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More Than A Month Of Stress Relief

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More Than A Month of Stress Relief

The following is a collection of over fifty tips and techniques that help people relieve stress and manage stress-related symptoms. If you do one thing a day, you'll have more than a month's worth (closer to two) of stress-busters in your arsenal.

The information here can and will help you. The ideas here are proven to be effective and they're also very easy! I have tried to provide explanations for why these things work; I believe that an understanding of the principles makes it easier to choose the tips and customize the technique to best suit your situation.

I encourage you to test drive each idea at least twice. Make a handful part of your daily routine. Use the rest as they fit your life.

As always, this information is not intended as a substitute for medical or psychological care. Contact your healthcare or mental healthcare provider if you have chronic or severe symptoms.

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Acknowledge Your Limitations

Remember that it's OK to say no. Don't blame yourself or feel guilty when you can't effectively juggle any more. There are things that you can't control, and that's perfectly acceptable.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is one of the oldest forms of stress relief, dating back to pre-biblical times. It works by activating the limbic system, which includes the parts of the brain that handle olfaction (our sense of smell), long-term memory, and emotion (including the fight-or-flight response). It takes the brain about twice as long to process those reflexes as it does to process smell. This means that a soothing scent in our environment can bypass the fight-or-flight response.

Vanilla has been long recognized as a relaxing scent, probably because we associate it with sweets - especially baked goods. Our first experiences with those kinds of treats are often as rewards or after school or dinner, leaving us feeling content, loved, and cared for. They are also usually loaded with serotonin, which adds to the positive emotional feeling.

Other scents to try include chamomile, sage, bergamot, or eucalyptus.

Art

You don't have to be Picasso to use this as stress relief. It's the perfect creative outlet for self-expression, and you can use anything as your medium. Not sure where to start? Coloring is exceptionally soothing; it only requires a simple, repetitive movement. If that seems a little dull, work your way up from finger painting or making dry macaroni mosaics!

One study in England found that even viewing art for as little as 40 minutes could reduce cortisol (the stress hormone) levels by one third. So if creating isn't your thing, go to the museum.

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Art, whether you're creating or appreciating, is distracting. It evokes feelings that stress represses, especially negative emotions, so we can allow ourselves to experience them and then move on.

Become a Hermit

If you're naturally an introvert, too much time around people can be exhausting and stressful. Take time to isolate yourself and recharge in solitude.

Breathe

You don't have to do the whole "om" thing, but just taking a moment to breathe deeply will get more oxygen into your system. More oxygen, less tension.

Breathing exercises force you to be mindful of your body. When you breathe deeply, the way you would if you were relaxed, it sends a message to your brain to calm down. The brain forwards this to the rest of the body. There are a variety of different methods, so experiment and find what works best for you.

Change Your Focus

Another way we bring stress on ourselves - our focus. For example, if I define myself by my job, it can become everything. I get up and get ready for work, I drive to work, I work, I drive home from work, I spend the weekend trying to maximize my time away from work, just to spend a good 50 or more hours focused on work the next week. Crazy!

Instead, plan your day - not just the work day, but your personal time. Get ready for your whole day, not just your work.

Clutter Control

Decluttering our environment, home or office is a natural stress reliever. It is a surprisingly powerful way to regain

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simplicity and balance in our thoughts and our behaviors. It seems to clear away the extraneous so that the important and fundamental aspects of our lives can more easily shine forth.

Control of clutter is a core element of feng shui. Clutter saps energy. A lack of energy makes stress more difficult to handle. It also makes it more difficult to get up and declutter! This has the potential for a vicious cycle. Gain control, gain energy and a sense of calm.

Communicate

If there's a problem in a relationship that's causing stress, talk about it early. Don't blame anyone, don't trivialize anyone else's feelings or perspective, and work together to find a solution.

Contingency Plans

Set these up for regular use. Then, if you're running late or get separated or have to meet someone at the airport, everyone knows what to do.

Cut Back on Caffeine

A cup of coffee has between 100 and 125 mg of caffeine. A can of cola runs 40 to 50 mg, which is a lot less, but is that one can the only caffeine you consume all day? Your total daily intake can add up quickly.

The problem with this is that a mere 250 mg of caffeine is enough to interfere with quality sleep. And 350 mg limits your ability to focus on a specific task for any real length of time. Good sleep and concentration are conducive to stress management. Help yourself and cut back if you need to.

