

## 10 Tips for Stress Relief



By Steve Edwards

Stress is a part of everyone's life. It disrupts our ability to function at work. It affects our moods. It upstages the things around us, which we should be grateful for. Stress distracts our attention and, when it does, it gains power in what becomes a vicious cycle of reacting to stress, and building on it. But even though we're all susceptible to its evils, we're also in control of how we let it affect us. Let's take a look at a few ways to keep our daily stress to a minimum.

As you might imagine, your lifestyle plays a huge part in how stress affects you. What you may not be aware of is just how important your diet is for how well your body can cope with it. It seems obvious that just eating better would help you deal with stress more effectively. Sure, but there are dissenting opinions over how it affects your body.

According to the American Dietetic Association: "It's a common myth that our bodies use more nutrients when we're under mental stress. Although pressures at home or work sometimes cause people to neglect eating well, we do not use any more or fewer essential nutrients while under stress."

Since *everything* the body does alters its use of nutrients, this statement seems suspicious. According to Leo Galland, M.D., author of *Power Healing* (Random House, 1997), it's just plain wrong. "Chronic stress is not just harmful to the heart, it depletes the body's essential supply of magnesium, the nutrient most important for handling stress and contributing to sound sleep; relaxed, healthy muscles; and staying calm."

He goes on to add, "The fight-or-flight syndrome causes magnesium to pour out of the cells, which makes you more vulnerable to anxiety's negative effects. What's more, the substances we often reach for when we're tense—caffeine, sugar, high-fat foods and alcohol—leech even more magnesium from the body. Leafy vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds, on the other hand, are full of this nutrient. Load up on these foods if you're under a lot of stress.

Judith Wurtman, Ph.D., a research scientist at MIT, adds, "Complex carbohydrates are champion stress-fighters, too, because they boost the brain's level of the mood-enhancing chemical serotonin. These include an array of vegetables (broccoli, leafy greens, potatoes, corn, cabbage, spinach), whole-grain breads and pastas, muffins, crackers, and cereals. Make them a part of your regular diet. Bananas also help quell anxiety."

Is someone right or wrong here? It's hard to say, exactly, but we can make an educated guess. History shows that western science is usually slow to embrace ideas which are intangible or which lack scientific study, which probably explains the ADA's position. Common sense, however, makes a good argument for a nutrient-rich diet, regardless, since it would have many benefits beyond pure stress reduction. And, it must be noted, many of these unarguable effects, such as health, weight management, and fitness level, have the potential to reduce stress levels. Regardless, some caution should be used before embarking on a "de-stressor" diet of crackers and muffins.

The safe assumption is that if you eat healthier and pay closer attention to the details of eating, the level of stress in your lifestyle will most certainly decline. And if you feel more run down or sluggish as a result of stress, it can only help you to get back on your feet by making sure to get the proper nutrition from food and supplements. Here are a few ways to reduce the amount of stress in your daily life.

1. Take some time for yourself. Even if it's only a few minutes a few times throughout the day, claiming some of your busy schedule for yourself in order to

focus inward and relax can do wonders for your stress level. Of course, the more time you have the better, but the real key here is not time, but focus. Concentrate on yourself during this time and let those day-to-day troubles fall by the wayside.

2. Exercise. Since you're reading this, chances are that you have already committed to exercise, but no study on stress ever leaves out its importance. Exercise makes your engine run smoother, removes toxins from the body, lowers anxiety, and makes you feel good about yourself. Nothing puts the brakes on a stressful day like a long walk, run, or a bike ride.



3. Drink water. We can't stress (pun intended) the importance of drinking water. Water hydrates and cleanses your system, removes toxins, and makes you less hungry. Drinking a glass of water a few times a day is the simplest body regulator there is.



4. Eat breakfast. Take time out for a healthful breakfast before your day starts. It will help you get going for your busy day and will keep you from feeling hungry just when you need to be gaining momentum. Keep in mind that breakfast doesn't mean "Trucker's Special." A grapefruit, banana, or a protein shake is a much better option.



5. Drink tea. With zero calories and a host of antioxidants—which are basically stress-combatants—tea provides rationale behind the historical significance of "tea time." This afternoon ritual was created with de-stressing on its agenda. Turns out, this was a nutritionally sound practice as well. Just hold the scones with clotted cream.



6. Stop and breathe. Not everyone has time (or interest) to work on meditation, but there is no doubt that more meditation would lead to a less-stressed world. Mini-meditation sessions focused on breathing can be stress reducers. It's as simple as taking a minute from time to time and just concentrating on your breathing. Sitting or standing quietly, take a deep breath, filling your belly up with air as you inhale. As you exhale, silently count "one" to yourself and empty your belly of air. Continue inhaling and exhaling until you reach the count of 10; repeat as often as you wish. It works.



7. Snack well. Don't binge or just grab whatever is in sight once you get hungry. By taking some time to plan your snacks, you keep your blood sugar constant; nothing adds to daily stress more than a sugar crash. If food has ever altered your mood or made you feel sluggish, you know what we're talking about.



8. Stretch. You don't need a full-blown yoga session to alleviate your stress (though that will certainly help). Finding a few minutes to stretch each day will both center your mind and elongate muscles that tend to contract as you become stressed. Starting each morning with 2 or 3 minutes of light stretching as soon as you get out of bed can do wonders for your outlook on the day. Remember, however, that in the morning you aren't warmed up, and when we say light stretching, we mean light. You aren't trying to exercise; just get your blood moving and muscles warmed up.

9. Do yoga. If you do have the time, try adding some yoga into your life. There's a reason it's the fastest-rising exercise in the western world. Yoga is a full-on assault against the daily onset of stress. It's a whole-body workout that combines body and mind to enable you to focus.
  
10. Supplement your diet. But not just with magnesium, as Dr. Galland suggests—though magnesium is good. Ensuring you have enough vitamins and, especially, minerals will help you ward off stress. Two other supplements that are particularly useful are fish oil and antioxidants—these are two areas in which our diets are often deficient.