's no point in adding to the inner stress and discomfort further criticizing yourself "I must not say this etc" - that would be adding fuel to the fire.

Each time you recognize that you are doing your self-criticizing and self-undermining pause, remind yourself that it's just that old habit you've got into, and that from now on you're changing this habit.

Use a very soft and patient inner tone of voice for this.

Your inner voice should sound as if you are calming an upset 2-year old! Reassure yourself. Calm yourself. Remind yourself of the rationales and facts of the situation. Remind yourself of the value of handling things in a cool, calm, and confident manner. Doing this once or twice won't make a lot of difference. It takes quite a while to replace the habits of a lifetime - but it's definitely worth doing so. [Writing Freely](#) is an excellent tool for becoming aware of your self talk and gradually reducing the intensity of negative self talk. The [Daily Plan](#) is a useful Time Management tool for organizing yourself and preventing things from getting on top of you.

Easy Breathing

Maintaining an *easy breathing* pattern, where your chest and diaphragm are relaxed and moving naturally in harmony with each inhale and exhale helps re-develop and maintain a comfortable physical state with a clear and alert mind.

How to use Easy Breathing

1. Pay attention to the natural, effortless movement of your breathing cycle. Feel the movements and sensations.
2. Pay attention to the inhale, then the slight pause, followed by the natural exhale, and then another slight pause.
3. Do this for three or four minutes - paying

(In the beginning it is likely that accumulated tensions and poor breathing habits may have produced an uneven breathing pattern. If this is the case, you may find it helpful to first use the Sigh Breath method a few times to calm and regularize your breathing.)

Through practice you may discover ways of utilizing Easy Breathing as a *Quick Relaxer* - a way of relaxing quickly for a few moments. As you encounter these experiments to discover which methods you find most suitable for the different situations in your life.

When to use Easy Breathing

1. Whenever you wish to pace yourself and maintain a calmer and more centered internal state - at work, in sport, socially, etc.
2. When you wish to clear your thinking in order to give your full attention to an important matter.
3. As a Quick Relaxer - especially when it is inappropriate to relax with eyes closed, or to fully stop what you are doing.
4. To develop the habit of maintaining a clear mind and calm body. Use Easy Breathing in odd spare moments: in lifts, in queues, in waiting rooms, at traffic lights, during the TV 'adverts', while listening to someone, waiting on the phone, or when you are being delayed. In this way you can turn what might otherwise been a frustrating or irritating event into a beneficial and centering experience.
5. To develop an on-going natural awareness of your physical state - so that any chest tightness or breathing unevenness alerts you to take action to clear your thinking and calm your body.
6. To train yourself to feel mentally and physically comfortable even when under pressure.

Benefits of Easy Breathing

1. Helps defuse the physical effects of the stress response.
2. Provides an instant break and reduces frantic mental activity by centering your attention on a single issue rather than having it scattered.
3. Enables you to take a mental and physical break without stopping what you are doing.

4. Enables you to maintain physical comfort while being mentally active.

Learn to *Really* Relax

The practice or relaxation or meditation is not a mysterious or mystical experience available only to a select few adepts.

The ability to relax, or practice simple meditation, is a natural and valuable ability which we all possess, even though we may not have practiced it for many years. It's an innate skill which most of us have forgotten how to use. As very young children we could relax at will, anywhere: but most adults rely on artificial props to help them relax, such as alcohol, drugs, television, or even comfort-eating.

With just a little persistence, about 15 minutes a day, and maybe some relaxing music you can easily reawaken this natural skill.

Why (re-)learn to relax?

1. Relaxation enables you to take a break and switch off from the stresses of life whenever you wish.
2. It provides a few precious moments in which to re-charge your mental and physical batteries.
3. Relaxation is the bed-rock of effective stress management.
4. It enables you to stand back and switch off from problems - so that, often, when you return to them you can perceive solutions that had previously escaped you.
5. If you have intense fears or phobias, you will find your relaxation skills essential for using methods such as systematic desensitization to dissolve your fears.
6. Relaxation has been scientifically proven to be health enhancing (See *Beyond the Relaxation Response*, by Herbert Benson & William Proctor).