Decorate

If you decorate just one room in your home in a way that encourages relaxation, you have a sanctuary. At least once every

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quarter, make it your weekend assignment to decorate at least one room for the season.

Comfort is a must. Live plants are nearly a necessity: they are inviting plus they purify the air. A few additional seasonal items might be all it takes. Even if the decorations or flowers clash with the overall scheme of the room, they'll make it a little more welcoming.

Down Time

If you're an introvert, you might need a little solitude and space in which to relax and recharge.

Eating Habits

You can't overlook decent nutrition. The nutrients in healthy food benefit our bodies and brains, helping us combat the physical effects of stress and making us more resilient to it in the first place. Plus, eating right can help us avoid the compulsive overeating that stress can trigger. (See *Food*)

Exercises

Anything goes - exercise boosts serotonin levels and makes you feel better. That "runner's high" isn't just for runners. You can walk, swim, lift weights, dance, or climb a mountain. Any active movement that gets your blood pumping is good for you, and the boost of endorphins always makes you feel better.

Family Time

Eat as many meals together as you can, even if it means juggling schedules a little. Spend a few minutes each day or a half hour on the weekends doing family chores together. Designate one evening a week as family night; order pizza, watch a movie together, make ice cream sundaes, go to the park, or play games.

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One stressor on the family as a unit is not spending enough time together. Different schedules and communication via technology serve to disconnect us instead of supporting our family bonds. Quality time, even if there still isn't as much quantity as we'd like, improves communication and gives each family member positive attention.

Finances

Use cash, check, or debit card for as many regular purchases as possible and save your credit cards for larger planned purchases.

If you're struggling to put 10% of household income into savings, vow to save 5%. As soon as you're comfortable with doing that, bump it up to 7% and keep track of the difference. Use it for a chunk of the shopping next holiday season. Then go from 7% to 10%, and it will be a lot less painful.

Check your credit report every year. It's free from the three credit reporting bureaus, and it's your right as a consumer.

Money is a huge stress-point for many people. Gaining some control over your financial situation will help.

Food

Beyond proper nutrition, the choices we make can help.

Complex carbohydrates, like those found in vegetables, fruits, and whole grain breads, cereal, and pasta, create serotonin when digested, which produces a sense of calm and relaxation. Specifically, look for vitamin B6, which helps with the production of serotonin.

Anything with enough tryptophan, the chemical compound we convert to serotonin, can contribute - citrus is a great source, and it won't make you sleepy! Sunflower seeds can increase selenium, helping us handle emotional stress.

Green vegetables, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and legumes replace magnesium depleted by stress. Salmon and tuna

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are great sources of Omega-3 fatty acids, which reduce the stress hormone cortisol, as does black tea. Blueberries and citrus are good sources of vitamin C, which fight oxidative stress.

Forget the Future

Take a break from worrying about tomorrow or next week or next year. Focusing on the present will help prevent a lot of counter-productive "what if" thinking. When you're more relaxed, plan ahead, but limit your time if you find it keeps causing stress.

Fun

Don't forget you are allowed to take a vacation. If you can't spend two weeks on your own private island, there are still lots of ways to have fun and get away from many of the sources of stress.

Recreation is a distraction from stressors, but it's a positive way for us to release emotions. Laughter is wonderful medicine, but simply having a reason to smile for a while works, too!

Gardening

Gardening, like art, allows for self-expression and creativity, but brings out a sense of nurturing. When we care for plants, it grounds us. And of course, the oxygen that plants put into the atmosphere is a definite perk.

A large outdoor plot may not be practical for you, but there are plenty of kitchen herb "gardens" that fit in smaller spaces, and several house plants that will thrive even if you don't have a green thumb.

Gardening works in a few ways to relieve stress. First of all, there's the outdoor factor. Sunlight, vitamin D, and fresh air can do wonders. Next, even caring for a houseplant gets us in

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touch with nature. And the beauty of nature, in flowers or a harvest, is a rewarding stress reliever.

Get Help

Sometimes we bring stress on ourselves by trying to take on the world solo. If you need a little help, ask. Or delegate. But relieve yourself of at least a few minor tasks each week.

