

Stress Buster Techniques

You get in bed at night and instead of falling asleep, worried thoughts race through your mind like a movie on fast-forward. Work, family, money, errands, social engagements, the gym - what if you can't get everything done? Rather than relaxing, you're tense and stressed out, which only leaves you feeling frazzled the next day and more likely to actually make mistakes.

According to a 2007 study by the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., 48 percent of Americans report regularly lying awake at night due to stress. But this worrying isn't just tiring and counterproductive: it's actually hard on your overall health.

"There's good stress and there's bad stress, and it is important to make that distinction," says Edward Hallowell, M.D., founder of The Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, Sudbury, Mass.

"Exercise is stressful for your muscles and bones, but that is good stress. You want to reduce the bad stress - when it's overpowering and takes control of your life."

Bad stress can lead to heart attack, stroke and the release of stress hormones, which may serve you in the short term, but not in the long term. Prolonged exposure to these hormones can damage your brain, muscles, organs and immune system. They can also boost your heart rate and blood pressure, as well as negatively affect your ability to think clearly, learn and remember things.

But you don't have to start worrying that you worry too much. Just take the following seven steps to suppress your stress and be a happier, healthier you:

1. Get enough sleep

It might be worrying that's keeping you up in the first place, but when people don't sleep well, they won't feel well the next day, and they are much more likely to continue feeling stressed out.

If you are experiencing major sleep troubles, you may want to meet with your physician to be sure that you don't have a serious medical condition, such as heart disease, asthma or sleep apnea.

If everything checks out, Stuart Quan, M.D., visiting professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School's Division of Sleep Medicine, Cambridge, Mass., recommends no matter what you have to do the next day, don't go to sleep until you are actually tired. "A person can't arbitrarily advance their sleep time all that much," he says. "Let's say you have a 5 a.m. flight, so you want to go to bed three hours ahead - no way. The best thing you can do is go to another room other than the bedroom and do something mundane, such as reading or listening to music until you are finally tired." The resulting sleep may not have quantity, but it will be quality.

2. Never worry alone

The most powerful resource you have for reducing worry is human connection. When you are alone, worry can quickly become toxic; when you're with someone else, you tend to problem solve. Talk over your problems with a trusted friend or family member and focus on finding solutions. Stay aware from negative people who reinforce fear.

3. Collect the facts

If there's something in particular that's bothering you, do a little research on it to see if you can abate your concerns. You could spend your time worrying that you have a major illness, for example, but it can be taken care of right away if you go to the doctor. Even if it is a major illness, you will be better off knowing as soon as possible.

4. Make a plan

It's better to be active than passive when it comes to stress maintenance. Planning a course of action to remove unnecessary stressors from your life helps you to feel more in control. Write down what you want to accomplish that day, including non work activities. Learn to be flexible if the plan doesn't work.

5. Exercise

Research shows that physical exercise is absolutely crucial to well-being. It is a far healthier anti-anxiety remedy than taking pills, and also strengthens your mental acuity." Get regular physical exercise three to four times a week.

6. Never self-medicate

Doctors agree that many people will turn to alcohol, drugs, smoking, food and other compulsive activities such as gambling when they are stressed out. This can lead to addiction as a way of escaping those feelings of panic and stress. While these actions may feel like an "escape" in the moment, they will ultimately lead to numerous health, financial and even legal problems that can create a more stressful reality.

7. Devote time to introspection

Regular prayer and/or meditative time have a beneficial physiological effect on the brain. Scientists aren't entirely sure how it works, but meditation can produce a deep state of relaxation and give you a sense of calm, peace and emotional stability. Even better, it can be done anywhere, from a bedroom to a bus to an office desk, and it's free!

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