

7 of the Most Effective Stress Management Techniques

By Gia Mora • Mar 23, 2020 : 9-11 minutes : 10/5/2018

Feeling stressed? You're not alone. According to a [2017 Gallup poll](#), 79 percent of Americans report experiencing stress in their daily lives. If you fall into this high percentage, then these stress management techniques are for you.

What Is Stress?

Stress is your body's natural reaction to a threat — real or imagined — and it's controlled by your [sympathetic nervous system](#). When you experience stress in short, focused bursts, it can work in your favor: it activates your “fight or flight” response due to a flood of chemicals and hormones in your brain like cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine.

For example, stress would give you the extra boost of energy and concentration you need if you needed to escape a hungry tiger. In preparing to excuse yourself from the tiger's dinner plate, your heart pounds, your muscles engage, and your breath quickens. All of that helps you run to get away, or fight to enjoy a tiger dinner of your own.

But when every day [stress](#) causes you to feel anxious or like you can't cope with life's challenges, that's a different story. If you feel like your head is frequently in an imaginary tiger's mouth, stress management techniques can help you create a more joyful and peaceful life.

Signs You May Be Stressed

There are four categories doctors use to evaluate [signs of stress](#):

- *Cognitive*: This kind of stress can lead to incessant worrying, racing or anxious thoughts, an inability to concentrate, and memory issues.
- *Physical*: Stress can manifest itself in your physical body through a feeling of tightness in your chest, heart palpitations, nausea and dizziness, trouble sleeping, and aches and pains throughout your body.
- *Emotional*: Signs of emotional stress might include feeling lonely, isolated, or overwhelmed.
- *Behavioral*: Actions like chewing your nails, twirling your hair, or avoiding certain situations might be behavioral signs that you may want to get your stress levels in check.

Some stresses are acute and temporary, like studying for an exam or preparing to buy a home. But chronic triggers — like work, money issues, and family responsibilities — can last for an extended period of time. These are also some of the stressors that are the [top causes of anxiety](#) for most Americans: the [American Psychological Association](#) reports that money causes stress for 62 percent of Americans, and work causes stress for 61 percent.

If you experience stress in any of these forms, practicing the following stress management skills can make both your work and your leisure time more pleasurable.

7 of the Most Effective Stress Management Techniques

1. Take a Deep Breath

Remember when you were little and your parents told you to calm down and breathe? Thank them for their wisdom. [Deep breathing](#) is an excellent form of natural stress relief. There's even an entire branch of yoga dedicated to a breathing technique called [prananyama](#), a Sanskrit word meaning breath (*prana*) and self-control (*yama*).

Deep breathing helps relieve stress by shutting down the “flight or flight” response in your brain. Decades of [research](#) have seen a correlation between deep breathing and increased activity in parasympathetic nervous system, the “rest-and-digest” half of your autonomic nervous system that's responsible for involuntary actions like breathing and heart rate.

This is a great way to start relieving stress because you can do it anytime, anywhere. Simply inhale deeply through your nose, and then slowly exhale through your nose. And it doesn't take much time to reap great benefits. One [2013 study](#) found that just five minutes of slow, deep breathing (six breaths per minute) lead to a slight fall in heart rate and increased activity in parasympathetic nervous system.

2. Get Enough Sleep

More and more research shows that American adults regularly fail to get the recommended [seven to nine hours of sleep](#) every night. The American Psychological Association's [2013 Stress in America](#) survey found that 21 percent of adults reported feeling more stressed when they didn't get enough sleep and noted that “most Americans would be happier, healthier and safer if they were to sleep an extra 60 to 90 minutes per night.”

If you're feeling stressed out, however, [falling asleep](#) can seem an impossible task. Try [these seven natural sleep remedies](#), or make some [tweaks to your bedroom](#) for better ZZZs. Once you find a peaceful way to drift off into your dreams, then this becomes a very enjoyable stress management technique.