Herbal Remedies

Many herbs have long been known to have healing and remedial properties. Chamomile or catnip (mint) tea is calming, ginger tea can help reduce anxiety - and the abdominal symptoms that go with it. St. John's Wort is a Natural Reuptake Inhibitor (NRI) and is often used for depression, but is equally effective for stress because it improves neurotransmitter function, as does Gingko.

Check with your doctor if you are taking any medication, as many herbal supplements can impact their effectiveness.

Hugs

Somebody said we need seven hugs a day. These may not be physical, but you can find other ways to make them happen. Give yourself a mental pat on the back when you accomplish something substantial, unpleasant, or worth being proud of!

Humans are social animals. We need positive physical contact with other humans. Contact with someone you are comfortable hugging causes the brain to release endorphins. At the same time, the light pressure of a hug stimulates nerve endings under the skin; they transmit calmer messages to the brain, which slows the release of cortisol.

Leave Work

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When you go home, go home! Your commute, no matter how long or short, is a time for you to refocus your attention to home, family, a good meal, relaxing, your pets, or whatever good thing awaits you. Let your mind naturally shift from work to what you are physically directing yourself toward.

Light Therapy

We usually tend to feel the effects of stress increasingly through the day, and they may be strongest in the evening. Light therapy allows us to bring natural light rhythms into our controlled environments, and being more in harmony with nature relieves stress.

When the sun goes down, start dimming the lights inside. Reduce your late-night exposure to computers and TVs, and keep your bedroom as dark as possible when you sleep, to help you sleep more deeply and restfully.

Massage

You don't need me to tell you this is a great stress reliever. It would be heavenly to have your own personal massage therapist available at your beck and call, but even a one-minute neck rub can be soothing. Or get some peppermint lotion and give yourself a foot rub when you're able to sit and relax for a while.

As with hugs, the skin contact relieves stress and promotes a sense of calm. Massage improves circulation and increases oxygen flow to muscles, which relieves physical tension and boosts the immune system.

Music

Load up your MP3 player or your stereo with music that makes you happy. But be aware of the tempo - if it's too upbeat, you might feel more wired than relaxed. Choose music with a rhythm slightly slower than your normal heart rate (so 60 to 70

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beats per minute would probably be good). Not too loud, either; it's ideal as background music.

If you have musical talent, play something. If you sing, use your voice. Use pencils and drum on your mousepad. Create a new tune or jazz up something to express your artistic side.

So far, we don't know exactly how or why it works. But music decreases adrenalin and increases serotonin. Listening to music before bedtime has been shown to help people sleep better and longer.

Get Organized

Taking back control over the general chaos of life can not only reduce stress, but also prevent it. Start with the areas that produce the most stress.

If getting the kids off to school is a challenge, take time on a Saturday and create a new or improved system so it goes smoother on Monday. If you're so busy you're starting to forget things, organize your time. If you can't find what you need in your office/kitchen/family room, take everything but the furniture out and then put things back where you're most likely to need them. It's a little work, but it will pay off!

Consider Personality

Before stress has a chance to settle in, think about whether it's real stress, or if you're the kind of person who naturally wants to know how, what, when, and all the rest of the details. Some people are like that (like me) - we really feel better when we know the details ahead of time. Not knowing causes stress and anxiety.

If this is you, learn to be firm with your personality so it doesn't get the best of you. Remind yourself that there have been many times in life you didn't know what the day/week/year would bring, and you turned out just fine anyway. Not knowing can be okay, too.

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Pets

Many families and individuals have pets. When's the last time you spent time grooming or training or really playing with your pet?

Pets are great stress relievers. Caring for an otherwise helpless creature is empowering and gives positive control. Pets require regular play and exercise, which is good for us, too. Pet owners generally are more social people and tend to have more social support. Pets are usually good listeners, they keep secrets, and provide unconditional love.

Plan Ahead

Going to a movie? Great! Leave earlier, in case there's a line at the box office or concession stand, or you forgot you need to get gas first. Allow a little time between appointments.

Think about what you'll need for tomorrow before you go to bed tonight, so you don't have to rush to polish your shoes. Polishing your shoes isn't stressful. Getting dressed isn't stressful. But getting dressed in a rush and realizing your shoes are scruffy and you've got a major presentation in an hour could be stressful!

