

Stress Relief Guide

By [Harvard Health](#)



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Take the sting out of 10 common stressors

Sometimes just thinking about embarking on a program of stress control can be stressful. Rather than freeze in your tracks, start small and bask in the glow of your successes. Give yourself a week to focus on practical solutions that could help you cope with just one stumbling block or source of stress in your life. Pick a problem, and see if these

suggestions work for you.

1. Frequently late

Apply time management principles. Consider your priorities (be sure to include time for yourself) and delegate or discard unnecessary tasks. Map out your day, segment by segment, setting aside time for different tasks, such as writing or phone calls.

If you are overly optimistic about travel time, consistently give yourself an extra 15 minutes or more to get to your destinations. If lateness stems from dragging your heels, consider the underlying issue. Are you anxious about what will happen after you get to work or to a social event, for example? Or maybe you're trying to jam too many tasks into too little time.

2. Often angry or irritated?

Consider the weight of cognitive distortions. Are you magnifying a problem, leaping to conclusions, or applying emotional reasoning? Take the time to stop, breathe, reflect, and choose.

3. Unsure of your ability to do something?

Don't try to go it alone. If the problem is work, talk to a co-worker or supportive boss. Ask a knowledgeable friend or call the local library or an organization that can supply the information you need.

Write down other ways that you might get the answers or skills you need. Turn to websites, CDs, books, or classes, for example, if you need a little tutoring. This works equally well when you're learning relaxation response techniques, too.

4. Overextended?

Clear the deck of at least one time-consuming household task. Hire a housecleaning service, shop for groceries through the internet, convene a family meeting to consider who can take on certain jobs, or barter with or pay teens for work around the house and yard.

Consider what is truly essential and important to you and what might take a backseat right now.

5. Not enough time for stress relief?

Try mini-relaxations. Or make a commitment to yourself to pare down your schedule for just one week so you can practice evoking the relaxation response every day. Slowing down to pay attention to just one task or pleasure at hand is an excellent method of stress relief.

6. Feeling unbearably tense

Try massage, a hot bath, mini-relaxations, a body scan, or a mindful walk.

Practically any exercise—a brisk walk, a quick run, a sprint up and down the stairs—will help, too. Done regularly, exercise wards off tension, as do relaxation response techniques.

7. Frequently feel pessimistic?

Remind yourself of the value of learned optimism: a more joyful life and, quite possibly, better health. Practice deflating cognitive distortions. Watch funny movies and read amusing books.

Create a mental list of reasons you have to feel grateful. If the list seems too short, consider beefing up your social network and adding creative, productive, and leisure pursuits to your life.

8. Upset by conflicts with others?

State your needs or distress directly, avoiding “you always” or “you never” zingers. Say, “I feel ____ when you ____.” “I would really appreciate it if you could ____.” “I need some help setting priorities. What needs to be done first and what should I tackle later?”

If conflicts are a significant source of distress for you, consider taking a class on assertiveness training.

9. Worn out or burned out?

Focus on self-nurturing. Carve out time to practice relaxation response techniques or at least indulge in mini-relaxations. Care for your body by eating good, healthy food and for your heart by seeking out others. Give thought to creative, productive, and leisure activities.

Consider your priorities in life: is it worth feeling this way, or is another path open to you? If you want help, consider what kind would be best. Do you want a particular task at work to be taken off your hands? Do you want to do it at a later date? Do you need someone with particular expertise to assist you?

10. Feeling lonely?

Connect with others. Even little connections—a brief conversation in line at the grocery store, an exchange about local goings-on with a neighbor, a question for a colleague—can help melt the ice within you. It may embolden you, too, to seek more opportunities to connect.

Be a volunteer. Attend religious or community functions. Suggest coffee with an acquaintance. Call a friend or relative you miss. Take an interesting class.

If a social phobia, low self-esteem, or depression is dampening your desire to reach out, seek help. The world is a kinder, more wondrous place when you share its pleasures and

burdens.