How to relax - with a relaxation tape

Get a good relaxation tape and spend a few weeks becoming skilled at switching off and deeply relaxing whenever you wish.

At first, it may be helpful to use a tape with a spoken commentary since this will take you through a series of steps to help you become deeply relaxed. However, once you have learned, in this way, the physical routine for switching off and relaxing you may find it best to use a music-only tape and to use your own imagination to relax deeply and to actively utilize imagery during the session.

How to relax - without a relaxation tape

The following is a simple method of relaxing which you can develop by using mental imagery aided, perhaps, by soft relaxing music:

1. Make yourself physically comfortable. Initially shrug, stretch, and then sit comfortably upright with hands resting on your thighs or lap. Use a few long exhales to help you settle. Keep your eyes open for now.
2. Pay attention to what you can see, hear, and feel.
3. Close your eyes. This gives your brain a break by reducing the amount of incoming data it has to process.
4. Now pay attention to what you can see, hear, and feel with your eyes closed.
5. Do five long exhales (*see next section below*). With each exhale relax, in turn, a different part of your body as follows (1) Your feet and legs, (2) Your hands and arms, (3) Your torso, (4) Your head and neck, (5) Your entire body. Pay attention to the relaxing effect of each of these out-breaths.
6. Now continue to allow yourself to switch off - breathing normally - paying attention to how your body can relax a little more each time you exhale.

The breathing method when relaxing

1. Breathe in through your nose fully but not deeply.
2. Hold the air no more than one or two seconds.
3. Allow the air out through your nose - prolong the out of breath so that it is long and slow.
4. Pause...while you wait for your body to naturally and easily inhale once more (again through the nose).

This method of breathing is key to enjoying a wonderful relaxation session. It is meant to be quite slow and completely effortless. No breath holding, no straining, no counting - just discovering the rhythm that is right for you, personally.

In particular pay attention to the pauses -- the brief pause at the end of your in-breath and the longer pause at the end of the out-breath.

Why relax in a sitting position?

Because many people may initially find relaxing to be quite soporific. Having been deprived of the quality of the deep rest which relaxation evokes, your mind-body can relax so deeply that you slip into natural sleep.

There is nothing wrong with this. In fact, it's a great way of getting to sleep at night.

However it is a good idea, in the beginning, to train yourself to relax in a sitting position so that you will be able to relax at will just about anywhere and for just a few minutes e.g. in the dentist chair, while waiting for a train or plane, before an important interview or presentation, etc.

Tips for your Relax Session

1. Years of 'normal' stressful living undermine our natural ability to switch off and relax anywhere, anytime. You are now simply re-learning this natural ability.

2. Relaxation is something you allow to happen. You cannot force the issue. It is a gradual process of discovering your personal forms of emotional and physical tension and then discovering the ways of releasing these which work best for you.
3. At first, most people find it much easier to relax the body rather than the mind. This is normal. You can certainly learn to allow your mind to become quieter - it simply takes a little longer.
4. For the first few weeks relax in a sitting position. It is easier to relax lying down but if you make yourself too comfortable you risk falling asleep or becoming too drowsy and this negates some of the benefits. (*See previous section, too.*)
5. There is no right way to relax! So rather than attempting to 'get it right' experiment to discover what works best for you.
6. The quality of your relaxation will vary considerably during any session. One moment you may think you are losing the experience and the next you may be even more relaxed than before. So if you think it is not working, decide to calmly stay at ease for another minute or so. Then, if necessary, give up and have another session 30-60 minutes later.
7. There is no 'right' time to relax. Take a break any time you like - especially when you notice tension or a negative mood beginning to build up. For the first few weeks, you may find it more beneficial to take lots of short 3-5 minute breaks. Most people find it useful to have a relaxing session at the beginning of the day.
8. Initially your tension level may rise again soon after a session and you may wonder what is the point in relaxing. Here remind yourself that had you not taken a break, the tension would now be much higher - and that these breaks are conditioning your body/mind to react differently to pressures.