

# STRESS TIPS HANDOUTS

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**H**EALTH STRATEGIES BUILDING RESISTANCE TO STRESS

**T**HE STRESS TEST

**T**EN WAYS TO RELAX

**P**ROGRESSIVE RELAXATION EXERCISE

**S**TRESS BUSTERS

**L**IFESTYLE RECOMMENDATIONS

# HEALTH STRATEGIES BUILDING RESISTANCE TO STRESS

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These are healthful tips for better managing your stress levels.

1. Jog, swim, or bike. Exercise increases the flow of endorphins, natural pain relievers that are responsible for what is called “the runner’s high.” In addition, exercising, if done two to three times a week, will improve your circulation and help relieve chronic tension and anxiety. You may also find you reap more enjoyment from life!
2. Walk. Simply walking in good shoes with flexible soles can be one of the best forms of exercise. If you can only manage a short walk in the beginning, even ten minutes, remember that any new habit begins with one small step.
3. Stretch frequently. Practicing stretches every hour or two, if done properly, can help relieve muscle tension and even prevent injury. Ask your massage therapist for suggestions.
4. Get regular exposure to outdoor light and fresh air. This can reduce the effects of seasonal affective disorder, and stress in general to lift your spirits!
5. Get a complete physical evaluation to rule out any conditions that may be taking their toll.
6. Ask your physician for recommendations for vitamins and other supplements. Some supplements seem to help increase energy levels and balance hormones and other chemicals in the body.
7. If you feel that stress threatens to overwhelm you, seek a professional counselor.
8. Drink plenty of water. Many of us don’t drink enough pure water.
9. Get regular massage to reinforce your ability to let go of stress.
10. Take a yoga or tai chi class. Ask your massage therapist for referrals for qualified instructors.

# THE STRESS TEST

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Stress is not necessarily a bad thing—it can be a stimulus for positive change and growth. But excess stress can be detrimental. You can feel the effects of stress from one single large event or as a series of small ones accumulate. Even a small stressor in your life like a mild, but chronic illness, a daily commute or ever-present background noise, if sustained or combined with other stressors, can take its toll. Research shows that as stress builds, you may become more susceptible to physical illness, mental and emotional problems, and accidental injuries.

Awareness is the first step in coping with stress. Taking the following test will give you a moment out of your busy life to tune in to your own stress signals. Some of the following symptoms could indicate a medical condition that warrants prompt attention, so if the symptoms persist or worsen, see your physician. However, there's a good chance they are signs that too much stress may be affecting your health.

If your answers give you reason to suspect that stress may be taking a toll on you, remember that regular massage can gradually counteract these effects. Beyond that, you may want to see a physician or professional counselor for specific advice to manage your stress.

1. Do you experience regular insomnia?
2. Have your eating habits changed? Do you want to eat more than usual or have you lost your appetite?
3. Do you worry about bad things happening to your loved ones?
4. Do you have stomach aches or intestinal distress?
5. Do you have trouble concentrating?
6. Do you wake up in the middle of the night thinking about things you have no control over?
7. Do you lack energy to do the things you enjoy at the end of the day or on the weekend?
8. Do you feel listless or apathetic?
9. Are you tense or irritable at work or at home?
10. Have you lost your sense of humor?
11. Are you increasingly forgetful?
12. Do you feel you have lost control over your life?
13. Do your relationships or friendships feel unsatisfying?
14. Do you panic easily?
15. Are you often fatigued?
16. Do you get frequent colds or suffer from allergies?
17. Has your drinking or smoking increased?
18. Do you find it hard to relax or fall asleep at night?
19. Have you lost enthusiasm for your work?

# TEN WAYS TO RELAX

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Relaxation is key to reducing excess stress and its effects. Here are some ideas which may help.

1. *Get an extra massage.* When you relax with massage, you let go of muscle tension, worry and mental confusion. This may be one of the few times you slow down and notice what it feels like to relax. This actually helps you program yourself to tune into those feelings and encourage your body and mind to let go of stress and tension.
2. *Practice focused relaxation.* Sit comfortably or lie down with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Support your neck with a pillow if you prefer. Scan your body, noticing where you feel tension or discomfort. Breathe slowly into these areas. Imagine relaxation flooding into the areas of discomfort. Begin by practicing ten minutes once a day.
3. *Meditate.* You will probably have a better chance of sticking with a technique you learn in a class or other group, but in the meantime, try this. Silently repeat a word that has little emotional meaning for you, such as “one.” Give it your full attention. When other thoughts or images come into your mind, ignore them and return your focus to the unspoken word. Don’t strain or try too hard. Simply let your mind keep coming back to your chosen word again and again as thoughts pass through your mind.
4. *Practice abdominal breathing.* Inhale slowly through your nose. Exhale completely, squeezing the belly tight. Begin by practicing for 5 minutes at a time. Try it when you feel anxious or can’t sleep.
5. *Soak in a hot bath.* Add several drops of essential oils like lavender or ylang-ylang for relaxation. Or just soak your feet. Add Epsom salts to a bathtub or basin of warm water and enjoy!
6. *Try biofeedback.* A professional biofeedback practitioner can help you develop self-regulation over the mental and physical processes that are associated with stress-related disorders.
7. *Take a nap,* even if it’s only for ten minutes.
8. *Take a warm shower.* As the water rushes around your neck, drop your neck forward and stretch it from side to side. Then circle your shoulders slowly under the hot water.
9. *Try autosuggestion.* Frequently repeat a suggestion to yourself such as “Shoulders free” or “Neck relaxed.” Repeat the suggestion, but don’t strain or do anything at all but say the phrase. This plants an idea which may gently support muscle relaxation.
10. *Take a yoga class.* Many people find yoga increases relaxation and relieves many of the effects of stress.

# PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION EXERCISE

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This is easy and quick to learn. Try it when you feel anxious, stressed, or when you can't sleep. Doing it every day will give you the most benefit.

- Lie comfortably with your arms and legs outstretched.
- Clench one fist and hold it for 10 seconds.
- Relax the fist for 10 seconds, then clench again, and relax.
- Repeat with the other hand.
- Draw the toes of one foot toward the knee. Hold for 10 seconds. Relax and repeat.
- Do the same with the other foot.
- Repeat the same sequence for the following body parts, first on one side of the body, then the other. You can experiment with other muscle groups as well.

Back of the lower legs. Point, tense your toes, and relax.

Buttocks. Squeeze together and relax.

Shoulder blades. Draw together and relax.

Abdomen. Pull in tightly and relax.

Neck. Push your neck down towards the floor and relax.

Face. Tighten and contract the muscles around your eyes and mouth, and relax.

After a week, try combining muscle groups. For example, tense and relax the following parts together.

Hands and arms on both sides.

Face and neck.

Shoulders and back.

Legs and feet.

After another week, try to quit the tensing part of the exercise. Lie down and focus on different areas, relaxing areas that feel tight.

Source: *Fibromyalgia and Muscle Pain: Your Self-Treatment Guide* by Leon Chaitow N.D., D.O., Thorsons, 2001

# STRESS BUSTERS

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You can get more out of your massage if you participate in managing your stress in between sessions. Here are some things to try.

- Set aside time to talk to your family and friends about your concerns.
- Practice focused relaxation. Sit comfortably, noticing where you feel discomfort. Breathe slowly into these areas.
- Make a list of people and things you are grateful for.
- Set boundaries at work and home.
- Meditate. Take a class or try out a group.
- Bike, jog ... or just take a 10 minute walk!
- Dance! Take a ballroom dancing class or just twirl around your living room.
- Massage your aching neck or back.
- Stretch. Ask your massage therapist for some suggestions.
- Take a yoga or tai chi class.
- Have a cup of caffeine-free herbal tea.
- Practice deep, full body breathing if you can't sleep.
- If possible, take action to change situations that are troubling you.
- Relieve yourself of responsibilities that don't feel right any longer.
- Try new things, like a new, nutritious and tasty food.
- Assign yourself a time to "fret"—then move on to your day-to-day activities.
- If you feel that stress threatens to overwhelm you, seek a professional counselor.
- Take a hot bath. Add several drops of essential oils like lavender or ylang-ylang for relaxation.
- Try biofeedback.
- Take a painting, writing, or photography class.
- Play racquetball or tennis.
- Take a nap, even if it's only for ten minutes.
- Take your breaks at work. Get outside or do simple stretches for 10 minutes.
- Laugh. Watch comedies and read humorous books.
- Try autosuggestion. Frequently repeat a suggestion to yourself such as "Head tall" or "Neck relaxed." You don't have to *do* anything, just say the words.
- Take a warm shower, stretching your neck and shoulders slowly in the heat.
- Brush your hair. Brush from each temple to the base of skull, then down the center of your head.
- Take a weekend, or even a morning, away from obligations and worries.
- Express your creativity. Write down your memories or grow flowers.
- Try abdominal breathing. Inhale slowly through your nose. Exhale completely, squeezing the belly tight. Begin by practicing for 5 minutes at a time.
- Soak your feet. Add Epsom salts to a bath or basin of warm water and enjoy!
- Honor a time and space for your own relaxation. Regular massage is a great way to develop this nurturing habit.

# LIFESTYLE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Stress is not necessarily a bad thing, and can actually be a stimulus for positive change and growth. But excess stress can be detrimental. Here are some tips that can help you reduce the effects of stress in your life.

1. Set boundaries at work and home. Remember one person can only do so much. Choose to let some things go and give yourself wholeheartedly to those you keep. Encourage yourself to say “no” when you need to.
2. If possible, take action to change situations that are troubling you. Know when to face up to the things that are causing you anxiety and when to let things go. Ask for support if you need to.
3. Set aside time to talk to your family and friends about your concerns. Let them know you are feeling anxious or pressured. Use “I” statements, for example, “I feel stressed. I have deadlines at work and feel I can’t keep up at home.” Your loved ones will appreciate the chance to lend a hand as opposed to being blamed.
4. Honor a time and space for your own relaxation. Be willing to “stop the world and get off” even it’s only for half an hour after work every other day or a two-hour walk once a week. Make a commitment to yourself that nothing encroaches on.
5. Try new things, like a new, nutritious and tasty food — or even a new bodywork technique like Reiki or stone massage!
6. Assign yourself a time to “fret.” Then get on with your day-to-day activities with enthusiasm.
7. Take a painting, writing or photography class. Check the newspaper, colleges, community centers and bulletin boards to find one.
8. Take your breaks at work. Get outside for a walk or do simple stretches for 10 minutes.
9. Laugh. Watch comedies and read humorous books. Get together with people who know how to look at life on the light side.
10. Take a weekend, or just a morning, away from your obligations and worries. On your getaways, leave work and worries behind. If that’s difficult, try writing down your worries or “to-do’s.” Then tuck the list away, knowing you can get back to it after your time away.
11. Express your creativity. Write down your memories, grow flowers and herbs, or knit a sweater.