3 Techniques for a Calmer Life

1. Meditation. University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers found that mindfulness meditation, long believed to reduce mental anxiety, actually produces physical changes in the brain and immune system.

Try it: Sit in a quiet place. Focus your attention on the present moment. Take note of thoughts and feelings as they come up, but do not judge or act on them. This may be difficult at first, and you may feel restless. Start out with just 5–10 minutes, and work up to an hour over time.

2. Biofeedback is a technique that trains a person to change his or her stress response using the body's signals. It is performed in a health care setting with a trained biofeedback coach and uses a machine that senses body changes, such as muscle tension or temperature. For more information, visit the Biofeedback Certification Institute of America (BCIA) at *www.bcia.org* or call the BCIA at 303-420-2902.

3. Talk therapy. Sometimes problems are too big for you to work out on your own, and an objective third party can listen and help you devise coping strategies. Talk with your doctor about finding a counselor or therapist who specializes in stress-related issues.

It's How You Perceive Stress That Counts

Studies have shown that it's not necessarily how much stress you are under, but whether or not you see yourself as stressed that affects your health. Your best bet is to have a more positive outlook.

Encourage optimism. Concentrate on seeing the positive in every situation. Surround yourself with positive people you enjoy spending time with. Keep your complaining to a minimum, and spend some time every day thinking about what you have to be thankful for.

Laugh more. Stress may make you feel as though you want to withdraw from the world, but having fun may give you some perspective. Read the comics, see a funny movie or call a humorous friend.

Avoid bad habits. Habits such as smoking cigarettes, abusing alcohol and drugs, being sedentary and overeating may make you feel better temporarily, but in the end they only cause more stress and hurt your health.

The bottom line: Living an active, happy and healthy life may help stress roll right off your back. Remember, it's hard to worry and laugh at the same time.

STRESS
Your Guide to Better Mind/Body Health

Good Stress?

In the form of competition, drive to exceed expectations or desire to improve, stress can be a great motivator. However, when you are unable to see value in yourself unless you win, negative stress results. ***Remember:*** Recognize yourself as worthwhile and successful, independent of performance.

Medical Editor: Zorba Paster, MD

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SPOTLIGHT ON STRESS: IT'S MORE HARMFUL THAN YOU THINK

The word "stress" has become so much a part of daily language, it's easy to take it for granted. However, stress does more than just make you feel anxious or give you a headache that goes away after a couple of aspirin.

4 Effects Stress Has on Your Health

1. Suppresses your immune system. Stress causes your body to produce a hormone called cortisol, which may make you more susceptible to colds, flu and infections.

2. Puts your heart at risk. Stress speeds up your heart rate and raises blood pressure. Chronic stress puts you at higher risk for chest pain (angina), irregular heart rhythm (arrhythmia), heart attack and stroke.

3. Causes digestive problems. Ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, colitis and other gastrointestinal conditions are worsened by stress. Even short-term stress can cause diarrhea, constipation or intestinal pain.

4. Adds to breathing difficulty. If you have bronchitis, asthma or another lung issue, stress can make it worse. It can even bring on an asthma attack.

To protect your health, you must learn to manage stress in a positive way. Read on to find out how.

When to See Your Doctor

If you have panic attacks, sleep disturbance, anxiety, appetite loss, fatigue or other problems that last for more than two weeks and interfere with daily functions, talk with a health professional.

Are You Stressed?

Many common day-to-day discomforts that you may tend to overlook could be signs that you are not managing stress well.

- Changes in eating patterns. You may lose your appetite or overeat.
- Aches and pains, especially in your neck, shoulders, back and head.
- Forgetfulness. Lost your keys for the fourth time this week? Perhaps you're under a lot of stress.
- Fatigue, tiredness and a drained or low-energy feeling.
- Moodiness. Stress can cause feelings of edginess, irritability and short temper.
- Sleep problems. You may find yourself sleeping too much or suffering from insomnia.

A Day in *Your* Life: How to Cope

What will today bring? Waiting for life to calm down will keep you reacting against stress forever. Instead, learn to be proactive and stay calm in the face of adversity.

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

FAMILY STRESS: Remember that positive changes such as a wedding, a move or a new baby can bring on just as much stress as such negative situations as financial trouble, job loss or divorce. ***Solutions:***

Communicate clearly. Arguing is a common reaction to stress. Avoid phrases that place blame, such as "It's your fault that," "You did/didn't" or "If only you would." Instead, use "I" statements, such as "I need you to help out more at home," or "I feel angry when our plans don't work out."

Strengthen relationships. Getting out of your regular routine to have fun as a family may help lessen stress. Plan an outing to the zoo, hike in the woods, play ball in the park or cycle around the neighborhood. Get together for a dinner or game night with the rule that no one can bring up anything negative.

WORK STRESS: Deadlines, commuting, competition, working with others, meeting client needs, changing shifts … the workplace is a source of stress for many people. Take charge and meet the challenge. ***Solutions:***

Separate work and personal lives. Having a healthy work/life balance can help you keep job stress in perspective. Take time to rest and recharge, build healthy relationships outside of work, sleep and eat well and develop personal hobbies and interests.

Ease up. Delegating work, asking for help and setting realistic priorities and deadlines can help release the pressure.

Exercise. When you're bearing down on a problem or feel you're at the boiling point, 30 minutes of movement can do wonders for you mentally and physically.

CHILDHOOD STRESS: You may think children aren't under stress, but daily pressures affect all ages. ***Solutions:***

Talk with your kids. Understand that children of any age can be upset by what they see and hear. Talk with them about it.

Recognize stress symptoms. Behavior such as bed-wetting, mood swings or rebelliousness may be reactions to stress.

EVERYDAY STRESS: There's no escaping traffic jams, lines at the store, fender benders, unexpected rainstorms and dozens of other small daily events that can add up to big stress. ***Solutions:***

Visualize. If the situation you're in is too much to bear … leave. Maybe you can't physically walk away, but your mind is free to wander. Think of a peaceful place, real or imagined. Focus on every detail — the air on your skin, the smells, the sounds. Allow yourself to escape and feel calm.

Breathe. Clearing stale air out of the lungs counteracts the stress response, which makes breathing shallow. Take at least 10 deep breaths, breathing out twice as long as you're breathing in.

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