

Are You Experiencing a Little Stress?



Look Inside for Helpful Hints

All of us are concerned with stress. The amount of stress you may feel depends on internal factors – personality and mental state, as well as external factors – how much stress is in your daily environment? You can cope with stress easily or it can become difficult depending on the specific influence that induces your stress and/or anxiety. Your stress has the potential to cause severe mental, psychological, or medical problems if not handled properly.

Symptoms of Stress and/or Anxiety

Physical	Emotional	Mental
Heart pounding	Moody	Forgetfulness
Headaches	Irritability	Loss of concentration
Sweaty palms	Depressed/anxious	Poor judgment
Indigestion	Lack of or sense of humor	Disorganized
Skin breaks out	Abrasive	Fuzzy perception
Shortness of breath	Hostile	Confused
Holding breath	Nervous	Lack of interest
Cold hands	Emotional	Math errors
Sleeplessness		Stop thinking
Sleep too much		Diminished fantasy life
Fatigue		Negative self-talk
Nausea		
Diarrhea		
Tight stomach		
Tight muscles		
Pain		

Stress Relief Strategies

You may use a number of strategies to solve stress problems. For instance, some common solutions for work-related stress are simply to:

- Take some time off
- Reduce hours
- Go on a relaxing vacation

This will give you time to reduce the stress and recoup before returning to the daily grind.

Should you experience serious stress with psychological or physiological symptoms, you should, of course, seek professional help from a qualified medical professional. In the meantime and before the stress in your life gets out of control, you will want to use some of the following strategies:

- Get up 15 minutes earlier each day to ease the morning rush
- Plan your day, your work, and your month to feel more in control of your life
- Simplify your schedule, prioritize, delegate
- Learn to say “NO”
- Take occasional breaks to stretch or walk
- Get a good night’s sleep – 8 hours for adults
- Start the day with a good breakfast
- Exercise at least 20 minutes a day, three days a week
- Cut down on caffeine

Learn to Relax

Get comfortable – Lie down or sit down. Make sure your back and neck are supported.

Breathe – Inhale slowly, deeply, and evenly through your nose while counting to four. Exhale through your mouth.

Tense and then relax your muscles – This exercise will help you to feel the difference between tension and relaxation. Tense your right fist and arm for a few seconds, and then relax. Repeat this exercise and you should feel the difference between tensed and relaxed muscles. Repeat the above exercise using your left wrist and arm, and left and right leg.

Continue to relax other muscle groups – Jaw, shoulders, chest, stomach, and hips until your entire body is completely relaxed.

Use visualization to picture yourself in a pleasant and peaceful setting – Try to experience a particular setting, with all of your senses, as if you were there. For example, picture yourself on a beach, feel the warm sun, smell the sea air, hear the sound of the waves, etc.

Role-play dialogue – Role-play with someone in your setting to establish an interpersonal connection.

Suggest positive messages to yourself – Use positive messages such as “I feel relaxed”, “I feel good”, “I am in control”, etc.

* Repeat each day.

Stress Wear and Tear

Stress is the “wear and tear” our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings.

As a positive influence, stress can:

- Help compel us to action
- Result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective

As a negative influence, stress can result in feelings of:

- Distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.

With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, the loss of a job, or a new relationship, we experience stress as we readjust our lives. In so adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it.

Stress – Questions and Answers

How can I eliminate stress from my life?

As we have seen, positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Our goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected. On the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling “tied up in knots.” What we need to do is find the optimal level of stress, which will individually motivate but not overwhelm each of us.

How can I tell what is optimal stress for me?

There is no single level of stress that is optimal for all people. We are all individual creatures with unique requirements. As such, what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. And even when we agree that a particular event is distressing, we are likely to differ in our physiological and psychological responses to it.

The person who loves to arbitrate disputes and moves from job site to job site would be stressed in a job, which was stable and routine, whereas the person who thrives under stable conditions would very likely be stressed on a job where duties were highly varied. Also, our personal stress requirements and the amount which we can tolerate before we become distressed changes with our ages.

