

Techniques for Managing Stress

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No single technique is effective for managing all stressors. You may need to use more than one of the suggested methods or use different methods at various times in your life.

#1 Diaphragmatic Breathing

When people tense up, they often breathe more rapidly and shallowly. Diaphragmatic breathing counteracts this pattern. It encourages you to use your full capacity for breathing and emphasizes a long, slow exhalation, thus creating relaxation.

1. Assume the relaxed position (eyes closed, passive attitude, comfortable position, quiet room).
2. Begin to focus on breathing. Allow your breathing to become regular and natural as you inhale and exhale through your nose. Remember that breathing is a peaceful, natural process. Each time you exhale, allow some tension to leave your body and allow the relaxation to come in.
3. As you begin to feel more and more relaxed with each breath, try one (or more) of the following vehicles to deepen your feeling of relaxation:
 - Imagine the air that comes to you as a cloud. The cloud comes to you, fills you and then leaves you.
 - Imagine your lungs as a balloon (you may want to put your hand on your chest). As you inhale, your lungs expand like a balloon, and as you exhale your lungs deflate.
 - As you inhale, say the word "in" to yourself. As you exhale, say the word "out."

Try each of these techniques at different times to see which works best for you. For some people the visual images are more powerful, while for others the word formula (such as "in" and "out") works better.

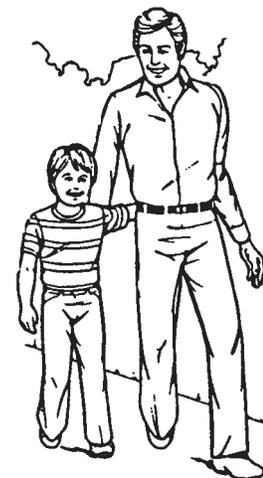
Try to focus on one of the images or word formulas for several minutes. Tell yourself to relax more and more with each breath. You may discover that your mind will wander from the image or word from time to time. This is normal. Simply return to your word or image and continue to relax.

#2 Creative Escape

Creative escapes give us a break from our stress. Remember the old saying, "Run away to fight another day?" Use a creative escape to leave a stressful situation and come back to it ready to solve the problem.

Here are some creative escape stress management activities that might be helpful:

- Take a walk.
- Read a favorite book.



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- Start a hobby.
- Play your favorite music.
- Work in your yard or garden.
- Plant some flowers indoors.
- Cook something special, bake bread or try a new recipe.
- Play a musical instrument.
- Invite a new friend to your home.
- Be really good to yourself. Set aside some time to do something you want: 30 minutes of quiet, a soak in the tub.
- Play tennis or get involved in an active sport that will give you exercise.
- Visit a friend and talk about what it is that causes you unpleasant stress.
- Write someone that you haven't heard from in a long time.
- Give your time away to a child, as a volunteer in a hospital or wherever your efforts will make you feel good.
- Plan a fun trip.
- Explore a place you've never been: a flea market, a gun shop, a doll store, a museum, a nature trail, a video game store, a historic site, an old home, a Civil War battlefield, a do-it-yourself building center or a neighbor's favorite collection.
- Rent a metal detector and explore a field, lot, roadside or campsite.

#3 Self-Talk

You can change what you are saying to yourself. You must be convinced that thoughts cause emotions. Since thoughts cause your stress symptoms, then changing your thoughts will reduce or do away with your stress symptoms.

Here are some hints from Davis on changing your self-talk:

- Imagine an event that was stressful, and notice all the details of the situation: what was said, smells, sounds, etc.
- As you imagine the event, let yourself feel uncomfortable – feel what you felt then – don't avoid feeling it.
- After you feel the stressful emotion, *push* yourself to change it. You can change depression, anger, guilt, etc., to disappointment, annoyance and regret. Everyone can push themselves to change a feeling, if only for a few minutes.
- Having contacted the stressful feeling and *pushed* it briefly to a more positive emotion, examine how you did it. What did you tell yourself?
- Instead of saying "I can't handle this" – you may be saying "I can do it." You have changed your belief system so you can now substitute the new ideas as you wish. Put time into finding out what

you have to say to change your feelings. For best results, practice this technique 10 minutes a day for two weeks. You need to be persistent.

Here's a list of sample situations and alternative emotional responses.

Situation	Stressful Emotion	Appropriate Emotion
Failure to get crop loan	Anger	Irritation
Criticized by spouse	Worthless	Annoyance
Declaring bankruptcy	Depression	Disappointment

Fill in your own stressful emotions and include what you would like to feel.

