

Managing Stress in the Real World

Creating a stress management plan that works is a process of exploring and experimenting. Begin by being curious about your particular sources of stress. Explore the factors that cause your body to create a “fight or flight” response, threatening to impact your health.

As your understanding about your stressors develops, experiment with ways to minimize the impact of these stressors on your life and health. Choose from a variety of strategies to find the ones that fit you best. Don’t stop at just one or two. It’s helpful to have several tools in your stress-reducing toolbox.

Learn more about your stressors

One of the most important things to understand about the stressful factors in your life is whether or not they’re under your control.

Some things—the traffic on your daily commute, say, or construction noise in your neighborhood—are clearly beyond your ability to control them, no matter how much you might want to. Stress you can’t control is best addressed with techniques, like those below, to relax your body and to help your mind handle the pressure more effectively

Other stressors are under your direct control. Choose less violent TV programs and movies, skip the evening news, and minimize unnecessary arguments. Inadequate sleep is a stressor, but you can enhance your sleep health with proven techniques. (In fact, fatigue compounds other stressors, so getting more rest is an important way to reduce your overall burden of stress.) If you’re stressed by too many commitments, you can change the way you schedule your time.

The key to reducing controllable stress is to create more balance in your life. Begin by making a list of the things in your life that are most important to you. If you haven’t considered this question before, making this list might take some time, but it is worth it.

Once you’re consciously aware of what’s important to you, decide how you’re going to make time for it. Simplify your life, doing less that’s not on your ‘Important’ list. Quit any unimportant activities that you persist in out of habit or a sense of obligation. Spend less money so you feel less compelled to devote long hours to earning it. Instead of being proud about how much stress you can handle, be proud of having a balanced life and attending to the things that matter the most to you.

Practice stress-reduction strategies

Stress-reducing techniques fall into two broad categories. The first focuses on inducing a Relaxation Response in your body; the second addresses thought patterns that add to stress.

Relaxation Response

The Relaxation Response is the antidote to the harmful ‘fight or flight’ physical reaction to stress. It results in slowed breathing and lowered blood pressure and heart rate. You can learn to induce a Relaxation Response with abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, and/or mindfulness.

Abdominal breathing

Under stress, you tend to take short, shallow breaths, using only the upper chest muscles to move air in and out. In contrast, relaxed breathing—what babies and sleeping adults do naturally—uses the diaphragm, a broad muscle at the top of your abdomen, to move air deeply through your chest.

To use diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing, lie flat on your back with your hand on your lower abdomen. As you inhale, try to push your hand up, breathing in and out through your nose. This may feel awkward at first, but it quickly becomes easier.

When you’re comfortable with the basic technique, practice abdominal breathing for relaxation with one of these methods. You can do these anywhere: in the car, at your desk, while waiting in line at the checkout counter.

- Breathe deeply into your abdomen, pausing briefly before you exhale, and counting “one” to yourself as you slowly release your breath. Continue counting with each exhalation until you get to ten, and then start over.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose, filling your abdomen and counting to five as you inhale. Hold your breath as you count to four. Slowly release your breath as your count to eight. Repeat for one to five minutes
- As you exhale while you’re doing slow abdominal breathing, mentally repeat, “relax,” “peace,” “love,” or another word that you find supportive and relaxing. Scan your body for areas of tension and relax it as you exhale. Continue for half a minute or so; you can repeat this ten to fifteen times a day.

Progressive muscle relaxation.

This strategy teaches your body the difference between tense and relaxed muscles. It helps you learn to recognize when you’re holding tension in your muscles and to release it intentionally.

- Lie down or sit with your head supported in an upright position.
- Start by tightening the muscles in your forehead for five seconds and releasing. Repeat the tighten/release exercise in turn with the muscles in your cheeks, jaw, and neck. Continue moving down through the muscles in your body, ending with your toes, tightening for five seconds and releasing.
- If you don’t have time for full body Progressive Muscle Relaxation, try this quick method:
 - Curl both your fists and tighten your biceps & forearms. Hold for five seconds, relax for fifteen seconds. Repeat.