It has been found that most illness is related to unrelieved stress. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level; you need to reduce the stress in your life and/or improve your ability to manage it.

How can I manage stress better?

Identifying unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect on our lives is not sufficient for reducing its harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. However, all require work toward change; changing the source of stress and/or changing your reaction to it.

Some Suggestions for Managing Stress

- 1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.**
 - Notice your stress. Don't ignore it.
 - Don't gloss over your problems.
 - Determine what events distress you.
 - Determine how your body responds to stress.
 - Do you become nervous or physically upset? – If so, in what specific ways?

- 2. Recognize what you can change.**
 - Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?
 - Can you reduce their intensity – manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis?
 - Can you shorten your exposure to stress – take a break, leave the physical premises?
 - Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change – goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here.

- 3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.**
 - The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger – physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
 - Are you expecting to please everyone?
 - Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent?
 - Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?
 - Work on adopting more moderate views – try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
 - Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation into perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the “what ifs.”

- 4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.**
 - Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
 - Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help you gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure.
 - Medications when prescribed by a physician can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.

5. Build your physical reserves.

- Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three or four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging).
- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
- Maintain your ideal weight.
- Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants.
- Mix leisure with work. Take breaks, and get away when you can.
- Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.

6. Maintain your emotional reserves.

- Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
- Pursue realistic goals, which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
- Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
- Always be kind and gentle with yourself – be a friend to yourself.

Stress Reduction
23 Techniques that Relieve Tension & Stress
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When you are stressed-out, the first course of action is to reduce your tension and stress. Otherwise, you'll say and do things you later regret. Or, at the very least, you won't operate at peak performance.

Before dealing directly with the source of an undesirable or stressful situation, first get yourself into a more peaceful, balanced and resourceful state of mind. Then you will be able to see your situation more objectively and work on a more permanent solution.

Everyone has a favorite method of easing the pressures of tension or stress. Sometimes the methods we use are productive – meditating, exercising, deep breathing, journaling, listening to music. But sometimes we choose methods that cause more problems in the long run – for example, drinking alcohol to excess, smoking, ingesting drugs or overeating. It's best to find effective stress-reduction methods that have beneficial and positive long-term health benefits. Here are 23 techniques to try out. Remember that stress itself is not nearly as important as how you react to it.

1. Rearrange or redecorate your environment.

Color, light and sound are elements that engage and influence our senses. These elements can be soothing, pleasing and comforting, or they can be jarring, painful or even unhealthy.

2. Take a Break

No matter how difficult the situation may appear to be, a change of pace can help you open up new ways of looking at the problem. Stop what you're doing and find something else to do. Switch channels. Take a breather. Take a nap. Focus your mind on anything but the stress. For example, if you're working on a stressful task, find another task to work on.

3. Work it off physically.

When you're feeling sad, angry, hurt or upset, physical activity can help relax both your mind and your body. Use physical activities like walking, hiking, stretching, jogging, running, skating or riding a bicycle to release the pressure. Even a five- or ten-minute movement break can go a long way toward helping your body manage the symptoms of stress.

4. Learn time management techniques.

Like many people, you may get stressed out when you feel like you don't have enough time to accomplish what you need to accomplish in a given day. But you can "make" more time for yourself by managing your time better. Time management means different things to different people. For some, it may be as simple as jotting down a "to do" list. For others, it involves using daily planners and organizers to schedule their day. Sometimes you just need to learn how to handle interruptions that tend to devour your time.

5. Delegate responsibilities.

Are you a perfectionist who doesn't believe that anyone else could possibly complete a task as well as you can?

6. Listen to your body.

When you're tense, your body lets you know. Your heart beats faster, your muscles tighten, your breathing becomes shallow, and you experience any of a number of other familiar symptoms, such as a headache or queasy stomach. Start noticing your body's signs of stress and slow down or take a break when your body is signaling you. You can also take steps to build your physical reserves, such as getting plenty of sleep and eating nutritious, balanced meals.