Practice meditation on the go

Meditation can evoke the relaxation response, and it appears to have health benefits as well. It's also simple to perform. Here's how to get started:

- Choose a mental device to help you focus. Silently repeat a word, sound, prayer, or phrase (such as “one,” “peace,” “Om,” or “breathing in calm”). You may close your eyes if you like or focus your gaze on an object.
- Adopt a passive attitude. Disregard distracting thoughts or concerns about how well you're doing. Any time your attention drifts, simply say, “Oh, well” to yourself and return to silently repeating your focus word or phrase.
- Now slowly relax your muscles, moving your attention gradually from your face to your feet. Breathe easily and naturally while using your focal device for 10 to 20 minutes. After you finish, sit quietly for a minute or so with your eyes closed. Then open your eyes, and wait another minute before standing up.
- Try to practice this meditation daily for 10 to 20 minutes, preferably at a specific time each day.

Try a mini-relaxation

Mini-relaxations can help allay fear and reduce pain while you sit in the dentist's chair. They're equally helpful in thwarting stress before an important meeting, while stuck in traffic, or when faced with people or situations that annoy you.

Here are a few quick relaxation techniques to try.

When you've got one minute

Place your hand just beneath your navel so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in slowly. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

Or alternatively, while sitting comfortably, take a few slow deep breaths and quietly repeat to yourself “I am” as you breathe in and “at peace” as you breathe out. Repeat slowly two or three times. Then feel your entire body relax into the support of the chair.

When you've got two minutes

Count down slowly from 10 to zero. With each number, take one complete breath, inhaling and exhaling. For example, breathe in deeply, saying “10” to yourself. Breathe out slowly. On your next breath, say “nine,” and so on.

If you feel lightheaded, count down more slowly to space your breaths further apart. When you reach zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, go through the exercise again.

When you've got three minutes

While sitting down, take a break from whatever you're doing and check your body for tension.

Relax your facial muscles and allow your jaw to fall open slightly. Let your shoulders drop. Let your arms fall to your sides. Allow your hands to loosen so that there are spaces between your fingers. Uncross your legs or ankles. Feel your thighs sink into your chair, letting your legs fall comfortably apart. Feel your shins and calves become heavier and your feet grow roots into the floor.

Now breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly.

When you've got five minutes

Try self-massage. A combination of strokes works well to relieve muscle tension. Try gentle chops with the edge of your hands or tapping with fingers or cupped palms. Put fingertip pressure on muscle knots. Knead across muscles, and try long, light, gliding strokes. You can apply these strokes to any part of the body that falls easily within your reach. For a short session like this, try focusing on your neck and head.

Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a loose fist and drum swiftly up and down the sides and back of your neck. Next, use your thumbs to work tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly massage the rest of your scalp with your fingertips. Then tap your fingers against your scalp, moving from the front to the back and then over the sides.

Now massage your face. Make a series of tiny circles with your thumbs or fingertips. Pay particular attention to your temples, forehead, and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose and work outward over your eyebrows to your temples.

Finally, close your eyes. Cup your hands loosely over your face and inhale and exhale easily for a short while.

When you've got 10 minutes

Try imagery. Start by sitting comfortably in a quiet room. Breathe deeply for a few minutes.

Now picture yourself in a place that conjures up good memories. What do you smell—the heavy scent of roses on a hot day, crisp fall air, the wholesome smell of baking bread? What do you hear? Drink in the colors and shapes that surround you.

Focus on sensory pleasures: the swoosh of a gentle wind; soft, cool grass tickling your feet; the salty smell and rhythmic beat of the ocean. Passively observe intrusive thoughts, and then gently disengage from them to return to the world you've created.

Keep a gratitude journal

Reflecting on the positive experiences, feelings, and relationships in your life can bring you greater joy. A gratitude journal is a good way to acknowledge the things that brighten your life and help you turn your focus away from negative thoughts and feelings.