Situation	Stressful Emotion	Appropriate Emotion
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

More self-talk ideas from Davis:

- Make a list of all the things you are worried about – rate them from 1 to 10 – with 10 being the big worries. Start out with only one of these and change your self-talk for it.
- Interrupt your thoughts...from your list of worries, choose one to worry about – set a timer for three minutes. When the timer goes off – stand up – and empty your mind of all worry – keep your mind empty for 30 seconds. If the worry comes back, say aloud "Stop." *Now* substitute a positive statement for this worry. It takes awhile to stop unwanted thoughts, but they will return less often as you practice.
- Another way to stop thoughts is to wear a rubber band on your wrist and pop it when you get to thinking about a worry.
- Write out a few pleasant, positive messages to yourself. Put them in your pocket and read them occasionally.

#4 Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them to create awareness of tension and relaxation. It is termed progressive because it proceeds through all major muscle groups, relaxing them one at a time, and eventually leads to total muscle relaxation.

Instructions:

Step 1. Assume a comfortable position. You may lie down; loosen any tight clothing, close your eyes and be quiet.

Step 2. Assume a passive attitude. Focus on yourself and on achieving relaxation in specific body muscles. Tune out all other thoughts.

Step 3. Tense and relax each muscle group as follows:

- **Forehead** – Wrinkle your forehead, try to make your eyebrows touch your hairline for five seconds. Relax.
- **Eyes and nose** – Close your eyes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.
- **Lips, cheeks and jaw** – Draw the centers of your mouth back and grimace for five seconds. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your face.
- **Hands** – Extend your arms in front of you. Clench your fists tightly for five seconds. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your hands.
- **Forearms** – Extend your arms out against an invisible wall and push forward with your hands for five seconds. Relax.
- **Upper arms** – Bend your elbows. Tense your biceps for five seconds. Relax. Feel the tension leave your arms.
- **Shoulders** – Shrug your shoulders up to your ears for five seconds. Relax.
- **Back** – Arch your back off the floor for five seconds. Relax. Feel the anxiety and tension disappearing.
- **Stomach** – Tighten your stomach muscles for five seconds. Relax.
- **Hips and buttocks** – Tighten your hip and buttock muscles for five seconds. Relax.
- **Thighs** – Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.
- **Feet** – Bend your ankles toward your body as far as you can for five seconds. Relax.
- **Toes** – Curl your toes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.

Step 4. Focus on any muscles which may still be tense. If any muscle remains tense, tighten and relax that specific muscle three or four times.

Step 5. Fix the feeling of relaxation in your mind. Resolve to repeat the process again.

Remember, people respond differently to various activities. Some feel pleasant or refreshed, and others feel calm and relaxed after an activity like this one. Some people notice little change the first time, but with practice, their control increases – as well as the benefits. If you practice this activity, your relaxation should increase.

#5 Relaxation Response

The relaxation response is a meditative technique that causes the heart to slow down, the muscles to relax, the blood pressure to lower, the adrenal glands to stop secreting their powerful adrenalins and the stomach to stop secreting strong acids.

Instructions:

Step 1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.

Step 2. Close your eyes.

Step 3. Deeply relax all your muscles.

Step 4. Breathe through your nose and say the word “one” each time you breathe out.

Step 5. Do this for 20 minutes maintaining a passive attitude; don’t try to bring about the desired physiological response.

#6 Autogenic Relaxation

Autogenic relaxation is a technique using imagery and suggested feelings of heaviness and warmth in the limbs to recognize a relaxed state and call upon it when needed.

Instructions:

Step 1. Assume a comfortable position. You may lie down; close your eyes, loosen any tight clothing and be quiet.

Step 2. Assume a passive attitude. Focus on yourself and on achieving a state of relaxation in specific areas of your body. Tune out all thoughts of other events or happenings.

Step 3. Repeat the word formula as follows. Keep the words in sequence and repeat each formula silently. Allow all your body parts to become heavy, warm and relaxed.

Step 4. Focus on your state of deep relaxation. Remember, repeating the procedure increases your ability to relax.

Word Formula:

My right arm is heavy.
My right arm is heavy.
My left arm is heavy.
My left arm is heavy.
My arms are heavy and warm.
My arms are heavy and warm.

My arms are heavy and warm; warmth is flowing into my hands.
 My arms are heavy and warm; warmth is flowing into my hands.
 My legs are heavy.
 My legs are heavy.
 My legs are heavy and warm.
 My legs are heavy and warm.
 My breathing is calm and regular.
 My breathing is calm and regular.
 My breathing is calm and regular; I am at peace.
 My breathing is calm and regular; I am at peace.
 I am at peace.
 I am at peace.

