

Stress Reduction and Management Tips and Steps

Sounds: Too many background noises can contribute to the stress and tension of your day — in the office it might be, ringing phones, workplace chatter, or copy machines. At home it could be, television volume, computer games, or children playing. If the sounds at work or home are causing you stress, take control. Begin by turning down your own sounds and noises like cell phones, chatter and radios, and kindly ask others to do the same.

Sights: Poor lighting can cause eye strain and increase fatigue. Better lighting can be an instant mood booster. Be sure your work environment has adequate lighting. Experiment with full spectrum bulbs at your desk or try working by a window, if possible. Also, try to get some daily exposure to the sun. Improve lighting to boost your mood

- Experience some light when you first wake up, whether it's the natural sunlight or artificial light. About a half-hour a day will give a positive start to your mind and body.
- Try to spend at least 30 minutes outside every day if possible.
- Set a timer on a light to go on early in the morning in the bedroom.
- Use light therapy products, such as full-spectrum light bulbs or dawn simulators, which act as an artificial substitute for natural light and a natural sunrise.
- Make your home or office sunny and bright. Open blinds, sit by a window, increase indoor lighting with lamps and fixtures and add a sunny color (yellow/orange) or a plant to your space.

Declutter: A cluttered, messy or disorganized work or home space can be stressful and distracting. Take the time to develop a system that works for you. Try to create a relaxing, inviting and pleasant vibe in both places. This will not only keep you calm, but will be welcoming and tranquil for any guests.

Technology Break: We all know that systems and technology can make life easier, but often offer too many interruptions, information overload and stressful accessibility. Make sure to give yourself a technology break on a regular basis, take a walk outside, chat with a friend or co-worker or practice some quiet meditation. Log off and disconnect whenever possible. Create a system or schedule for reading e-mail, responding to text messages and checking voicemail to eliminate overload and response time stress.

Do something that requires your full attention/focus, for example:

- playing a team sport
- making music
- painting
- dancing
- tinkering with machinery
- getting to grips with a tricky puzzle

Living in the present moment: Learning to appreciate what's going on around us can reveal beautiful and interesting things we never knew were there. This can help lift our mood and keep us in good spirits. Here are few things you can do to help bring yourself into the moment:

- Look - describe to yourself what you see, concentrate on colours and textures, let your eyes linger over each detail
- Close your eyes and listen - how many different sounds can you hear?
- Close your eyes and touch - run your hand over a nearby object - how does it feel?
- Sniff the air - what can you smell?

Meditation: Learning how to clear our minds takes practice, but it's a really good way to relax and de-stress. Find a space at home, work or in between where you can breathe deeply, meditate, visualize or practice other stress management techniques. Spending time in nature, even looking at nature pictures, has been shown to reduce stress levels. Relaxation Techniques:

- A muscle relaxation exercise video: <http://vimeo.com/7202939#>
- A simple breathing exercise video: <http://vimeo.com/7202749#>

Random acts of kindness. Being kind and doing good things for the sake of others has been shown to help us feel better about ourselves. It can also help make the world a less stressful place for everyone. Look for ways to be helpful and kind:

- Cook for someone that is sick or overwhelmed
- Offer to do a bit of shopping when you're going anyway
- Open doors for strangers
- Let someone in a rush go ahead of you
- Do someone else's dishes

Visualizing the positive: The first steps to getting something done is often to imagine yourself doing it and to think about how you can do it.. Thinking positively about the future helps us to feel optimistic and actually helps make that future a reality. Imagine your life ten years from now, as it could be if everything goes brilliantly. Try using the goal setting worksheets.

Practicing optimism--We can learn to be more optimistic by being more aware of our thoughts and challenging negative thinking. Negative thinking can hold us back and stop us from reaching our real potential. Optimism helps us keep going when something goes badly for us, meaning we can get through the problem and even learn from it.

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- Overthinking: Thinking constantly about a task can be counter-productive and stop you getting it done. If you find yourself doing this, say "STOP!" Distract yourself and direct your thoughts elsewhere but KEEP GOING with the task itself
- Challenge Your Beliefs: So, you believe something bad will happen or that you've done badly. Why is that? Is this an accurate view of the situation? Argue with your negative thoughts as if they were coming from another person (the one trying to make you unhappy).