7. Get plenty of sleep.

Sleep improves your ability to handle stressful situations. Provide an environment that allows you to get enough peaceful sleep each night. If there is a problem that interferes with your sleep, find a way to eliminate it.

8. Laugh it off.

Laughter is one of the healthiest antidotes to stress. Researchers have discovered that exposure to humor causes a measurable decrease in stress hormones, including epinephrine and dopamine, and an increase in immune system activity. When we laugh, even smile, blood flow to the brain increases and endorphins (painkilling hormones that give us a sense of well-being) are released.

There are abundant sources of humorous material – comedy programs on television, funny movies and videos, comedy clubs, humorous or satirical books, cartoons like Calvin and Hobbes and The Far Side, humor-focused discussion groups and newsletters, or a funny friend. A good sense of humor can help us relieve tension, dispel worry, relax and let go.

9. Talk it over.

When stress builds up, you can reduce the pressure by talking with someone who listens to you with compassion and understanding. Look for friends you can trust who won't be judgmental and will help you to find your own solutions, instead of telling you what to do. Seek the company of those who are optimistic and have high self-esteem. They tend to have low stress levels and contribute to lower stress levels in those around them.

10. Play it off.

The next time you're feeling anxious or stressed out, take a break and do something childish, like coloring with crayons, drawing a picture, reading a children's book, watching a cartoon or G-rated movie, playing with your children's toys or games (with or without your children), or playing with building blocks or an erector set.

11. Use affirmations.

Find attitude-enhancing phrases that resonate with you and repeat them regularly. Write little notes to yourself that say, "Smile more today," "Don't take things too seriously," "Don't sweat the small stuff," or anything else that reinforces a relaxed state of mind. Post these notes where you're likely to see them often (computer monitor, car visor, bathroom mirror, refrigerator door, etc.) Or perhaps you and a spouse, mate, family member, friend or co-worker can write little notes to each other and leave them in places where they're sure to be found. This practice can help remind you to relax.

12. Learn to say NO.

Many people have been raised to believe that there is nothing nobler than giving up self for the sake of others. They will frequently deny their own desires in order to please others, believing that the needs of others must come first. Whenever they're asked to do something, they answer yes without considering the consequences to themselves.

Taking too many responsibilities triggers stress. If you can't say no, you often end up not only with your own problems and responsibilities to attend to, but everyone else's too! Become more aware of your limits and learn when you have reached them. Practice saying no without feeling guilty. Remember, your first responsibility is to your own health and well-being. After all, if you're not healthy, you can be of little use to others.

13. Count your blessings.

The more you focus on life's problems, the more stressed out you feel. Likewise, the more you dwell on what you appreciate and love, the better you feel. Start asking yourself what is "right" with your life, reviewing in your mind or making a list of everything for which you feel grateful or appreciative. You may discover that you can't be in a stressed out state and an appreciative state at the same time. For this reason, appreciation can be one of the most powerful tools for poking a hole in the stress balloon and feeling better immediately.

14. Practice deep breathing.

Breathing! Can you imagine that? It's one of the simplest yet most effective ways to manage stress's effects on your body. When you're stressed, you have tendency to breathe more shallowly and rapidly, depriving your body of vital oxygen; some people even hold their breath under stress. To promote a relaxation response, you need to reverse this pattern by breathing slowly and deeply.

15. Eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet.

When you get stressed, you tend to overdose on certain foods, particularly sweets. Unfortunately, sugary foods (and that includes processed foods like pasta, rice and bread) quickly increase blood sugar levels in the blood stream and your energy drops as too much insulin is dispatched into your blood to balance the sugar rush. That drop in energy leads to irritability, which impairs your ability to stay centered and deal effectively with stressful situations.