3. Eat Healthy

You might think it's comforting to chow down on fast food, especially when you're stressing out. But that kind of [emotional eating](#) actually works against you.

Over the last 10 years, research has discovered that there is a relationship between your digestive system and your central nervous system, called your "[gut-brain axis](#)." This connection means that consuming healthy, nutritious foods can help keep both your body and your brain in top shape.

Specifically, eating foods high in [magnesium may be helpful to fight feelings of anxiety](#): a study involving mice found that those who had diets low in [magnesium](#) had increased anxiety-related behaviors, leading researchers and doctors to believe that eating [foods naturally rich in magnesium](#) may help people feel calmer. The next time you're feeling uneasy, reach for some magnesium-rich food like green leafy veggies, beans, nuts, and oatmeal .

Research also suggests that probiotics often found in foods like yogurt [might help with symptoms of anxiety and depression](#), although more research is needed. If you are dairy-free, sauerkraut, kimchee, fermented pickles and kombucha also contain probiotics that can promote a healthier gut microbiome. Additionally, antioxidant vitamins like [vitamin C](#) may play an important therapeutic role in managing anxiety.

4. Move Your Body

One of the greatest forms of natural anxiety relief is [exercise](#). It may seem counterintuitive —why would raising your heart rate help you calm down? But [regular exercise](#) can improve concentration, reduce fatigue, and enhance overall cognitive functioning, making it one of the best stress management techniques.

"Most people think of exercise in terms of its physical benefits—weight loss, muscle growth, greater endurance, improved cardiovascular health and functioning—but it can have equally dramatic mental benefits," says Trevor Thieme, C.S.C.S. and Openfit's senior manager of fitness and nutrition content.

By reducing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, and increasing mood lifting hormones like endorphins, exercise can provide "the physical and mental boost you need," Thieme says.

In particular, [aerobic exercise](#) (biking, running, swimming, and rowing) can activate the parasympathetic nervous system to the calm you down. Yoga can also [promote relaxation and relieve the symptoms of anxiety](#). Both the deep breathing (*pranayama*) the [physical poses](#) (*asanas*) in yoga are associated with lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as an enhanced quality of life.

5. Find Some Stillness

Moving your body can keep stress at bay, but so can taking some time to be still. [Meditation](#), or mindfulness and relaxation techniques, can calm the brain and [help relieve stress](#). One [2015 study](#) demonstrated that even novice meditators showed significant, measurable changes to the electrical activity in the brain.

The great thing about this stress management technique is that it can be done anywhere you can find a quiet space. Don't know how to start? There's an app for that. A [study](#) indicated that just 10-20 minutes of meditation using an app "practiced multiple times per week can improve outcomes related to work stress and well-being, with potentially lasting effects. Take a break at home or in an empty office at work with free mindfulness apps like Breathe ([android](#), [iPhone](#)), 10% Happier ([android](#), [iPhone](#)), or Omvana ([android](#), [iPhone](#)).

6. Use Your Lifeline and Call a Friend

Friends aren't just numbers on social media profiles—they provide a great support network for good times and bad. [Recent research](#) in chimpanzees suggests that spending time with friends may actually reduce overall stress levels, suggesting that friendship between human beings actually regulates the way our bodies manage stress. Double your bang for your buck in stress reduction by taking a walk with a friend IRL instead of just chatting them up on Insta.

7. Put Down Your Phone

Although phone apps are great for things like guided meditation, [too much phone use can lead to more stress in your life](#).

Workers who can't stop emailing and people obsessed with checking social media suffer from the same increased stress levels, sometimes experiencing [FOMO](#), or "fear of missing out." This specific form of anxiety stimulates the brain's addiction mechanisms by placing the focus on the external, either objects to be coveted or people's lives to be emulated, instead of the internal self, triggering the body's stress response.

Consider taking a "digital detox"—a set period of time where you leave your devices behind. Instead, use that time to meditate, looking within to find contentment.