



Life Can be a Stress Test

Stress Management

World-wide studies demonstrate that mental health is associated with risk factors for heart disease. Having depression, anxiety, stress, and even PTSD over a long period of time, can affect your body. Your heart rate and blood pressure may rise, blood flow to the heart may lower, and you might have higher levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, which can cause inflammation or other issues.

No matter what is happening in your life, you can use heart-mind tools such as those on the next pages to lower your heart rate and blood pressure, increase the amount of oxygen in your blood, improve circulation, and lower your anxiety and hostility. Not only do these techniques improve your mood, they can also improve your health.

For information on these activities, visit heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management

SLOW, DEEP BREATHING

Have you ever paid attention to how your breathing is tied to your mood? Simply slowing down your breathing can calm you down. You can use this technique at any time or place. It may be helpful at a stoplight, when you are place 'on hold' when on the phone, or even when getting into bed at night.

- 1 Either lying down or sitting quietly, place your hands on your stomach.
- 2 Take a deep breath in through your nose; your stomach should expand or rise. Count to 10 while breathing in.
- 3 Pause.
- 4 Breathe out through your mouth—you may want to make a blowing sound as you breathe out.
- 5 The breathing out should be about half as long as the breathing in. Count to 5 while breathing out.
- 6 Each time you breath out, try to release feelings of tension and stress.
- 7 You may wish to picture breathing in energy, hope and peace and breathing out what is old, tired, and negative.

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BODY SCAN

This exercise takes 20–40 minutes. You may want to keep your eyes open if you have trouble staying awake.

- 1 Lie on your back in a comfortable place.
- 2 Allow your eyes to gently close.
- 3 Feel how your belly rises and falls each time you breathe in and out.
- 4 Take a few moments to feel your body as a 'whole' from head to toe. Notice which parts of your body are in contact with the floor, mat, or bed.
- 5 Bring your attention to the toes of your left foot. Try to direct your breathing to this area, too.
- 6 Allow yourself to feel any and all sensations from your toes. You may not feel anything, and that is OK. Just keep focused on your toes, and breathe in and out as best you can.
- 7 When you are ready to move on, take a deeper breath in and out. Now focus on the sole of your foot. Just like you did with the toes, allow yourself to feel any sensations, and continue to breathe in and out.
- 8 When you are finished with the sole of your foot, continue this scanning process for other body parts: the heel, top of the foot, ankle, lower leg, knee and thigh. Then start on the toes of your right foot and move up your body until you reach the top of your head.
- 9 As you bring your attention to different body parts, breathe in and out for several moments as you think about what you feel.

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MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

The goal of mindfulness is to be aware of what is happening right now, to focus your mind on the present moment, and not the future or the past. During this practice, you will focus on one thing—a word or phrase, the breath, body sensations, or sounds.

- 1 Get in a comfortable position either sitting or lying down. If sitting, try to have your back straight and let your shoulders drop or relax.
- 2 Close your eyes softly.
- 3 Try to follow your breath—breathing in and out—without changing how you breathe.
- 4 Follow the air coming in then follow the air going out. You might focus on one spot like the tip of your nose as the air passes by, or to your belly rising and falling with each breath. Imagine you are riding the waves of your breathing—in and out, in and out.
- 5 When you notice your mind has wandered off the breath, just bring your attention back and start over again. Try not to get upset with yourself for getting “off track.” This is natural. The goal of this practice is to notice when your mind has wandered and to gently bring it back to the object of focus.
- 6 If you have chosen a word or phrase for your focus, silently repeat the word or phrase. Notice when your mind has wandered, and simply start over, silently repeating the word or phrase.
- 7 Start out with 10 or 15 minutes of practice like this each day. Over time you may wish to stretch out the time to 20, 30, or even 40 minutes.

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GUIDED IMAGERY

Daydreaming is an example of how our mind or imagination creates mental pictures. Guided imagery allows you to create a safe, relaxing place where information can be shared between your body and mind.

