

Stress & Anxiety

19 Proven Ways to Reduce Stress
and Anxiety

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Prolonged stress is bad for us. It raises our cortisol levels and leads to stress can manifest itself as a physical and mental health problem. Stress causes an increase in cortisol levels, which leaves us in a continual state of alertness, ready to jump into a fight, flight or fright response. This prolonged rise in cortisol levels is not good for us. It often results in high blood pressure and puts additional pressure on the blood vessels in the heart and brain. It has been documented that prolonged stress can lead to structural changes in the brain too.



Many people suffer from stress headaches, heart burn, back ache, they are unable to sleep and are more prone to infections as stress interferes with their immune system. Stress can increase their blood sugar as it causes your liver to release glucose, it can adversely affect your sexual performance, make you more at risk of a heart attack or stroke and has been shown to be a contributor to mental health problems.

If you're stressed, whether by your job or something more personal, the first step to feeling better is to identify the cause.

The most destructive approach is turn to something unhealthy to help you cope, such as smoking, drinking or binge-eating comfort food.



Exercise

Stress hormones: Exercise actually lowers your body's stress hormones – such as cortisol. It also helps release endorphins, which are chemicals that boost mood and can act as natural painkillers.

Sleep: Exercise can also improve your sleep quality, which can be adversely affected by stress and anxiety.

Confidence: regular exercise has been shown to contribute to mental wellbeing.

Deep breathing exercises

Cortisol in your bloodstream activates your sympathetic nervous system, signalling the fright, flight or fight response.

In response to this, your heart will beat faster, your breathing quicken and your blood vessels constrict to conserve blood flow to your vital organs.

Controlling your breathing to override this response, will activate your parasympathetic nervous system and help you relax.

The goal of deep breathing is to focus your awareness on your breath, making it slower and deeper. When you breathe in deeply through your nose, your lungs fully expand and your belly rises. There are several types of deep breathing exercises, including diaphragmatic breathing, abdominal breathing, belly breathing and paced respiration.

Understanding how to control your breathing is extremely helpful in combating panic attacks. Mindfulness and yoga courses often include breathing exercises.

Take control

Feeling a loss of control is a key contributor to that panicky feeling.

The act of taking control is empowering in its own right and depending on the reason for the stress, may instantly relieve some of the panic.

Say no

Again, part of taking control. Simplifying the number of things you are doing and who you are trying to please, should help reduce the stress in your life.

Alongside this – delegate. If someone else is able to take the strain let it go!

Stop procrastinating

If you have things on your mind that you need to do, get them done! Dilly dallying will lead to an increase in stress as you rush to try and complete them, when the deadline approaches.

Write things down

One way to handle stress is to write things down. When the brain is trying to remember things it can be stressful in itself. The act of writing things down brings order to some people's thought processes and can consequently be calming.

Spend time with friends and family

Spending time with friends and family can help you get through stressful times.



It is thought that spending time socialising helps release Oxytocin, which is a natural stress reliever and it reduces the effect of cortisol.

Increase physical contact

Harder to do in the midst of a pandemic. But if you have people within your bubble, cuddling, kissing, hugging and sex can all help relieve stress.

Positive physical contact helps release oxytocin and lower cortisol. Consequently, lowering blood pressure and heart rate and reducing the fluttering feelings associated with stress and anxiety.

Spend time with a pet (or cuddle a baby!)

It has long been documented that stroking a pet can have an incredibly calming effect. Once again it is the caring interaction that is thought to release oxytocin and counter the effects of stress.

Owning a pet can also give someone a sense of purpose, encourage exercise and providing companionship. However owning a pet when you are unable to look after them properly can provoke additional stress and worry!

Take some Me Time

Take time out to do things that you really enjoy. This can be with friends or family, or on your own. But it is your choice as to how you would like to spend your time, not something you are doing to please someone else!

Challenge yourself

Learn a new skill or language or do something to stretch your abilities and gain a sense of satisfaction from completing it. The sense of achievement will contribute to your sense of wellbeing.

Laugh

Laughter has been shown to improve your immune system and mood, it relaxes your muscles and can lead to a feeling of well-being.

Herbal remedies

Always check with your pharmacist to be sure they do not interact with any other prescription medication that you may be taking. Some of the following could also have side-effects.

Lemon balm: Lemon balm is a member of the mint family that is known for its soothing and anti-anxiety properties.

Omega-3 fatty acids: can potentially help.

Ashwagandha: Ashwagandha is an herb used in Ayurvedic medicine to treat stress and anxiety.

Green tea: Green tea contains many polyphenol antioxidants which provide health benefits. It is believed to lower stress and anxiety by increasing serotonin levels.

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Valerian: Valerian root is often used to promote sleep. It contains valerenic acid, which alters gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) receptors, thought to reduce anxiety.

Kava kava: Kava kava is a member of the pepper family. The indigenous people of the South Pacific have long used it as a sedative, it is thought to be beneficial in reducing stress and anxiety.

Peppermint or chamomile tea both have soothing properties.



Aromatherapy

Using essential oils or burning a scented candle helps many people reduce feelings of stress and anxiety.

Some scents have been shown to be especially soothing:

Lavender (good for promoting sleep too)

Rose

Vetiver

Bergamot

Roman chamomile

Neroli

Frankincense

Sandalwood

Ylang ylang

Orange or orange blossom

Geranium

Reduce your caffeine intake

Caffeine is a stimulant found in foods such as coffee, tea, chocolate and energy drinks. High doses can increase anxiety and make it harder to sleep.

Chew gum

Chewing gum is thought to relax tension in the jaw muscles and some studies have suggested that it increases blood flow to your brain.



Yoga

Yoga has become a popular method of stress relief and exercise and is helpful in promoting a feeling of calm wellbeing as well as improving your body's tone and flexibility.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of thinking, to reduce your mind wandering. It can be extremely helpful in reducing the anxiety-inducing effects of negative thinking .

Listen to soothing music

Listening to music can have a very relaxing effect on the body. Slow-paced instrumental music can help you feel more relaxed and help lower blood pressure, heart rate and reduce stress hormones.

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Classical, Celtic, Native American and Indian music along with nature sounds, have all been shown to have particularly relaxing affects on the body. However listening to music you enjoy is also mood enhancing and relaxing.

The NHS recommend a selection of stress-relieving apps: <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

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