Address Your Stress: Simple Techniques to Try

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Most individuals view stress as the result of external forces when, in fact, the issue is internal. Stress is a conversation. It's not about what is going on in your life or your work; it's about what's going on in your head. The good news is, if you change your perspective, you can profoundly change your experience. Correspondingly, you will change your stress level, efficiency, productivity, energetic capacity and mood state.

When you're feeling stressed, negative self-talk is created, repeated and eventually internalized. Thoughts like "I don't have enough time" and feelings like "I have a constant weight on my shoulders" are debilitating perspectives on many levels:

- Psychologically, they create the feeling of being overwhelmed.
- Physiologically, they produce a catabolic chemical state and sap you of energy.
- Pragmatically, they decrease productivity because everything, even small tasks, can come to feel daunting.

To better understand how to control your stress level, consider the following formula:

Your thoughts create your moods.
Your moods create your behavior (or lack thereof).
Your behavior creates your results.

If you don't like the results you are getting (e.g., stress, anxiety, deliverables that are unfinished), what you need to change is the root cause—your thoughts, which are the drivers that are sabotaging the results.

Within any difficult situation lies tremendous opportunity for growth, learning and even transformation. During stressful times, even very independent individuals will be open to new perspectives, experimentation and unorthodox solutions. It's a window when coaches, therapists or even books can provide a powerful intervention that will impact and influence so deeply, it can systemically alter how you see the world and how you navigate life forever.

The next time you're feeling frazzled, try using the following behavioral, mental and physical stress reduction techniques. Play around with them. Have fun. Use one at a time or a combination. Discover which techniques work best for you.

Behavioral Strategies

▪ **Practice saying "no."** Overscheduling yourself is a surefire path to feeling stressed and overwhelmed. To achieve a more balanced, peaceful, authentic life, one of the most important words you can add to your vocabulary is "no." You may have trouble using this word because you worry about hurting others' feelings, appearing as though you're not a "team player," or even seeming like you're weak. However, by respecting your limits, setting boundaries, and prioritizing your commitments, you can better achieve what is really important to you and find extra time to devote to relaxing activities.

▪ **Adopt a healthy lifestyle.** Some amount of stress is unavoidable, but by incorporating regular exercise, a healthy diet and at least a few close friendships, you can structure your life in a way that helps you better relieve stress and stay healthy.

▪ **Consider your job fit.** How well do your strengths and interests fit your current job responsibilities? For example, do you like to focus on the details or the big picture? Do you prefer flexibility or structure? Are you more comfortable working as part of a team or on your own? Does your current job stimulate and excite you? The more closely your strengths and interests line up with your life's work, the happier and more fulfilled you will be.

▪ **Break every 90 to 120 minutes.** Research shows that our capacity to focus and be productive diminishes greatly after 90 to 120 minutes. So, set a timer or phone alarm and break up your work day by simply switching activities for 10 to 20 minutes. Grab a snack and recharge, listen to music, take a walk—it will help you return to your task rejuvenated and refreshed. Be sure to set the alarm for your break time as well, as we can easily lose track of time when we're doing pleasurable things or procrastinate to avoid returning to the "grind."

You can also use this strategy to break your day into chunks of time. Use short chunks to take care of less time-consuming "to do" items that start to add up. This small but steady approach can help keep ongoing tasks from overwhelming you.

▪ **Control interruptions.** Studies indicate that you lose, on average, 20 minutes of productivity every time you are interrupted. Therefore, silence the cell phone, ignore text messages and stop checking your emails (turn off the volume so you can't even hear the emails arriving in your inbox). Instead of responding to these as they come in, set aside time to check and reply to them. For example, you may choose to do this once an hour or perhaps after you have completed each of your priority tasks. Let's not kid ourselves—most things can wait.

▪ **Start with what you least want to do.** Avoid stressing about the hardest, most dreaded or most time-consuming tasks on your list by completing them first. This accomplishment will give you a boost of energy and confidence to attack the rest of your “to do” list.

▪ **Break it down.** When you think about all that you need to accomplish, it can seem insurmountable. Make it less intimidating by breaking down projects into individual tasks. Write each task on an index card, organized in order of priority. Each day, set aside time to tackle at least one card and discard it when complete.

▪ **Unclutter your space.** Whether it’s at your office or in your home, clutter can drain both your energy and time. For example, how much do you stress about your messy house, especially when you have guests coming to visit? Or how long do you spend looking for your keys every morning, sorting through piles?

Here’s a strategy to try—focusing on one room of your house or one area of your office at a time, separate your things into four boxes: to keep, to store, to donate and to throw away. Unless you need it or love it, consider pitching it.