The ABCDE technique: This exercise is based on Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, developed by psychologist Albert Ellis and expanded by expert of human happiness Dr. Martin Seligman. Try running through these steps the next five times you feel something has gone badly for you. Write down your answers and thoughts for each step. Once you get used to the process, you'll be able to do it in your head:

- Adversity: This is the problem part - write briefly about the situation that went badly.
- Beliefs: These are your beliefs about the situation. Write down how you feel about it (e.g. 'I looked stupid', or 'my boss thinks I made a mess').
- Consequences: Write down what you're likely to do because of what happened. For example, you might avoid similar situations, the people who were there, or be very worried if you have to try the same thing again.
- Disputation: Argue with yourself about your beliefs - most negative beliefs are overreactions. Look for other reasons why things turned out as they did.
- Energy: Notice the change in your thoughts and feelings when you successfully challenge your negative beliefs.

Good sleep: Good sleep is essential but can be the first thing to go when we're stressed. And this can lead to us feeling even more stressed.

- Don't have a TV, computer or games console in your bedroom - try to keep it as a calm place to relax
- Cut out light - blackout blinds or an eye mask are good for this
- Block out noise with earplugs
- Have a regular bedtime routine
- Relax with a warm bath
- Avoid heavy meals for at least two hours
- Switch the TV off half an hour before you go to bed
- Set an alarm to avoid "have I slept in?" panics.
- To avoid clock watching make sure the clock is facing away from you
- Concerns often disrupt our sleep. Try thinking about them, and what you might do about them, during the day. Writing them down before you go to bed can also help you put them out of your head.
- Get eight hours sleep in every 24, even if you have to cat-nap to top up on a short night's sleep
- Don't have a TV in your bedroom
- Don't let your work intrude into your bedroom
- Read a good book
- Have a hot drink or hot bath before bed
- A cool bedroom can help you to drop off faster
- Once you've established a good sleeping pattern, stick to it
- Don't cut back on sleep by hoping to catch up at the weekends
- Be careful about consumption of caffeinated drinks, alcohol, chocolate or eating a big meal within two hours of bedtime

Fun: Taking a break from your hectic life - even a small one can stop stress building up. Being stressed can stop us doing the things we usually enjoy. But missing out on those things is also one of the causes of stress. Are there things you used to love doing, but haven't done recently because of the pressure you're under? Making time to relax and have some fun is an important part of beating stress - even if you don't feel like it to start with. Professor Martin Seligman, in his book 'Authentic Happiness', describes methods that we can employ to increase momentary happiness in our lives:

- Set aside a free day this month to indulge in your favourite pleasures. Pamper yourself. Design, in writing, what you will do from hour to hour. Do not let the bustle of life interfere, and carry out the plan.
- Habituation - rapidly repeated indulgence in the same pleasure does not work, so how you spread pleasures out in your life is crucial. You should inject into your life as many events that produce pleasure as you can, but spread them out, letting more time elapse between them than you normally do. Try to find the optimal spacing that keeps habituation of your pleasures at bay. Surprise, as well as spacing keeps pleasures from habituating. It is worth five minutes each day to create a pleasing little surprise for your spouse, your children, or a colleague. Such acts are reciprocally contagious.
- Savouring is the awareness of pleasure and the deliberate conscious attention to the experience of pleasure. Five techniques that promote savouring:
 - Sharing with others – tell others how much you value the moment
 - Memory building – take mental photographs or a physical souvenir of the event
 - Self-congratulation – don't be afraid of pride
 - Sharpening perceptions – focusing on certain elements and blocking out others
 - Absorption – let yourself get totally immersed and try not to think
- Mindfulness is the principle of shifting perspective to make a stale situation fresh. Meditation can help slow down the mind which can help give mindful attention to the present.

Gratitude Journal

Our brain tends to ignore what goes well and it focuses by default on what might go wrong. Martin Seligman and others have devised and used a simple technique to address this, called the three blessings exercise. The three blessings exercise demands that you focus your attention, as you end your day, on three things that went well and why they went well. These three don't have to be earthshattering: they can be as small as a beautiful flower you looked at. This re-educates your attention toward the positive. Right before going to bed, write down these three things.

Exercise: Research shows that taking exercise for at least 30 minutes a day, three times a week, fights depression.

Use an ad break: Cut down on exposure to advertising, as it encourages you to compare yourself with other people and ultimately to feel dissatisfied with what you have.