#7 Imagery and Fantasy

Imagery, fantasy or visualization can be defined as perception of an event in the absence of actual external stimuli. In addition to your visual sense, imagery includes hearing, smelling and touching. Fantasy may be thought of as mind pictures of places, sounds, feelings of joy, reverie, fear or fright.

You can use imagery and fantasy as techniques to help you relax. Set aside a specific time each day to take fantasy trips you enjoy – shopping, fishing, etc. Imagine what the experience would be like and how you would feel after it.



Instructions:

Step 1. Assume a comfortable position in a quiet environment where you won't be disturbed.

Step 2. Read the following script to yourself very slowly. (You may record the script on a tape recorder and replay it.) Pause about five seconds at the dots (...).

Step 3. Use all of your mental powers to focus on the script and to form mental pictures of this fantasy.

Script:

Lie on the floor or ground...assume a relaxed position...close your eyes...imagine yourself in your favorite place...by a lake...in a flower garden...at a sunny beach...in a field of wheat or corn....

Picture yourself in this place, too...feel the warm sun...feel the cool breeze...enjoy the sounds...hear the breeze...listen to the water, if it is there...hear the birds...sense, smell all the fragrances of this favorite place...sense all of the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of this place....As you enjoy being in this favorite place, begin to focus on your breathing and your state of relaxation...You should be breathing deeply and slowly...relax your muscles....

Blend into the environment as much as you can...soak up all the warm, comfortable thoughts and feelings of this place...fix these feelings in your mind...tell yourself you will take these feelings with you when you leave.

Now as you continue to relax, imagine it is a wonderful spring day...someone is coming to join you...someone you love...who is this person?...this person greets you quietly and gently...you begin a very pleasant conversation...what do you talk about?...you feel very good about this conversation....

The two of you join hands as you prepare to leave....As you leave this world of fantasy, bring your thoughts back to where you are now...slowly and gently open your eyes, inhale deeply and exhale slowly.

Step 4. Reflect on the following questions:

1. How do you feel now?
2. What colors did you see and when?
3. What sounds did you hear and when?
4. What scents did you smell? When did you smell them?
5. Were you surprised and happy when someone joined you? How did you feel about that person being there too?
6. Did you have any other sensations?
7. Did you experience any emotions? If so, when?

Step 5. Remember, practice increases your relaxation skill. Keep an open, active mind as you continue to practice this activity.

You can use imagery and fantasy to change. Here is how you do it:

1. List all the positive consequences of the behavior change.
2. Fantasize that you're in your favorite spot.
3. Visualize yourself as having changed, and in your mind, review the list of benefits the change provides.

4. Be realistic.
5. Act on your plans to change.

#8 Brief Relaxation Activities

Instructions:

Step 1: Assume a passive attitude in a comfortable position.

Step 2: Practice the following activities several times each day.

1. Deep breathing:

- Take a deep breath and hold it five seconds.
- Exhale slowly, and tell all your muscles to relax.
- Say as you exhale, "I feel tension and energy flowing out of my body."
- Repeat the above process five or six times and you'll become more relaxed.

2. Whole body tension:

- Tense every muscle in your body, stay with that tension and hold it as long as you can without feeling pain.
- Slowly release the tension and very gradually feel it leave your body.
- Repeat three times.
- Reflect how your feelings change.

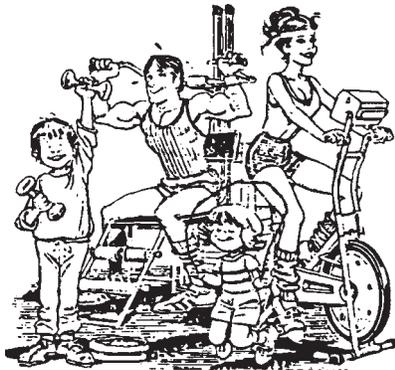
3. Shoulder shrugs and head rolls:

- Try to raise your shoulders up to your ears.
- Hold for the count of four, then drop your shoulders back to normal position.
- Rotate your head and neck.
- Repeat as often as necessary.
- Vary this by rotating your shoulders up, down and head and neck around – first one way, then the other, then both at the same time.

#9 Exercise

Exercise should be aerobic, performed at least four times per week for a minimum of 20 minutes while sustaining a specified target heart rate.

Aerobic exercise is sustained, nonstop activity, such as brisk walking, cycling, jogging, swimming, rowing, aerobic dancing, rope skipping, stair climbing, progressive treadmill, stationary cycling and cross country skiing.



