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Stress-relieving tips to try every day

Whether it's the pressure of work, family life or a looming deadline, most of us have stress from time to time. There are lots of ways to reduce stress. So, if you're feeling the strain, try some of these simple stress-busters?

Stress isn't necessarily a bad thing: "Stress can be useful - in a sporting context or even in the workplace, short-term stress may improve performance," explains Dr Chi-Chi Obuaya, consultant psychiatrist at Nightingale Hospital.

However, if stress is excessive or continuous, we can begin to suffer negative effects: "If stress is ongoing, it can have a negative impact on mental health."

Stress affects millions of people every year, and while stress in itself is not a mental health problem, it is linked to problems including [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), [self-harm](#) and even [suicidal thoughts](#).

We also know that long-term (chronic) stress can have an impact on your physical health, affecting [blood pressure](#), [digestion](#), and even causing [fertility problems](#) in some cases.

Take a mindful pause

[Mindfulness](#) - the art of focusing your mind on the present moment - is widely acknowledged as an excellent way to reduce stress. And you don't need to spend hours at a class in order to practise.

Vari McLuskie, mindfulness and meditation trainer, recommends taking a mindful pause during your day. "Stop and breathe three times to become fully present. Let go of your thinking, anxieties and plans and just focus fully on the breath. This will give you a short break from the busyness of your own mind and your day," she explains.

Visualise the positive

When we're stressed, most of us tend to picture the worst-case scenario – which can worsen our negative feelings.

Psychologist and clinical hypnotherapist Geraldine Joaquim of Quest Hypnotherapy explains: "We are predisposed to overthink negatively; it's part of our brain's survival system. This negative speculation causes us to release stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol to get us ready to run or fight."

To counter this, Joaquim suggests visualising positive outcomes. "By doing this we can change the chemical response, releasing hormones such as serotonin and dopamine, which keep us on an even keel and help to cap the levels of cortisol – so when we do hit a moment of stress we are in a better place to cope with it," she explains.

Step away from the biscuit tin

When we're stressed, it's tempting to reach for stimulation in the form of sugar. Sweets, chocolate, crisps and other convenience foods may offer a short-term energy burst, but long-term can be damaging to our health and even increase stress levels.

Dietitian Laura Clark says: "Poor food choices may lead to energy slumps, and make us feel irritable and strung out."

"To regulate your blood sugar (glucose) levels, aim for balance in your meals. This means including some wholegrain carbohydrates such as brown rice noodles or wholemeal pitta, with some lean protein such as chicken, fish or pulses."

As well as preventing the highs and lows that come with a glucose hit, eating a balanced diet can help us to feel better in the long term.

"Balanced eating also encourages the body's uptake of amino acid tryptophan – needed for serotonin production. This can counteract the effect of raised cortisol levels in the body, which occur when we're under pressure," adds Clark.

Move your body

Taking a break from your desk to go for a walk, or incorporating more activity into your evening, could have a calming effect on both mind and body. And we can [incorporate exercise](#) into our daily life – whilst you might not have an hour to spend at the gym, most of us have the time for a short walk during the day.

"Exercise is a very good coping mechanism – it gets dopamine flowing in our brain and has calming effects," says Obuaya.

Release the pressure

If you're feeling your stress build, try this simple release recommended by reflexologists:

- Using your left thumb, repeatedly press slightly above the centre of the palm on your right hand for around 30–60 seconds.
- Hold for a few seconds more.
- Repeat on your left hand.
- Repeat as necessary throughout the day when you feel the need to de-stress.

Repeat a positive mantra

When you're feeling negative or stressed, repeating a positive phrase could work wonders. Psychologist Joaquim explains: "Positive Affirmations were developed in the 1970s by neuroscientists, incorporating a modern understanding of psychotherapy and linguistics in order to consciously rewire thought patterns towards more desired outcomes."

"It's as simple as saying short phrases like:

- Today I'm going to greet everything with an open mind and an open heart.
- I am in control of my life; I can choose what I accept or not.
- I love myself as I am.

"It's a way of starting your day on a positive note, with a calm and positive energy, and using them if feeling under pressure during the day to induce equilibrium," she adds.

Try essential oils

Many people find that certain essential oils can have a calming effect and even create a relaxing atmosphere in your home or office.

Aromatherapist Lisa Basso says: "For stress, I'd recommend lavender, clary sage or camomile oil - and make sure you choose essential oils rather than a simple fragrance."

Using oils needn't take up too much time - "simply heat 4-6 drops of your chosen oil in a diffuser, or even put them on to a nearby radiator," explains Basso. "However, if you're pregnant, always consult a healthcare professional before using essential oils."

Create a pre-bed routine

When we feel under pressure, our [sleep can suffer](#), and working long into the night may be counterproductive.

Joaquim says: "During the night our brains go through essential 'download' processing, moving events into our long-term memory banks, and also carrying out necessary waste clearance. Lack of sleep - less than five hours per night - has been linked to Alzheimer's disease, and long-term poor sleep has been linked to cognitive decline."

The psychologist recommends the following:

- Introduce the idea of creating [a pre-bed routine](#), starting roughly 90 minutes before you want to be asleep.
- Start by turning lights down, have any last drinks or snacks, and switch off screens.
- Ensure your bedroom isn't too warm and that it is as dark as possible - if necessary, use an eye mask if there is intrusive light - such as street lights.
- Use a relaxation audio to help promote good sleep.

- If you stick to a routine, your brain will get used to the cues and will wind down quicker once the habit is embedded.

Whilst excess stress can be harmful, learning how to remain calm could help you to keep cool and remain healthy.

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