Postpone worrying: If you have worries that are interfering with your day, postpone them until a later time or date. You don't need to suppress the thoughts; rather you are acknowledging them but postponing how to deal with them until later. Set a time to ruminate or worry. This will allow you to take control and also may reduce the anxiety and depression associated with your worries. You might want to write them down for later thought to concern yourself with in the future. (Borkovec et al 1983b, 'Stimulus control applications to the treatment of worry'.)

Positive Psychology: Martin Seligman and colleagues have found that people can increase their well-being by writing about a time when they were at their best and reflecting on this daily for a week. The study demonstrated that people report increased happiness. Doing this exercise allows you to see what you are good at. Think of a time when you were at your best, a time when you may have felt productive or happy. What were you doing? Who were you with? Recreate this time by writing about it in detail. If you don't enjoy writing you could record yourself describing this time. For the next week review the story once every day and reflect on the strength/s identified. This may help you to use the particular strength to maximise engagement and increase well-being, and to find out how to recreate this 'at your best' time more often. (Seligman 2005 in Positive Psychology Progress)

Reducing Anxiety by Restricting Choices: We live in a world with many options. We have to make choices about what to buy or where to eat, which means that we are missing out on other opportunities. Making choices can become stressful. Next time you are out shopping think about 'is this good enough' and not 'is this the best or most perfect choice'. You could support local, small shops that have smaller ranges to choose from, therefore helping you make choosing simpler. (Schwarz et al, 2002. 'Maximizing versus satisficing: Happiness is a matter of choice.' You can listen to Professor Schwartz in the audio resources.)

Gratitude Practice: Dr. Bruce Lipton shows that most of our decisions, actions, emotions and behavior depend on the 95% of brain activity that is beyond our conscious awareness, which means that 95 – 99% of our life comes from the programming in our subconscious mind. That is a lot of subconscious and unconscious programming. This practice beats that back some, by reprogramming your mind into the positive. It's about finding inner freedom and accepting what is in every moment. It's about seeing everything as perfect. It's about loving yourself unconditionally. It's about accepting everyone just the way they are. It's about accepting and embracing everything that flows through your life experience. It's about conditioning your mind to look for the best in every situation. It's about seeing the beauty that life offers in every moment. It's about changing the way you experience the world around you. It's about making appreciation a daily part of your life.

Go for a walk (perhaps your 20 minute walk that is part of your physical activity goals). Turn off your cell phone and go alone (or with a dog) and with every step you take say to yourself (or out loud) "thank you" or "thanks." Continue to do this with every step. At some point, you might switch into specific gratitude. For example, "thank you trees for providing me with oxygen," "thank you for all the colors," "thank you for providing me with shelter," "thank you for my ability to walk around," etc. It is impossible (okay, that is my opinion), to be in a bad mood while also in gratitude.

Two books I heartily recommend:

- [The Big Leap](#) by Gay Hendricks
- [The Healing Code](#) by Alex Loyd

Heart Coherence

David Servan Schreiber is a French psychiatrist who works in the US. In his best-selling book he argues for the need for 'a new medicine of emotion' – drug free, alternative approaches to curing stress, anxiety and depression.

He is a neuro-scientist and argues that many psychological problems result from the two brains – the limbic brain and the neocortex – not working well together. In the book he advances seven different techniques, all supported by scientific evidence, for improving brain function, and how we feel, by tapping into the emotional brain's self-healing process. He argues that the most important technique we can learn for emotional, and physical, health is 'heart coherence'.

Here are some pages outlining the technique:

Essentially it is about 'harmonizing the intimate interplay between the heart and the brain'. If you are uncertain if you are making a connection between your heart and your brain you can get software on your computer to analyse what's going on. More information can be found in the book or on the web-site – www.nofreudnoprozac.com

This book has been acclaimed by key figures in positive psychology such as Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi and supports and adds to the type of thinking outlined in the Vanguard Programme.

The Coherence Training Method

Heart coherence was first described in 1992 by physicist Dan Winter and was made popular more recently by the Institute of HeartMath based in Boulder Creek, California. They developed and researched a number of techniques and practical applications of cardiac coherence. Their work has been developed further by others in Europe, such as Dr Alan Watkins based in London.

The practice of heart coherence draws together a number of ancient wisdoms and traditional techniques used in yoga, mindfulness, meditation and relaxation. The first stage consists of turning your attention inwards. To start with, you must set aside your personal concerns for a few minutes. You have to be willing to keep your worries briefly waiting and give your heart and brain the time it takes to recover their balance and intimacy.