The American College of Sports Medicine advises that anyone under 35 who has no known coronary-heart disease risk factors or previous history of cardiovascular disease may begin an exercise program without a special medical checkup. Anyone over 35 should have a medical checkup prior to beginning an exercise program.

#10 Neck Exercises

Side Stretch – With your shoulders relaxed, tilt your head so your right ear reaches toward your shoulder. Feel the stretch, then repeat on left.

Over-the-Shoulder Stretch – Turn your head slowly and look over your left shoulder. Feel the stretch, then repeat on the right.

Jaw Stretch – Let your head drop forward until your chin rests on your chest. Hold for a few moments without tensing. Now lift your head and let it fall back. Slowly let your jaw drop open and relax. Repeat.

Clock Stretch – Imagine you are looking at a clock face. Move your neck to the left, toward 9:00, then to the right, toward 3:00. Then up toward 12:00 and down to 6:00. Repeat three times in each direction.

Clock Stretch II – Now face up toward the left at a 45-degree angle, then up to the right at the same angle. Next, down 45 degrees to the left, then right. Repeat.

Revolving Stretch – Start with your head dropped on your chest. Slowly rotate it around to the right, the back, the left and back to the front. Then switch directions. If you feel points of tension, pause a moment and let those muscles relax. If you feel an excess of cracking, stop. Try the bobbing stretch instead.

Bobbing Stretch – Instead of revolving your neck, go from an upright position to each of the four positions. Return to upright position in between.

Do-In – Press your index and middle fingers along both sides of the spine from your shoulders to your skull and back again. Use a circular motion on points of special tension.

Finger Massage – With your right hand, reach back and find the muscle that runs along your spine from the top of your neck to your shoulder blade. Work it with your finger tips using a small circular motion. Begin at your shoulder blade, then follow it along your spine to your skull. Switch hands and repeat on the right side.

Massage – Interlock your fingers behind your neck and knead this muscle with the heels of your palms. Work from the ends of the muscles. If you press hard in the middle, the muscle may spasm even more.

Shrugging – Lift your shoulders upward in an exaggerated movement. Then bring them down, push them forward and then back. This tightens then relaxes the muscles in the upper and middle back and breaks the tension that crawls up the neck to the head.

Head Rolling – Stand or sit with your back straight. Slowly drop your head forward and turn your head, without strain, in a circle to the side, back, side, and front again. Make two or three circles to the right, and then reverse the direction to the left making two or three circles.

Head Turning – Hold your head up, your chin at a right angle to your neck. Turn your head to the right as far as you can, then back to the center. Then turn your head as far as possible to the left, then back to the center. Bend your right ear toward the right shoulder. Bring the head back up. Repeat four times to each side.

Lifting Shoulders – Raise your shoulders up toward your ears. Then pull them back as far as possible, and drop them down so you're making a half circle – up, back and down. Do five or six times. Then reverse the circle, raising your shoulders up toward your ears, pushing them forward as far as possible, then dropping them down again. Repeat five or six times.

#11 Loosening the Knots

Ideokinesis, a blend of imagery and movement, can ease neck strain. The body copies pictures better than it follows orders. Here are five mental motion pictures to tune the small muscles in your spine.

- Imagine a string gently pulling upward from the top of your head.
- Let your head rock up and down till it comes to rest naturally.
- The bones where your spine and skull meet are like a ring around a rod. Turn your head from side to side. Feel the ring swivel around the rod.
- Imagine your neck as a wrinkled collar. Mentally smooth it.

- Find the indentations behind each ear. Imagine them moving away from each other, allowing your head more room.

From the Desk of...

If you sit at a desk all day:

Break now and then. Walk around, stretching your arms to get more blood to your shoulders and neck.

Get your neck moving. Do simple neck stretches right at your desk. Be conscious of your usual neck positions, and change them.

Tailor your chair to your back. A small pillow between your chair and your lower back often helps.

Don't slump. Remind yourself to keep your back, neck and head aligned, especially if you slave for hours over a terminal. Be gentle with your bones. Sitting ramrod straight doesn't help.

#12 Biofeedback

Biofeedback is a laboratory relaxation-stress monitoring technique. Participants are hooked up to an electronic machine that measures systolic blood pressure, finger temperature or forehead muscle tension. Participants are asked to relax, quietly.

Once the relaxation process has begun, a machine continuously monitors the above stressors using high or low pitched sounds and numbers.

Studies confirm that biofeedback technique can successfully lower mild hypertension. Yet the American College of Physicians stresses there is no evidence that biofeedback is more effective than less expensive types of relaxation techniques.

Reference

Davis, Martha, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay, *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*, New Harbinger, California, 1982.

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