Eating the "right" foods is essential to protect your body against air, water and food pollution. Balanced nutrition means eating a variety of foods that support physical health. For instance, eating LOW fat is not the same as eating NO fat. Your body needs fats to function optimally, but eating the "right" fats is essential.

16. Participate in stress reduction therapy.

There are dozens of therapies that can be useful for reducing or temporarily eliminating stress-related symptoms. These therapeutic modalities include:

- Applied and behavioral kinesiology
- Bio-sonic resonance therapy
- Bio-energetic harmonization therapy
- Herbal and homeopathic therapies
- Structural integration therapy
- Myofascial therapy
- Movement (aikido, brain gym, chi gung, t'ai chi, yoga, etc.)
- Bodywork (Rolfing, Swedish, ayurvedic, Oriental, sports massage, reflexology, Feidenkrais, myopractic, Alexander, etc.)
- TMJ occlusion balancing
- Chromatology
- Advanced balancing techniques
- Energy-based modalities (acupuncture, jin shin, shiatsu, reiki, meridian, massage, polarity, craniosacral, flower essence therapy, essential oils and aromatherapy, orthobionomy, biomagnetic therapy, inc.

17. Get a massage.

According to the Physician's Guide to Therapeutic Massage, massage can help increase blood circulation, lower blood pressure, reduce fatigue, increase restful sleep, enhance a sense of well being, and elevate mood. As the list in the previous section suggests, there are a variety of massage techniques to choose from. You can even get a quick foot, neck, shoulder or back massage, which can work wonders in relieving stress.

18. Keep an appreciation journal.

Keep a daily journal or list of things you appreciate, then refer back to it when you're feeling stressed to remind you that not everything in life is difficult or stressful. Here are a few examples of items to add to your appreciation journal:

- The wonders you felt as you learned a new idea or skill.
- The excitement of connecting through laughter or words with a friend or teacher.
- Acknowledgement you received from a supervisor, friend or mentor.
- The feeling of joy after lending a helping hand.
- Something you did for someone else that brought the person pleasure or joy.
- Something someone did for you that caused your heart to swell up with love.
- Your accomplishments in life.
- Your own valued qualities and talents.
- Being asked to join a club or group.
- Hearing the laughter of a child.
- Helping someone to learn something new.

19. Learn to relax.

You can reduce the negative effects of stress by learning how to relax your body and mind. Relaxation techniques take the pressure off your body by decreasing metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and muscle tension. Other benefits include:

- Reduced fatigue, neck and back pain, joint pain, migraine headaches.
- Improved sleep patterns.
- Heightened sensory perception and concentration.
- Decreased tension, anxiety, depression, anger or hostility.
- Release from negative thoughts (compulsive worrying, doubts, fears, etc.)
- Enhanced performance, efficiency and effectiveness.
- Improved immune function, which reduces susceptibility to infectious disease.

The body can be relaxed in a number of ways. Some people relax through self-hypnosis, meditation, prayer, visualization or various breathing, movement or energy techniques. Others use a combination of a number of these methods. The approach is not as important as how you feel as you do it. There is no one right way for everybody; what works for one person may not necessarily work for you. So experiment. If you feel more relaxed, centered, balanced and peaceful, then you've chosen a method that works for you.

A simple and effective way to relax the body is tense-relax method, which works as follows:

- Give yourself permission to take time for yourself.
- Turn off the telephone, close the door and create a private space free of interruption.
- Select a comfortable position for your body.
- Take a few deep breaths, breathing in and out slowly and concentrating only on your breath.
- Inhale and tighten the muscles of your right leg, foot and toes, holding the muscles taut for a few seconds.
- Exhale as you relax the muscles.
- Repeat step 5 and 6 for each muscle group.
 - Left leg, foot and toes.
 - Hips, and buttocks and abdomen.
 - Chest, back and shoulders.
 - Right arm, hand and fingers.
 - Left arm, hand and fingers.
 - Neck and jaw.