Prayer

Meditation is a fine way to gain clarity, find focus, or even indulge in a brief escape from the pressures of the world. But sometimes, you might want to do all that, plus talk to Someone who loves you and cares about you, and has the power to help.

Spiritual people are generally better able to cope with stress, they heal faster, and experience greater health and well-being. A connection to God helps people remember they aren't responsible for everything.

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Preventive Maintenance

Regularly check the oil and tire pressure on your vehicle. Practice the same kind of maintenance on all the things you depend on so they don't break down at the worst time - your teeth, your relationships, and so on. Stock extra batteries for your TV remote, too!

Be Proactive

You hear lots of people complain when stress strikes. They sound victimized. "Why does this always happen to me?" "What did I do to deserve this?" But self-pity or playing a victim role doesn't resolve anything. Get proactive and start changing the situation.

Rate It

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is a perfectly hassle-free day and 10 is a major crisis), rate the cause of your stress. Most issues are under 5. While they can add up on your shoulders, just knowing that they're relatively weak makes them easier to manage.

Read

Flip through a magazine or take a vacation and escape with a book for an evening. Reading isn't just pure escapism, though. It also requires concentration that stress dilutes, so it's a good mental exercise. Just be sure you have good light, and don't choose anything that may increase your stress; newspapers are out.

Reduce Exposure to Pollutants & Toxins

Besides the pure physical stress that these things cause, they also contribute to physical signs of emotional stress, like dry or prematurely aging skin, dull or dry hair, brittle nails, digestive problems, and so on. Detox for a day by eating healthy, breathing less-polluted air, and drinking plenty of water. Give

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yourself a facial and don't put on makeup after - allow your skin to breathe.

Between cleaning out the junk, and increasing vital water and oxygen, the entire body can function better.

Reframe

The frame is the lens or point of view you use that defines your reality. Become a movie director and look at things another way - reframe the situation. You can do this by changing certain features of the situation. For example, maybe you can try seeing a problem as a challenge, or rudeness as a misunderstanding.

You can also do this by evaluating your beliefs and values. Maybe something about the situation is important to you, but not important within the context of the situation, so you can downplay it.

Relaxation

And then, sometimes the very best thing to do for natural stress and anxiety relief is to stop. *Rest*. The most common advice I hear people give to someone who is stressed is, "Relax." It's easy to say, not so easy to do. But it is possible. Usually we just need to give ourselves permission to do it!

Repetitive Tasks

When your brain won't stop or doesn't want to shift gears, sometimes a no-brainer task actually helps. Sweeping, vacuuming, shoveling snow, raking leaves, or pulling weeds are all mostly mindless tasks that are soothing in their simplicity.

Shopping

There's a reason some people call it "retail therapy." Go browsing for a new treasure. It doesn't have to be expensive;

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something as simple as a new houseplant or some bright Post-Its can make you feel better.

Silence

Having a TV or radio on for background noise is actually a source of environmental stress. If you think you need something, make it a CD and let it play at a lower volume. Over the span of a week or two, reduce the volume and amount of listening time until you're able to function with quiet.

Sleep

Sleep actually plays an important role in stress management. When you sleep, stress hormone levels return to normal. If you aren't getting enough sleep, hormone levels remain high and usually lead to stress-related physical symptoms.

If sleep is a problem, institute bedroom rules: it's a place for sleeping and sex only - no TVs or other technology (other than your alarm clock). Set and stick to a bedtime routine, just like when you were a kid - this trains your body and brain to start shutting down on a regular schedule.

Smile

You may feel like stress has removed all causes for smiling, but try it anyway. Smiling is something we do when we're relaxed, but doing it also helps us relax. If you need help, incorporate laughter via a funny movie or TV show.

Social Media Strike

Being all things to all people is stressful. Unless you're an SEO, limit your time on Twitter and Facebook. I use several social media sites as part of my daily Internet presence management, but it only takes an hour of my day.

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In addition, there are plenty of duplicate sites that are happy to steal your time and energy. Klout, Kred, and TrustCloud, for example, all serve a similar purpose. Do you really need to actively participate on all three? Ditch the sites that don't serve a real purpose for you.

Start Your Day Positively

Get up just five minutes earlier and read a daily devotion. Drink a glass of juice. Make your own CD of upbeat, motivating music, or download some to your MP3 player to listen to while you're getting ready for your day or while you're on your way to work.

