

Other Stress Management Strategies



by Barbara Frazier

Here's a list of additional stress-management strategies you may like to try. To read about my top seven, [click here](#).

Crying

A good cry can provide some relief from stress. The stress hormone cortisol is secreted in tears and is released when you cry.

Emotionally, crying also often brings on support from someone else, which in turn reduces feelings of helplessness and isolation. Crying can be self-soothing, but research doesn't show that this is a regular or proven occurrence. I would guess that individual personality traits come into play, meaning one person may feel immediate relief and a shift in perspective after crying, and someone else could feel no difference or worse.

Other theories are that crying, especially intensive crying, may set in motion the release of opioids in the body,

acting on emotional pain much like they do on physical pain. Emotional crying also triggers the production of oxytocin and endorphins, which boost mood.

So when stressed out, a good cry might help you “complete the cycle” of stress release necessary to get your body back to a more normal state of balance.

Yoga

We know that exercise is at the top of the list for releasing stress in body and mind. However, the type of exercise is key. Aerobic exercises like walking, jogging, or running are very effective.

Yoga is another choice you can add to your regular exercise regime.

Yoga is meditative. One study found that after twelve sessions of Hatha Yoga practice and training, subjects experienced a significant decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress.

A literature review conducted by two other researchers also found Yoga to be an effective way to release stress. They said:

"All types of Yoga and yoga-based interventions (e.g., mindfulness-based Yoga, meditation-based Yoga) illustrated significant benefit to stress release."

You can use Yoga for immediate stress relief, but its greater value comes from regular practice. Doing it just three times a week for about 20 minutes significantly impacts releasing stress build-up while also building your immunity to it. Like meditation, Yoga creates mental and emotional space in your mind so you're less reactive and more proactive. It also releases stress pockets lodged in your body.

Another great benefit is that regular Yoga promotes other healthy habits like a good diet and better sleep. The more you do it, the more likely you are to choose healthy foods and enjoy deeper sleep.

Balancing Your Heartbeat

This strategy is off the beaten path. You've likely never heard of it. Neither had I until I read about it in *Buddha's Brain* by Rick Hanson. I'm going to borrow heavily from him to explain it.

Your regular heartbeat has "small changes in the interval between each beat. This is called heart rate variability (HRV)." Typically, your heart speeds up some during inhalation and slows down during exhalation. That's the variability factor. But, when plagued with chronic stress, your HRV decreases, meaning there is less variability between heartbeats. When your HRV is low, you have more difficulty recovering from a heart attack.

So here's the punch line:

When you can increase the "amount and coherence" of HRV, you feel less stressed and improve your cardiovascular health and immune function.

Here's how to do that:

- Consciously work on keeping the length of your inhalation and exhalation the same. In other words, if you inhale to a count of three, exhale to a count of three.
- Secondly, imagine you're "breathing in and out through the area of your heart." That's not easy at first, but try it. It helps to visualize it.
- Third, as you breathe with even counts through your heart, imagine positive emotions such as love, kindness, compassion, gratitude, happiness, being with people you love, cuddling with your pet, or whatever fits for you. You can imagine these feelings moving through your heart along with your breath.

Do the whole exercise for a couple of minutes and feel yourself calming. The more you do it, the more automated it becomes, and you associate breathing with good feelings.

Drink Green Tea

Having a cup of hot green tea is soothing. The warmth alone is helpful, but more importantly, green tea contains an amino acid called L-theanine, a natural relaxant that reduces mental and physical stress. It acts similarly to an anti-anxiety drug, but without the side effects and with a milder yet energizing effect.

Some people drink a few cups of green tea daily to stay calmer and reduce stress. Studies have also shown that L-theanine improves mood, cognition, and a reduction of anxiety symptoms.

So imagine doing Yoga for 20 minutes and then sitting on the couch with a cup of warm green tea and sipping away. It's very relaxing and soothing.

Imagery

Imagery is a good strategy, especially if you're visually oriented. Imagine a calming scene or activity that creates

a sense of well-being. See it in full color with sounds, textures, and aromas that make it more real. You might walk along the ocean at sunset with a beautiful kaleidoscope of colors in the sky and the water gently lapping at the shoreline. Maybe you're with someone you love, and you're chatting quietly and intimately. The breeze is brushing up against your face. You feel peaceful and have a sense of well-being.

Imagery activates the right hemisphere of the brain associated with creativity. It quiets internal chatter and stressful thoughts. Imagery also stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system associated with calming and soothing. Some people have a regular scene they use whenever they feel stressed. That's something you can try.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a broad term. It can refer to a particular type of meditation, but more generally, it means being aware of your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations in

the moment without reacting to, judging, or resisting them. You become an observer who witnesses what's happening and acknowledges it without being immersed in it.

When you're anxious or stressed, you can watch your thoughts rise rapidly, and emotions charge up as you experience the stressor, but you have some distance. It's calming, and you can practice it at any time in any situation.

When dealing with stress, noticing your body sensations is particularly helpful. By focusing on them directly and observing them, you alter them. If you watch yourself breathing hard, your breathing will slow. If you notice tension in your shoulders, you relax them. If you watch fearful thoughts rising in your mind, you get some distance from them and feel less threatened.

Mindfulness is an extremely useful practice - not just for stress reduction - but for self-awareness and objective examination of your thoughts and feelings.

Diet and Sleep

This is the last one I want to mention. Food has a significant effect on mood. Most people either don't know this or ignore it. A diet heavy in fat, junk food, empty carbs, and sugar can cause anxiety and depression without any other stimulus. That kind of diet also taxes your digestive system and can disrupt its healthy functioning. We already know that stress slows digestion. When you add a poor diet to that, you up the ante – not in a good way.

Sleep deprivation has many ill effects that affect your physical and mental health. Getting enough sleep allows your brain to declutter and your subconscious to work out problems through dreaming.

In the first instance, toxic material builds up around the cells in your brain during the day. When you sleep, it's washed away. Arianna Huffington likens it to running your brain through a dishwasher. It's like decluttering your hard drive on your computer and deleting unnecessary files.

Too little sleep increases the toxic build-up, leading to issues with cognition, memory, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and mood stability. You need at least 7 hours of sleep per night, and preferably 8.

Dreaming also allows your subconscious to pull up stored information relevant to the problems and stresses you're dealing with and work on them. That's why you can go to bed with a problem and, upon waking up in the morning, have a flash of insight that provides the answer.

Regular sleep and a healthy, clean diet set you up to handle stress more effectively, whereas the opposite makes it challenging to deal with stress and adds to it.

That's my list!

There are other options for managing stress besides these and the others I gave you in [this week's blog](#). However, these have been tested and come with a lot of backup. Take your pick and use the strategies that work best for you!

Footnotes:

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