In guided imagery, when you imagine you are doing something, you activate the same areas of your brain as when you actually do them. This practice can be used to relax, by imagining yourself going to a special place where you feel safe and calm. It can also be used to create healing images, such as a healthy heart.

The example below guides you to a special place for relaxation.

- 1 Sit in a chair with your back supported, and your shoulders relaxed. Allow yourself to sit back and relax. Loosen any tight clothing. Take off your glasses and gently close your eyes.
- 2 Allow your attention to move to your breathing. Let your breathing become even and comfortable.
- 3 Now, think about a special place. It can be a real place, a place you may actually have been; a beautiful spot in the woods, at the beach, or a comforting place in your own home. Your special place may be an imaginary indoor or outdoor place. It doesn't matter. If more than one place comes to mind, allow yourself to stay with one of them.
- 4 The only thing that matters is that you are in a place where you are completely comfortable and safe. Appreciate this scene with all of your senses. Smell the smells, feel the air as it caresses your skin, experience the ground securely under you, and touch and feel the whole environment that you are in.
- 5 Notice what you are wearing. Notice what you have on your feet, what time of year it is, the time of day, how old you are. Notice whether you are alone or with another person or people. Notice the color that surrounds you. What is the temperature? Warm? Cold? Notice the things about the place that make it safe and comfortable.

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- 6 Look around you. Is there anything else that would make this place safer for you? Perhaps you need to remove something from the place. Or, do you need to bring something in? Notice how your body feels in the place. Take some time to enjoy this feeling of safety in your special place.
- 7 Thank yourself for taking this time for yourself. You may wish to promise yourself you will visit this place again when you need to.
- 8 When you are ready, at your own pace, let your breathing deepen. Gradually let the awareness of your body against the chair return.

Bring yourself back slowly and comfortably.

When you are ready, gently open your eyes with a smile on your face.

YOGA

Yoga is a series of gentle stretching and strengthening exercises or postures that can improve strength, balance, flexibility and awareness. If you do it slowly, yoga can be a form of meditation and an excellent way to help manage stress as well as exercise the body.

You may find yoga classes in your community, or even online. There are different types and intensity levels of yoga sessions, so make sure to check the description to make sure the class is right for you.

TAI CHI

Tai chi (pronounced “tie chee”) is similar to yoga, with slow, gentle movements that are like a meditation in motion. Besides helping to manage stress, tai chi may help to increase fitness, strength, balance and flexibility. Tai chi is low impact. It doesn’t put too much stress on your muscles and joints so it a safe exercise for people of all ages and levels of fitness. Some studies have shown fewer symptoms of heart failure, and a lower risk of falls in older adults who practice tai chi regularly.

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EXERCISE

Physical activity and exercise improves your emotional as well as your physical fitness. Getting outside for a walk or bike ride can take you away from a stressful situation and help you to get rid of nervous energy. Being active helps you relax and sleep better. When you get a good night's sleep you are better able to manage stress.

MANAGE YOUR TIME

We all have just 24 hours each day. Learning to manage time better may help you get done what you need to, and feel less stressed.

Here are some things you can try, in order to better use the time you have:

- ➔ Decide what is the most important thing to do that day and do that first.
- ➔ Avoid trying to do too much in one day. It's OK to say no.
- ➔ Use a calendar, or planner, and check it before you agree to do something.
- ➔ Limit time wasters—such as surfing the internet.
- ➔ Experts suggest checking emails and making phone calls at specific times each day, rather than responding to constant interruptions.
- ➔ Get organized. If your physical surroundings are well organized, you won't be faced with the stress of misplaced objects and clutter. Make it a habit to regularly clean out and sort through the messes of paperwork and clutter that build up over time.

Check off the things you will do to lower your stress:

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|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Exercise | Just say no |
| Practice deep breathing | Keep my calendar up to date |
| Get organized | Limit time wasters |
| Learn to meditate | |