- Tighten all your facial muscles and hunch your shoulders. Hold and relax as above. Repeat
- Breathe deeply into your chest and arch your back. Hold for five seconds and relax for fifteen. Take another deep breath and push out your abdomen. Hold and relax as above. Repeat both.
- Flex your ankles, pulling your feet towards your nose and tightening your shins. Hold for five seconds, relax for fifteen. Curl your toes, contracting your calves, thighs, and buttocks. Hold and relax. Repeat both.

Meditation

Once you learn abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing, you can learn to meditate. Research shows that meditation results in decreased heart and respiratory rates and oxygen consumption, as brain waves change to patterns characteristic of deep relaxation.

Don't be put off by the word 'meditation,' imagining that you'll have to wear a saffron robe or eat brown rice three times a day. Meditation is simply the practice of focusing your attention on one thing at a time, whether it's your breath, a flower, or a word that evokes peace and relaxation for you. You can do it sitting in a chair or on the floor or lying in bed. (However, since your body's natural response to relaxation is to drift into sleep, you might find it easier to meditate in a sitting position.)

It doesn't matter what you focus your attention on. You can just notice your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Walking meditation centers on the experience of movement: the placement of your feet, the feel of the ground underneath your toes. Mantra meditation focuses on a word or sound: "peace," "one," "love," "God is love," "I am safe." Choose any word or phrase that has meaning for you. Repeat it silently as you inhale. Or you can use both inhalation and exhalation to repeat a phrase: "peace" on the inhale "and love" on the exhale, for example;

Whatever word, object, or action you choose for meditation, focus your attention on it, simply allowing all other thoughts to pass by. You'll probably notice many thoughts arising. That's fine. Just observe them and bring your attention back to your breath or your chosen word or phrase.

The point of meditation is developing the ability to easily let go of your mind's thoughts by gently bringing your attention back to your focal point. So observe your thoughts without judging them or becoming 'hooked' by them. For instance, if you find yourself thinking that you have to go to the grocery store, don't begin making a mental shopping list or judge yourself harshly ("Oh, I'm not supposed to have thoughts! I'm no good at meditating"). You might find imagery helpful; I sometimes imagine that I'm sitting underwater and my thoughts are above me on the surface, just floating by.

Meditation takes practice, so it's best to do it regularly for at least ten minutes. You can start by meditating for five minutes; you'll benefit from it even while you're learning. Over time, slowly increase the duration of your meditation to fifteen or twenty minutes.

Mindfulness

It's a natural human tendency to wish that the present moment were somehow different. The tension between what is and what we'd like to experience causes stress. The practice of mindfulness emphasizes focusing your attention on the present moment – just as it is.

With focused attention, simple activities can bring an experience of pleasure and even joy. Try to recall a time when your attention was fully captured by something: gazing at the ocean or snuggling a sleeping baby, for instance. It was accompanied by a sense of calm and relaxation.

You can recreate that sensation as you move through your day. Imagine fully relishing the sensation of warm water on your back—instead of concentrating on the activities that await you once you step out of the shower. Or savoring the taste of a salad—instead of wishing it were a hamburger.

Begin practicing mindfulness by identifying a reminder to pay attention to and enjoy your breathing. Perhaps when the phone rings, or at the next red light, or by setting a timer on your computer. What reminder can you use?

At the signal, focus on the present moment, letting go of the desire to be elsewhere or doing something else. Feel your breath moving in and out of your body. Scan your body for tense muscles and relax them. Bring your attention to the sensations you feel as your breath moves through you for a moment or two. Repeat this at intervals throughout the day, allowing yourself to sink deeply into the present moment.

When practicing mindfulness, try slightly longer periods, too. Even for just two or three minutes, concentrate completely on what you're doing. If you're doing dishes, for instance, notice the feel of the dishes in your hands, the smell of the dish soap, the sounds of running water and cutlery clinking together. Try to become completely engrossed in the experience.

Whatever relaxation exercises you choose, do them daily and don't forget to include other relaxing experiences: a long, candlelit bath, a walk in the park, taking off your shoes and wiggling your toes. Use your body, too. Physical activity—aerobic exercise, yoga, or tai chi, for example—releases the lingering effects of the 'fight or flight' response.

