

Feeling Stressed Out? Overwhelmed?

Here are some easy tips to help you relax in minutes...

The effects of stress tend to build up over time. Stress symptoms can affect your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behavior. Being able to recognize common stress symptoms can help you manage it.

Below are some ideas for different activities you can do to lower your stress. Pick a couple that look interesting to you, and try them out. If these help you de-stress, you can include them in your daily or weekly routine. If not, you can try others on the list, or come up with a list of your own.

If you have 1 minute...

Sit comfortably. Place one hand on your belly. Breathe in deeply as you slowly count silently "One...Two...Three". Feel your hand rise as you breathe in. Hold the breath. Now breathe out slowly, as you repeat silently "Easy...Easy...Easy". Repeat three times. Feel your body relax into the chair.

If you have 2 minutes...

Count down slowly from 10 to zero. With each number, take one complete breath in and out. Breathe in deeply, saying "10" to yourself, and then breathe out slowly. On the next breath, say "9". If you feel lightheaded, count more slowly. When you have counted down to zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, try repeating the exercise.

If you have 3 minutes...

Sit comfortably and check your body for tension. Relax the muscles in your face, letting your jaw drop open slightly. Drop your shoulders. Let your arms fall to your sides. Loosen your hands so there are spaces between your fingers. Uncross your legs. Let your thighs sink into the chair, as your legs fall apart. Feel your lower legs become heavier and your feet grow roots to the floor. Breathe slowly in and out.

If you live in situations of prolonged stress, you may feel irritable, anxious or distracted and you may have other health effects such as high blood pressure and decreased resistance to infections.

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing can be used in a stressful situation or periodically throughout the day. It is easy to learn, requires no special equipment, and can be done anywhere.

1. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest.
2. Breathe in through your nose slowly, to the count of 10.
3. Feel the hand on your belly move up as you breathe in and move down as you breathe out. The hand on your chest should not move.
4. Breathe out through your nose slowly, to the count of 10.
5. Concentrate only on your breathing and counting.
6. Repeat 5 to 10 times, several times throughout the day.

NOTE: If you cannot breathe through your nose, it is fine to breathe through your mouth, pursing your lips as you breathe out.

If you have 5 minutes...

Try a self-massage, focusing on your head and neck. Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a fist and drum up and down the sides and back of your neck. Then use your thumbs to make tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly use your fingertips to massage your scalp. Then tap your scalp with your fingertips, moving from front to back and then to the sides. Now massage your face. Use your thumbs or fingertips to make tiny circles, especially on your temples, forehead and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose, working over your eyebrows to your temples. Close your eyes.

If you have 10 minutes...

You will need to find a quiet room to try imagery. Sit comfortably and breathe deeply for a few minutes. Now picture yourself in a place that holds good memories for you. What do you smell—bread baking, salt air, the scent of flowers in a field? What do you hear—the crash of waves, a mountain stream, the rustle of wind, gentle music? What do you see? What do you feel? Use all of your senses to focus on this pleasant place. If other thoughts come to mind, notice them, but then return to the place you have created. Notice your feeling of relaxation.

With practice, the feeling of relaxation and the image of your special place will be linked, so that simply recalling the image, even for a few moments, will help you relax.

If you have 30 minutes or more...

Exercise is a great stress management technique for at least two reasons: exercise is a distraction from the stressful events in your life and exercise is good for our heart and blood pressure—so if stress is causing your blood pressure to be up, exercise may help bring it down. Even better, if you can exercise with a family member or friend, you have the added benefit of accomplishing a goal together. Walking is excellent exercise and best of all, it's free! Even a short, 10 minute brisk walk, can relieve stress. Consider a couple of short walks each day, if you cannot find 30 minutes at once. Consider getting up 15 minutes earlier to walk in the morning combined with a short walk at lunchtime.

Yoga or Tai Chi are both effective stress management techniques, combining breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation, while toning muscles and improving balance. You may consider a yoga or Tai Chi class, or look for an instructional DVD at your local library.

Whatever exercise you decide is the one for you, start small. If you do not exercise at all right now, 10 minutes three times each week is a good place to start.

There are many techniques to help us manage stress. These techniques do not work effectively for everyone—you need to try several techniques to find the ones that are best for you. Before you start, it's a good idea to visit your health care provider and discuss how you are feeling with him or her.

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