20. Declare yourself king or queen for a day.

Take a day (or half day) and put your needs first for a change. Many of us tend to put others' needs above our own, leaving little time for what we need and want. How about taking a "self-day" off from work or hiring a babysitter to look after your kids while you look after yourself? It's not selfish or irresponsible. After all, how can you take care of anyone else effectively when your own batteries are running out of juice? Isn't it time you made some time for you? You might be surprised at all the extra energy you have when you return.

21. Compare your situation to another.

When you think of people who are having a harder time than you are, you may be prompted to count your blessings. As the old story goes, there was a man who was depressed because he had no shoes, until he met a man who had no feet.

Problems are relative. No matter how bad you think you have it, there is always someone worse off than you. For instance, if you find yourself becoming impatient in line at a grocery store, remember that people in Darfur wait in line all day just for essential items like food rations or drinking water.

22. Take a private retreat.

One of the best things you can do for yourself is to take a private retreat every once in a while. Take a whole weekend to be by yourself and to take stock of your life. Ask yourself some important questions about the direction of your life. Are you living in alignment with your highest values? Are you giving enough time and attention to the things that matter to you most?

If not, then why not? Are you trying to be all things to all people? How can you simplify your life? What activities or habits are counterproductive to your happiness? What do you want? What kinds of relationships do you want to create?

You can use this retreat as an opportunity to get clear on your priorities and to arrange your life to support them. You may find that you return from your retreat feeling refreshed and inspired, with a renewed sense of purpose and direction, which can help alleviate the pressure in your stress balloon.

23. Declare a “gripe day”

Sometimes, try as you might, you just can't shake those yucky stressed-out feelings, and the only way to get rid of them is to “vomit” them up. When all else fails, you might want to declare a “gripe day” and make a game of it. Allow yourself to complain all you want, ad nauseum. Complain until you find the complaining ridiculous and can laugh at yourself. See if you can get to the other side of it. Sometimes it helps to ask a good friend to play this game with you. Or you can pour out your complaining in writing, tear up the paper and throw it away, or act out a little ritual in which you burn the paper and release all your problems.

Explore these different stress-releasing techniques until you find the ones that are right for you. In the process, you may learn more about the relationship between your thoughts, your emotions, your physical body and your overall well-being. This understanding will help you maintain your well-being in the face of stressful circumstances.

Pause and ponder.

Can you think of activities that make you feel good instantly? Most people have only a few, and some of the old favorites are unhealthy, such as bingeing on junk food, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and taking drugs. If these are your only options, you may want to expand your repertoire.

List ten activities right now that bring you instant tension release. If you can't think of ten, take out a sheet of paper and brainstorm all the things you could do to make yourself feel better. Do you have a special hobby you love? Does a particular subject enthrall you? What about a friend you love to talk to? List as many items as you can, and keep the list handy so you can refer to it for instant relief when you're stressed or tense.

Remember, though, that these are only temporary solutions. As long as you have not dealt with the real cause of your undesirable emotions – your perceptions – you will still generate the same thoughts, beliefs and perspectives that caused your stressful feelings and the feelings will eventually return. Of course, you will be more effective in transforming your perceptions when you're in a relaxed and resourceful frame of mind, so these quick-relief techniques can be invaluable.

Empowering Highlights

Here are some empowering ideas:

- When you slip out of the Flow Zone state, do whatever is necessary to feel better immediately.
- Pivoting to a more resourceful state of mind as soon as possible is important for a number of reasons:
 - Taking action from a place of stress is likely to produce more stressful effects.
 - You can't solve a problem from the same frame of mind you were in when you created it.
 - When you are in a resourceful frame of mind, you can see your situation more objectively and from a more positive and empowering perspective.
 - From a relaxed and balanced state of mind, you can more effectively explore and transform the perspectives that are causing your problems.
- Keep a list of personal activities that make you feel good instantly so you can refer to it in moments of stress.

These ideas are designed to help you neutralize your stress so that you can be in a more resourceful state of mind when you assess how your thinking contributes to your effectiveness.