Stress is a fact of life. Although some stress is normal and even needed, too much of it can affect your quality of life and your health. There are simple things you can do to help relieve stress.

Tips to relieve stress

When you feel stressed, you can:

Take slow, deep breaths.

Soak in a warm bath.

Listen to soothing music.

Take a walk or do some other activity.

Meditate or pray.

Take a yoga class.

Have a massage or back rub.

Have a warm drink that doesn't have alcohol or caffeine.

You also can make some changes in your everyday habits to reduce and relieve stress.

Get plenty of sleep.

Stay connected to your family, friends, and other caring people in your life.

Get regular exercise. It can help you clear your mind and work off feelings of frustration and anxiety.

Don't drink or eat anything that has caffeine in it. Caffeine can make you feel "wound up" and more stressed.

Don't smoke or use tobacco. Nicotine can make you feel more anxious.

Don't drink alcohol. It can cause sleep problems and depression.

Muscle relaxation to relieve stress

Your body may respond to stress by tensing up, which can cause pain. If you learn to relax your muscles, you can reduce muscle tension and anxiety. Progressive muscle relaxation is an exercise that can help you do this.

In progressive muscle relaxation, you tense and then relax related groups of muscles. You can use a relaxation tape or CD to help you go through all the muscle groups. Or you can learn the muscle groups and work through them from memory.

Find a quiet place where you won't be bothered. Be sure you can lie on your back in comfort.

For each muscle group:

Breathe in and tense the muscle group for 4 to 10 seconds. Tense hard, but not to the point of cramping.

Then breathe out while you suddenly and completely relax the muscle group. Don't relax it gradually.

Rest for 10 to 20 seconds.

Here are the muscle groups:

Hands and arms

Hands: Make a tight fist.

Wrists and forearms: Tense them and bend your hands back at the wrist.

Biceps and upper arms: Make your hands into fists, bend your arms at the elbows, and tense your biceps.

Shoulders: Shrug them.

Head and neck

Forehead: Wrinkle it into a deep frown.

Around the eyes and bridge of the nose: Close your eyes as tightly as possible. If you wear contact lenses, remove them before beginning the exercise.

Cheeks and jaws: Smile as widely as you can.

Around the mouth: Press your lips together tightly.

Back of the neck: Press your head back against the floor or chair.

Front of the neck: Touch your chin to your chest.

Upper body

Chest: Take a deep breath and hold it, then breathe out.

Back: Arch your back up and away from the floor or chair.

Stomach: Suck it into a tight knot.

Lower body

Hips and rear end (buttocks): Press the buttocks together tightly.

Thighs: Clench them hard.

Lower legs: Push your heels out and flex your toes up, as if trying to bring the toes up to touch your shins. Then point your toes away and curl them downward.

You may feel sleepy after doing this exercise. To "wake up" your body, count backwards from 5 to 1. Then move your fingers, toes, hands, and feet. Finally, stretch and move your entire body.

Be sure you are alert before you drive or do other activities.

Roll breathing to relieve stress

Roll breathing helps you use your lungs better and gets you in touch with the rhythm of your breathing. You can practice it in any position, but it's best to lie on your back, with your knees bent. Practice roll breathing daily for several weeks until you can do it almost anywhere.

When you are roll breathing, always breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. As you breathe out, make a whooshing sound.

Place your left hand on your belly and your right hand on your chest. Notice how your hands move as you breathe in and out.

Breathe in to fill your lower lungs. Your belly will push your left hand up as you do this. Your right hand won't move. Then breathe out. Your left hand will fall as your belly falls. Do this 8 to 10 times.

Next, breathe in as you did before, but don't stop after your left hand pushes up. Continue to breathe in. You will feel your upper chest expand and push your right hand up. Your left hand will fall a little as your belly falls.

Breathe out slowly through your mouth. As you breathe out, feel the tension leaving your body. Both your hands will fall.

Do this for 3 to 5 minutes. Notice how your belly and chest move like waves, rising and falling in a steady motion.

Notice how you feel after you breathe this way.

Caution: Some people get dizzy the first few times they try roll breathing. If you begin to breathe very fast or become lightheaded, slow your breathing. Get up slowly.

In addition to meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and breathing exercises to relieve stress, you might try these other therapies.

**Ways to relax your mind**

* Self-hypnosis can open your mind to suggestions that can relieve stress or change the way you respond to stress.
* Autogenic training includes six exercises that make the body relax. Each exercise helps you relax your body in a different way.
* Music therapy can relax your body, improve your mood, and change the pace of your day.
* Humor therapy may reduce stress and boost your immune system.

**Ways to relax your body**

* Massage, such as a shoulder and neck massage, uses touch to relieve tension. You can see a massage therapist or have a friend or family member give you a massage. You can even give yourself a massage.
* Aromatherapy uses the aroma-producing oils from plants to help you relax.
* Biofeedback teaches you how to use your mind to control skin temperature, muscle tension, heart rate, or blood pressure. All of these things can be affected by stress.

**Herbal supplements**

Some people use herbal supplements such as valerian, kava, gingko, St. John's Wort, and chamomile to relieve stress symptoms such as anxiety and insomnia. But supplements like these can be sold with limited or no research on how well they work. Talk with your doctor if you are taking supplements, especially if you have another health condition.

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