▪ **Read a book.** One of the easiest ways to get a new perspective is by considering another person’s point of view. Read a book on the topic of stress management, such as one of the following:

- “The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook” by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay
- “Stopping: How to Be Still When You Have to Keep Going” by David Kundtz
- “Time and the Art of Living” by Robert Grudin
- “The Simple Living Guide: A Sourcebook for Less Stressful, More Joyful Living” by Janet Luhrs
- “Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence” by Vicki Robin

▪ **Delegate. Delegate. Delegate.** Both at work and at home, you really don’t need to do everything, do you? Make a list of everything you hate doing, errands someone else can run and mundane things that another person can do after some minimal training on your part. Then, sit back and watch relief set in and time open up.

▪ **Create systems and processes.** Create a standardized grocery list for shopping each week. Set up a bill payment system in your calendar and pay bills online. Create a “home” for everything so you can find items quickly and put things away robotically. Have things delivered—your groceries, dry cleaning and whatever else you can. Houseclean in 10-minute chunks to tackle this ongoing

task in a systemized, efficient manner. At work, develop a filing system for both electronic files and hard copies that makes it easy to locate documents at a moment's notice.

Mental Strategies

▪ **Mental "staycation."** In order to avoid or overcome negative feelings, refocus your mind on positive images. Visualize yourself in a safe, peaceful nature setting—lying on a hammock at the beach, walking through a bamboo forest, hiking past a waterfall, etc. It can be made-up or real. Use all five of your senses—what does this place look, smell, sound, taste and feel like? Go through each sense slowly. Revel in the beauty that surrounds you. Savor the smells attached to the location. Lose yourself in the experience. Just a few minutes are all you need to recharge.

▪ **Try meditating.** The exercise of focusing your mind reinforces the principle that you have the power to choose your thoughts. As you practice meditation, you will notice that you have certain thoughts over and over again. In fact, most of your thoughts today were your thoughts yesterday; they are habitual patterns. By becoming more aware of these patterns, they will begin to lose their control over your life. And meditation doesn't have to be performed while seated in the lotus position; you can meditate while walking, running, eating, etc. "With regular meditation, a person feels more focused and calm in [his or] her life, more capable of making new choices in the moment, and less prone to engage in struggle and reactive responses."[1]

▪ **Identify and minimize negative thoughts.** Often, people get caught in a pattern of negative thoughts. They tell themselves, "I'm so overwhelmed" or they ruminate about the past and worry about the future. This increases the production of negative hormones in the body and initiates and maintains the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Here are the ABCs of managing your mood state:
A: **Awareness**. When you catch yourself thinking negatively, stop and bring yourself back to the present moment. By all means, don't beat yourself up for having negative thoughts. Be gentle.
B: **Breathe** diaphragmatically (see below for instructions).
C: **Check** your perspective. Ask yourself, "Is what I am saying to myself helpful? Is what I am saying true? Or is it a negative opinion without evidence?" For example, if you catch yourself saying, "I'll never get this done on time" (opinion with no evidence), shift to asking yourself a question that begins with "*What can I do right now to* move this project toward completion?" or *"How can I* approach this task more effectively?"

Physical Strategies

▪ **Breathe.** Hands down, the fastest way to slow your body's physiological stress response is to engage in deep diaphragmatic breathing. While breathing in through your nose, concentrate on filling your belly with air like a balloon. Hold your breath for a count of 2, then, exhale slowly through your mouth until your belly flattens. Breaths should be at a ratio of 1:2, with exhales about twice as long as inhales. Try counting to 4 as you inhale, hold for the count of 2, then exhale to the count of 8. Continue this pattern for at least 60 seconds.

▪ **Progressive muscle relaxation**. While lying down or sitting in a chair, focus on tensing one muscle group at a time for five to seven seconds each, starting with your head and face. Once you release the tension in a muscle group, then concentrate on relaxing it for 20 to 30 seconds. If a specific muscle is hard to relax, practice tensing and relaxing it up to five times. Work your way down your entire body, repeating the process over and over again.[1]

▪ **Get a good night's sleep.** One of the best things you can do to beat stress is to invest in a good night's sleep. However, when you've had a stressful day and finally lie down to sleep, your mind may race with thoughts of all that you still need to do. To help fall asleep and provide for a productive tomorrow, try the following exercise. Think of a topic, such as U.S. cities. Then, work your way through the alphabet by naming a city that begins with each letter. If you're still awake by the time you reach "Z," work your way backward through the alphabet or begin with a new topic. This repetition focuses your thoughts and fatigues your brain.

▪ **Eat protein throughout the day.** Your brain needs it. This will help your concentration, energy and staying power. We've all had the experience of food rejuvenating us or draining us. Refuel thoughtfully. Choose foods like nuts, peanut butter and high-protein bars to keep your brain working at its highest capacity, especially during busy days.

A Worthy Investment

Stressful events present the opportunity to shift the lens through which you view the world. To a great extent, you can't control external forces, but you *do* have the power to choose how you react.

By practicing stress reduction techniques on a regular basis, you will be better able to tolerate and respond to future challenges. Consider it an investment in your health, happiness and well-being.

Source

[1]Davis, Martha, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay. *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. 6th ed. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2008.