Stop Smoking

Nearly every smoker says that smoking helps them relax, but in reality, smoking has the exact opposite effect. Smoking increases blood pressure and pulse rate and decreases circulation; it takes about 20 minutes for these to return to normal after a cigarette.

If you go eight hours without a cigarette, oxygen levels in your blood rise to healthy, normal levels. Oxygen helps your body recover from environmental stress, relieve headaches, muscle fatigue, and is a key factor in the anti-aging benefits of antioxidants.

No substance addiction is easy to quit. But deep down, you know you're better off without it. Your body knows and tries to tell you. It's like the guy who kept banging his head into the wall. Somebody asked why he did it, and he said, "Because it feels so good when I stop."

Take a Mini-Vacation

Change your computer's desktop to an image that allows you to escape for a few minutes. It might be a scenic beach or mountain scene, a waterfall, an image from deep space, or

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nothing but chocolate! Even at work, try to take five consecutive minutes each hour and allow the image to inspire a brief daydream.

Vent

Talk to a friend or spouse about what's stressing you. Don't keep it to yourself. Be sure your listener understands you aren't looking for solutions, just someone to empathize with you.

Healthy venting gets out all kinds of negative emotions like anger, frustration, discouragement, or anxiety by releasing those feelings relatively quickly after they develop.

But "quickly" is the key. Research shows that if we have to wait long to vent, it can actually increase stress, by causing us to refocus on the stressor instead of letting the passage of time diminish unpleasant emotions naturally. It's like adding fuel to a fire.

So if you have an outlet, use it promptly.

Visualize

Take three long, slow breaths. As you do, imagine a peaceful and relaxing scene - a flower-filled meadow, a waterfall, the beach, etc. Alternatively, when you're in the shower, visualize the water washing your stress down the drain. Even just a few seconds are effective.

Visualization helps relieve stress because it changes our breathing patterns. We breathe more slowly and deeply. Engaging as many senses as possible requires mental focus. This means we can't think about stressors! It reduces anxiety and calms the body.

Vocabulary

Are you truly "stressed out" by not knowing, or are you just curious? Are you seriously angry or just a little irritated?

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Over-dramatizing your own emotions artificially increases your stress. Using more accurate words to describe feelings helps.

Wardrobe Makeover

If your clothes or shoes are physically uncomfortable, doesn't fit properly, or constantly need adjusting so you feel comfortable in them, it's time to make some changes. Pain and discomfort cause stress. Wearing something that doesn't make you feel confident could also be a source of stress. Find a wardrobe that fits and is appropriate but comfortable. Make it over one piece at a time, if you need to.

Water

It's our first environment, we're mostly made of it. Is it any wonder it helps us relax? Anything from a brisk swim to a warm (not hot) bath can dissolve stress. The best use of water, though, is using it to rehydrate.

The human body is roughly two-thirds water. The human brain is over 80% water! While most people drink lots of fluids through the day, they consume a lot of caffeine and sodium. Both of those ingredients deplete water.

Even with chronic moderate dehydration, the body can function well enough. The brain, however, does not do so well. Dehydration can mimic dementia - and has been misdiagnosed as such!

Dehydration has a negative effect on memory, ability to focus attention, and even the ability to do basic math in your head (like what time to set the alarm). This overall inability to think straight means the brain's ability to regulate appropriate responses to stressors is probably compromised for most dehydrated people.

The flip side to simply hydrating is sealing in the moisture. The brain can lose water and cell function if there aren't enough fats.

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Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids (from fish), especially help form and protect brain cell membranes. Oleic acid (found in olive oil and nuts) is also helpful. Your grandmother probably told you that fish was brain food, and she was right. These days, you can opt for a supplement and avoid her big spoon of cod liver oil. But a daily dose will help ensure that the water you drink goes to good use.

Check the Weather

Online or on TV, check your local weather forecast. It may just be more of the same, but mentally think of a few things the weather ahead is perfect for. You don't have to do any of them, but the creative exercise is good for helping your brain switch gears.

Weather permitting, make sure to get some sun exposure. (Use good sense concerning sunscreen.) Some stress symptoms could be warning signs of developing seasonal depression, so be sure to get some vitamin D. If the weather won't cooperate (or it's too hot or intense for several months straight), at least take a supplement.