The best way to go about this is to begin by taking two deep, slow breaths. They will immediately stimulate the parasympathetic system and begin applying a bit of physiological 'brake'. To maximize their effect, your attention must stay focused on your breath right up until you have finished exhaling and then let your breathing pause for a few seconds before the next in-breath begins of its own accord. The point is to let your mind float with the out-breath right up to the point where it lightens up, becoming mellow and buoyant inside your chest.

Eastern meditation practises would suggest concentrating on the breath as long as possible and keeping the mind empty. But to maximize cardiac coherence, it works better to actually centre your attention on the region of your heart 10 to 15 seconds after your breathing stabilizes. At this second stage, imagine that you are breathing through your heart (or the centre of your chest, if you do not yet feel your heart directly). As you continue breathing slowly and deeply (but effortlessly), visualize - and really feel - each inhalation and exhalation passing through that key part of your body. Imagine that each intake of oxygen nourishes your body and exhalation rids it of the waste it no longer needs. Imagine the slow and supple movement of inhalation and exhalation that bathe the body in this purifying and soothing air. Imagine that they are helping your body make the most of the gift of attention and respite it is receiving from you. You might visualize your heart as a child in a bath of lukewarm water where it floats and frolics freely, at its own pace, without constraints or obligations. Like a beloved child at play, you ask her only to be herself. You watch her thriving in her natural element, as you continue to supply gentle and enveloping air.

The third stage consists in becoming aware of the sensation of warmth or expansiveness that is developing in your chest, and in fostering and encouraging it with your thoughts and your breath. This feeling is often shy at the beginning and emerges only discreetly. After years of emotional abuse, the heart is often like an animal awaking from long hibernation. First it feels the first warm whiffs of spring air. Numb and uncertain, it opens one eye, then two, and it only springs into action after making certain that the mild weather is not just a chance occurrence. One way to encourage the heart is to draw on a feeling of recognition or gratitude and to let it fill your chest. The heart is particularly sensitive to gratitude, to any feelings of love, whether it be love for another being, an object, or even the idea of a benevolent universe. To many, it is enough to think of the face of a beloved child, or even a pet. To others, a peaceful scene in nature brings on a sensation of inner gratitude. For you, maybe inner gratitude will spring from the memory of a physical feat – the exhilaration of a downhill ski run, the perfect swing of a golf club or the hauling in of a sail as you lean into the wind. During this exercise, people sometimes notice a gentle smile that has risen to their lips, as if it had been spread from the glow inside their chest. That is a simple sign that coherence has been established. Other signs include a sensation of lightness, warmth or expansion in your chest.

In a study published by the American Journal of Cardiology, Dr Watkins and researchers from the HeartMath Institute have demonstrated that the very act of recollecting a positive emotion or imagining a pleasurable scene rapidly provokes a transition of heart rate variability towards a phase of coherence. Coherence in heart rhythm affects the emotional brain, fostering stability and signalling that everything is in working order physiologically. The emotional brain reacts to this message by reinforcing coherence in the heart. This interplay creates a 'virtuous' circle that, with a little practice, may lead to a state of maximum coherence lasting for 30 minutes or more. Coherence between the heart and the emotional brain stabilizes the automatic nervous system, both sympathetic and parasympathetic. Having reached a state of balance, we are optimally poised to confront any and all contingencies. We simultaneously have access to the wisdom of the emotional brain – its 'intuition' – and to the faculties for reflection, abstract reasoning and planning of the cognitive brain.

The more training we have in using this technique, the easier it becomes to induce coherence. Once accustomed to this inner state, we become capable of communicating directly, so to speak, with our heart. Like Celeste talking to the little fairy who lived in her heart, we can ask questions such as, 'At the bottom of my heart, do I really love him/her?' and get a real answer.

Once coherence is established, we have only to ask ourselves the question and carefully observe our heart's reaction. If this reaction provokes an extra wave of inner warmth, of well-being, at the very least it wishes to maintain the contact. If, on the contrary, the heart seems to withdraw slightly – if coherence declines – it seeks avoidance and prefers focusing its energy elsewhere. This does not necessarily provide the right answer. After all, many couples go through periods where their heart would like to be elsewhere, at least temporarily, before making up and rediscovering a lasting happiness in their relationship. Nevertheless, it is very important to be conscious of the heart's preference at each stage in life, because it has a powerful influence on the present. In this authentic inner dialogue, I imagine the heart as a sort of bridge to our 'visceral self', acting on behalf of the emotional brain, suddenly open to a nearly direct form of communication. And we all need to find out if our emotional brain is pointing in a different direction from the one we have chosen rationally. If this is so, we must try to reassure the emotional brain in other ways, so as to avoid a conflict with our cognitive brain. Such a conflict would sabotage our capacities for reflection. In the end, it would produce physiological chaos and its ultimate consequence, a chronic waste of energy.