Keep a journal by your bed so that at the end of each day, you can spend five to 10 minutes writing about something that you were grateful for in your day. Savor pleasant sights, sounds, and experiences—a sunset, the birds chirping outside your window, a hug from your child, or a call from a friend.

Celebrate accomplishments large and small—learning to master a new hobby, doing well on a project at work, or getting the kids off to school on time.

Conjure up the scene in your mind and try to write about it in detail. Then, spend a few minutes soaking in the experience again. You can also use this journal to reflect on things from the past that you are grateful for.

Deflate cognitive distortions

When you recognize negative thoughts cropping up, take the following steps.

- **Stop:** Consciously call a mental time-out.
- **Breathe:** Take a few deep breaths to help release burgeoning tension.
- **Reflect:** Ask some hard questions. Is this thought or belief true? Did I jump to a conclusion? What evidence do I actually have? Am I letting negative thoughts balloon? Is there another way to view the situation? What would be the worst that could happen? Does it help me to think this way?
- **Choose:** Decide how to deal with the source of your stress. If distortion is the root of the problem, can you recognize this and let go? Is the problem or constraint a real one, or is it one of your mind's making? If the problem is real, are there practical steps you

can take to cope with it? Practicing a mini-relaxation may also help.

Make a worry box

Everyone gets distracted by worries and concerns, but sometimes these worries can spill over, seeping into the fabric of your day. Having a place to contain your worries—quite literally—may help you set them aside so that you can focus on the more pleasurable or meaningful parts of your life.

Begin by finding or making a worry box. Any box will do. This is a great exercise for children, but youngsters may find it even more appealing if they can decorate the box as they like and keep it in a special place.

At the end of the day, take a few minutes to write down two or three of your concerns on slips of paper and place them inside the box. Or if the box is handy, you can write down worries as each crops up and drop your worries into the box throughout the day.

The worry box allows you to mentally let go of your worries. Once your worries are deposited in the box, try to turn your attention to other matters.

What you do with your slips of paper is up to you. Some people choose to throw out the notes without reading them again, while others benefit from looking through them periodically before tossing them away. In that case, you may be surprised to find that most of your worrying was fruitless; the scenarios you imagined never came to pass.

Use mindfulness to reduce workday stress

Given the rapid pace technology has enabled us to achieve on the job, it is not surprising that so many of us cite work as a significant source of stress.

Try these tips to take the edge off the stress you feel during your workday:

- While driving to work, do a body scan. Loosen your death grip on the steering wheel, lower your tensed shoulders, and let your tight tummy relax.
- After you park, stay in your car for a minute and orient yourself to your day before going in to work.
- Throughout your workday, monitor your tension levels and stress warning signs. Consciously try to relax and let go of your tension.
- Take a five-minute break every few hours, but use this time to take a walk instead of simply pausing.
- Deliberately set aside a few minutes every hour or two to take some deep, diaphragmatic breaths.
- Have a mindful lunch in a new location, eating slowly and enjoying your time with yourself.
- At the end of your workday, think back on the day and acknowledge and congratulate yourself on your accomplishments.
- As you are driving home, be conscious of whether or not you are rushing. How does it feel? Try to slow down and relax.
- When you arrive home, change out of your work clothes, take some deep breaths to center yourself and, when possible, allow yourself five minutes of quiet before delving into activities there.

Harness the power of your mind

If you are feeling stressed or are in pain, these visualization exercises may help. They are especially effective once you have elicited the relaxation response, because your brain is calmer and more focused, and you tend to be more open to suggestion and new information.

Try making a recording of these visualizations—either in your own voice or that of a friend whose voice you find soothing.

Up, up and away: Hot-air balloon visualization

Imagine that you are standing beside a grassy meadow. Now, allow all of your senses to be present.

Pay attention to every detail. Is it chilly outside? Can you see your breath? Or is it a warmer time of year? Is it sunny or cloudy? Continue to use all of your senses as you enter the meadow. What sounds do you hear? The wind? The rustle of leaves underfoot? Or the songs of birds or insects? Does the air smell of flowers? Or of dampness or leaves?