Stress-free thinking:

Stress-reduction strategies that focus on your thought patterns interrupt the cycle of self-generated stress. How you interpret events in your life can significantly add to your total stress burden—or improve it.

You may believe that other people and life events make you feel certain ways. "That guy made me so mad when he cut in front of me." Believing that your feelings arise from external events adds to stress because your emotional well-being seems to depend on circumstances outside your control.

In truth, your feelings arise not from the people and events in your life, but from how you interpret them. In other words, your feelings arise from your thought patterns and beliefs. If you believe that inconsiderate jerks crowd the freeway system, immediate anger is a natural response to being cut off in traffic.

However, if you replace that belief with another interpretation, a different response becomes possible. Maybe the other driver is distracted because his wife just asked for a divorce. Maybe he's a physician en route to an emergency at the hospital. Each of these interpretations gives rise to feelings, too, but they're not an adrenalin-charged rush of anger.

Here's another example.

<i>Event</i>	<i>Stressful Interpretation</i>	<i>Feeling</i>
Being yelled at	"You won't like me any more"	sadness, rejection

With a different interpretation, the resulting feeling is different:

<i>Event</i>	<i>New Interpretation</i>	<i>Feeling</i>
Being yelled at	"You must be having a bad day"	mild annoyance, compassion

Healthy, realistic interpretations are key to reducing stress. By changing your thoughts, you change your feelings. And you can choose what thoughts you want to entertain.

It's very common for people to have irrational thoughts that contribute to stress. These are called 'cognitive distortions' and they occur in certain patterns:

- All or none thinking—seeing situations in black and white terms. "My project isn't perfect, so it's terrible."
- Overgeneralization—making sweeping assumptions based on no evidence. "You're mad at me, so everyone else must hate me, too."
- Catastrophizing—perceiving a small setback or error as horrendous. "I made a mistake, I'm going to lose my job."
- Minimizing—noticing only negative aspects to a situation. "So what if I got a raise? It's less than I wanted."
- Emotional reasoning—turning your feelings into facts. "I feel bad, so I must be bad."

To change your thoughts and reduce stress, experiment with these strategies:

- If you tend to catastrophize, try to forestall gloom and doom statements with a phrase like "That's unfortunate."

- Try reframing problems as opportunities by looking at them from a different point of view. No close parking? Instead of getting stressed, consider it an opportunity for some spontaneous exercise.
- Replace negative self-talk with positive statements. Instead of “I can’t do math,” try “In the past, I’ve had trouble with math, but I’m sure I can learn it”
- Try thought-stopping. When you become aware of irrational thoughts—imagined disasters, perfectionism, and minimizing positive events—say “STOP.” Ideally, say it out loud if and when you can. Then counter the irrational thought with a more realistic one: “It won’t be as bad as I think it will be.” “It may not be perfect, but I did the best I could.”
- Keep things in perspective. Will this problem matter in a year? Five years? Ten? Make a list of things that once seemed disastrous but are now only memories.
- Get outside yourself. Develop a connection with something bigger than yourself: religion, nature, a social cause. Or help someone in need; performing a willing act of service to someone else releases stress.
- Develop an attitude of gratitude. We grow accustomed to the positive things in our lives and need to remind ourselves to appreciate them. Start a gratitude journal, writing three to five things each day that you genuinely appreciate: people, experiences, comforts, and the like.
- Develop a “psychic spit shield.” If you’re having trouble with someone, imagine a shield between you that deflects negative energy away from you.
- Use affirmations as you move through your day. Include only positively phrased statements: “I am relaxed,” “I am calm,” “I am enjoying this moment.” Avoid negatively phrased statements, like “I am not tense,” for example.
- Get some support. Close friends can provide a valuable reality-check for your thought patterns and offer additional suggestions for reducing stress. Research proves that supportive social relationships can mitigate the effects of stress.

Learning to manage your stress more effectively is a trial-and-error process that will last the rest of your lifetime. It’s a valuable investment that will pay off many times over in improved health and enjoyment of life.

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