



4 Skills to Help You Manage Stress

Fine-tune your skills.

Stress can take a toll on the best of us, and it's not usually pretty. Stress-induced symptoms can include appetite changes (sometimes eating more, sometime eating less), headaches, mood swings and irritability. While stress may affect everyone a bit differently, almost everyone feels under stress—and shows stress symptoms—some of the time.

Stress activates the body's fight-or-flight defense, pumping up levels of "stress" hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. That's handy if your house is on

fire, but if stress never lets up and your system gets stuck in "Code Red," your health can take a hit. For instance, sustained stress has been linked to a heightened risk of cardiovascular disease and a host of other illnesses.

It's not always possible to make life less hectic (hey, those weeknight dinners aren't going to cook themselves), but not to worry: experts say the real trick to achieving greater calm and better health is to change how you respond to stress. Read on for some simple strategies, and get ready to breathe a sigh of relief.

1 FIGURE OUT WHAT'S CAUSING YOU STRESS.

If you listed “money, work and family responsibilities” as top stressors, dig deeper.

Ask yourself, “What aspects of my daily life feel overwhelming?” For instance, maybe you’re anxious about money—even though you earn a good salary. The real problem could be a haphazard bill-paying system that leaves your monthly budget in disarray. Once you zero in on specific stressors, problems tend to appear smaller, allowing solutions to rise to the surface. For example, maybe it’s time to download a budgeting application or make an appointment with a financial planner.

That said, your body sometimes knows better than your mind which circumstances are setting you off. So if you’re still stumped, be on the lookout for headaches, fatigue, impatience and GI distress. Such symptoms can flare in stressful situations—like when you realize the utility bill is overdue.

3 KNOW WHEN TO CALL A TIME-OUT.

It’s not even noon, and already your water heater is on the fritz, the dog mauled your favorite shoes and your son was sent to the principal’s office. On days when nothing goes right, battling stress can seem futile. The more-efficient option? Put damage control on hold for a few minutes and give yourself a break. Watch a funny video online, phone an upbeat friend or do a crossword puzzle. Afterward, your mind will be calmer and you’ll be better equipped to cope.

For longer-lasting stress relief, consider meditation, deep breathing, yoga or other exercise to boost your body’s resilience to stress. Regularly practicing a stress management skill such as belly breathing can make it more likely that you’ll employ that skill when you’re actually under stress.

4 BANISH SNEAKY LITTLE STRESSORS.

Sometimes, you can eliminate the source of your stress, simple as that. Consider ridding your life of these everyday anxiety provokers:

Ambient racket. Studies show that background noise—say, from a TV droning in another room—can stimulate the release of the stress hormone cortisol. If you can’t quiet the clamor, try to distance yourself, or drown it out with earplugs or headphones.

2 ROOT OUT AND REWRITE SELF-DEFEATING THOUGHTS.

Even when you take steps to intercept stressful situations, a curveball can catch you unaware—for instance, blowing a tire on your way to an event you’re overseeing. It’s hard not to feel overwhelmed in a situation like that, but you can control how you respond to stress by consciously eliminating negative or self-defeating thoughts from your mind. Instead of asking, “Why does this always happen to me?” try focusing on how to become a take-charge survivor with the upper hand. (And just think—you’ll have a great story to tell once you’re back on the road!)

Wardrobe woes. Itchy sweaters, too-tight jeans, shoes that pinch. An uncomfortable ensemble can leave you on edge all day. Feeling uncomfortable? Wear something else.

Chronic clutter. Stress can set in when objects are hard to find or your surroundings appear disorderly. Two quick moves that can help: clear tabletops and pick up loose objects from the floor.

“Urgent” emails. Try turning off your email alerts, and check your in-box only when the timing is right for you. Chances are, it can probably wait.