In the middle of the meadow is a colorful balloon. Come closer to it. Look carefully at the pattern of colors. You can choose to stay in the meadow and rest, or take a ride in the hot-air balloon.

If you choose to take a ride, slowly step into the basket. You see two small sandbags on the floor; on each sandbag are written words. Bend over and pick up one of the bags. This bag represents a burden, concern, or stress in your life. Notice what the words say, and then gently toss this bag over the side of the balloon basket.

As you let go of the sandbag, the balloon gets lighter and lifts off the ground. Pick up the other sandbag. Notice what this bag represents. Toss this bag over the side and then sit comfortably down in the basket. The balloon gets lighter and rises higher in the sky. You notice that with each burden you release, you also feel lighter and lighter just like the balloon.

As you feel lighter, you begin to relax. Your muscles relax, and your mind becomes quiet. You might drift quietly among the clouds, floating lightly, feeling content, peaceful, and free of worries. Perhaps you choose to travel to a special or safe place. Sit quietly for several minutes, and continue to savor this time of silence with yourself.

It is time to begin your journey home. Remember that the balloon does not need the sandbags in order to land; there is no need to collect your burdens. Just leave them where they dropped. As the balloon slowly glides back toward the meadow, remember how it felt to release your burdens and concerns.

Focusing on how you felt during the balloon ride will help you repeat the experience when you feel stressed again in your daily life. Gently step out of the balloon and walk slowly back through the meadow, paying attention to your surroundings and being mindful of the experience of the moment. As you reach the edge of the meadow, transition back into the room, and become aware of the sights, sounds, and smells around you.

Evaporating pain: Visualization for headache sufferers

Close your eyes and try to imagine what your headache looks or feels like. Imagine that it is a hard steel band weighing down your forehead, eyelids, and nose. It is so hard that it is difficult for you to move the muscles in your face.

Now, you notice a dim, blue light appears. It settles above the hard steel band of headache and locks onto it. As the blue rays target your headache, the hard surface begins to soften. Gradually, it becomes softer and more pliable. You notice movement in the band like ripples on a lake. Take a few slow breaths, allowing the muscles of your face to relax.

The light continues to melt your pain. You feel your forehead loosen slightly as the hard band releases its grip. Now, the entire band is liquid, and it begins to evaporate. Your eyelids and forehead feel lighter as the liquid turns to steam, rising above your head. Your entire face relaxes as you see the last of the liquid disappear above you. You are engulfed in a soothing vapor. Your head and face feel light and relaxed, and you can breathe easily.

Now, focus on your breath. Take a few more slow, diaphragmatic breaths, paying attention to how peaceful and relaxed you feel. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes, stretch, and resume your day.

Developing your personal plan for stress relief

Having a personalized stress-relief plan can help you manage stressful situations better and even prevent stress from building in the first place.

Whenever you notice symptoms of stress, take a moment to do the following:

- **Stop and breathe.** Can you identify a specific stressful event?
- **Reflect.** What were your automatic thoughts? Write these down. Were there any distortions?
- **Choose.** Ask yourself: Is there another way to think about this situation? Can you use an affirmation? What steps can you take to reduce your stress level?
- **Notice how you feel now and write it down.** Congratulate yourself for coping with the situation better.

Practicing these techniques regularly may put you on the path toward a more peaceful, joyous, and healthy life.

Aim to try a variety of techniques, so that you can find the ones that work best for you. Even small changes—pencil in a few mini-relaxations to break up daily tasks, reconnecting with a friend over lunch, or taking a mindful walk—are important steps toward your goal. By writing down what you noticed after taking these steps, you can encourage yourself to keep at it. Try your plan for one or two weeks before you make any changes.

What if you don't stick to the schedule you've drawn up? Try not to feel discouraged. Consider what got in the way and whether you set out to do too much. Ask yourself what strategies could help you circumvent these obstacles next week. Finally, embrace what felt good and find the opportunity to repeat it.

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