Excerpt from *'Healing without Freud or Prozac'* By Dr David Servan-Schreiber (Rodale, London 2005)

Watch a video or listen to a recording about how to decrease stress and be more happy

- Daniel Gilbert's Ted Talk on Happiness: Daniel is a social psychologist who is known for his research (with Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia) on affective forecasting, with a special emphasis on cognitive biases such as the impact bias. He is the author of the international bestseller *Stumbling on Happiness*, which won the 2007 Royal Society Prizes for Science Books. http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy.html
- Tal Ben-Shahar is an author and lecturer at Harvard University. He currently teaches the largest course at Harvard on 'Positive Psychology' and the third largest on 'The Psychology of Leadership'-with a total of over 1,400 students. Link to Dr Tal Ben-Shahar lecture on 'The Science of Happiness': <http://dev.forum-network.org/lecture/positive-psychology-science-happiness>
- Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside. She currently teaches courses in social psychology and positive psychology and serves as the Department of Psychology's graduate advisor. Her teaching and mentoring of students have been recognized with the Faculty of the Year and Faculty Mentor of the Year Awards. She is the author the book 'The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach of getting the life you want'. The following is the link to a TV interview on 'The How of Happiness': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwOROPlhGL0&feature=related>
- Professor Martin Seligman: Co-founder and undisputed intellectual leader of the Positive Psychology movement. Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, past president of the American Psychological Association and author of several internationally acclaimed books including *Authentic Happiness*, *Learned Optimism* and *The Optimistic Child*.
 - Three different types of happiness and how to increase happiness in your life audio: <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTI=#>
 - Learned optimism video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6loWc55YTM>
 - Explanatory style, pessimism and links with learned helplessness audio: <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTQ=>
 - Using 'disputation' to counteract pessimism and build optimism: <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTQ=>
 - Optimism: <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTQ=>
- Professor David Myers: Social psychologist David Myers is a communicator of psychological science to college students and the general public. David has digested psychological research for the public through articles in four dozen magazines, from *Scientific American* to *Christian Century*, and through seventeen books, including general interest books and textbooks. Go to <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTI=#> to access 9 audios including the following:
 - The Scientific Pursuit of Happiness Prof David Myers Aug 2007
 - Subjective Happiness
 - Genuinely Happy? A look at happiness self-reports
 - Who is Happy?
 - Money and Happiness
 - Traits of Happy People
 - Happiness and Relationships
 - Faith and Happiness
- Dr Karen Reivich: Research Associate in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania and Co-Director of the Penn Resiliency Program. Co-author of *The Optimistic Child* (with Martin Seligman) and co-author of *The Resilience Factor*. Go here <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTQ=> for these 8 audios:
 - What is optimism?
 - Effects of Pessimistic Thinking
 - The Potential Dangers of Optimism

- Albert Ellis and the ABC model
- Getting Unstuck from Negative Emotions
- Generating Alternatives
- Evaluating Evidence
- Real Time Strategies
- Dr Harry Burns Worked as a surgeon for many years before becoming Head of Public Health for the Greater Glasgow Health Board. Currently Chief Medical Officer in Scotland. Has an abiding interest in the reason for health inequalities. The Biology Linking Hopelessness, Stress Hormones and Ill-Health audio: <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTQ=>
- Carl Honore Carl's first book, *In Praise of Slow: How A Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, examines the modern compulsion to hurry and chronicles a global trend toward putting on the brakes. It has been translated into 30 languages and landed on bestseller lists in many countries. His second book, *Under Pressure: Rescuing Childhood From the Culture Of Hyper-parenting*, explores the good and bad of growing up in the 21st century. In Praise of Slow Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhXiHJ8vfuk>
- Professor Barry Schwartz Dorwin Cartright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College in the USA. Author of several books including the latest best-seller *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*.
 - Ted Talks Paradox of Choice video: http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.html
 - Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly8R5TZNV1A&feature=related>
- More audios: <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/audio.php?p=c2lkPTM=> on well being