



Relax: How to Let Go of Stress

You're familiar with the symptoms of stress -- a pounding heart, increased perspiration, tight neck and shoulder muscles, anxiety and fear. But you may not know how to prevent or relieve these symptoms.

Taking the following actions can help you manage the negative effects of stress.

Exercise

A regular workout can release pent-up frustrations. The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends getting 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise at least three or four times a week. Choose any aerobic activity you like, such as walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, stair climbing or step aerobics.

If life is too hectic for such a commitment, you also can find relief through brief periods of exercise: If you work at a desk, get up and take a walk around the building for 15 minutes, or go up and down a few flights of stairs.

Don't isolate yourself

One of the best ways to fight stress is to discuss your problems with a close friend or relative. Talking to other people helps you realize you're not alone and can help you put a difficult situation in perspective.

Besides relieving the pressure of dealing with a problem by yourself, talking things out may lead you to a solution. If you can't find someone to talk to, or you have difficulty talking about what's bothering you, writing about the situation in a journal can be effective as well.

Live in the present

Take a moment to think about the causes of your stress. Many of them may come from thinking about the past or worrying about the future. If you can plant yourself firmly in the present, you can leave many worries behind and focus more clearly on solutions to current problems.

Quiet your mind and imagination

In times of stress, the mind makes things appear worse than they are by creating endless versions of impending disaster. Because the body can't tell the difference between fact and fantasy, it responds with heightened physical response and mental anxiety.

Pay attention to your diet and health habits

A sensible diet of wholesome, healthful foods can help stabilize your moods. Consuming too much caffeine, sugar and alcohol or any nicotine or illegal drugs can increase your stress, making coping more difficult.

Make time for laughter and fun

Surround yourself with positive people who like to laugh. Watch funny movies instead of the news in the evening. Engage in fun or silly activities. You'll find laughter really is one of the best remedies.

Immerse yourself in a favorite activity or hobby

Participating in a pleasurable activity will give you a block of time when you're focusing on an interesting task instead of on your problems. Gardening, carpentry, fishing, sewing, working with clay, painting or playing cards may appeal to you.

Use a variety of relaxation techniques

Deep-breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, visualization, creative imagery, yoga, meditation or listening to relaxation tapes can help relieve stress.

Relaxation techniques are skills that can be learned and practiced. If you don't know how to do any relaxation exercises, take a class, read a book or listen to a tape on the subject.

Balance your life

If work is causing you stress, immerse yourself in a favorite activity when you get home. But focus more on work if a family problem or relationship is the cause of your stress.

Above all, take time for yourself, whether it's for a daily walk, a hot bath or a quiet night at home. Taking good care of yourself helps you let go of stress.

If these techniques don't work, and your stress impairs your capacity to function at work or at home, speak with your primary care doctor or a mental health professional