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# 25 Great Ways to Manage Your Stress

Prolonged pressure and strain can affect your physical and mental health. Here's how to cope

By Matt Alderton, AARP | 8 Comments

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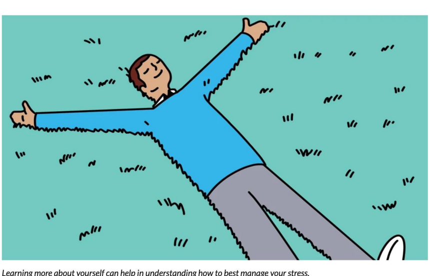

*Learning more about yourself can help in understanding how to best manage your stress.*
SAM ISLAND

Life has changed a lot since the Stone Age, but one aspect of the human condition has been a constant for millions of years: stress. Although stress today comes from smartphones instead of saber-toothed tigers and bills instead of bubonic plague, its devastating effects remain the same, including a wide range of mental, emotional and physical problems. Fortunately, you can manage stress — even if you can't eliminate it. We've compiled 25 ideas that will help you get started. Decide which ones could work for you, then share your own tips at the bottom of the page.

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## 1. Determine your stress personality

Managing stress starts with understanding how you react to it, says Lauren Hodges, author of *Less Stress, More Calm: Discover Your Unique Stress Personality and Make It Your Superpower*. "Research in stress neurosciences has found that we don't all show up the same way when it comes to our stress.... We all have a unique 'stress personality' — patterns of thought, emotion and behavior under stress," she says. Hodges has identified eight different stress personalities: the Fighter, the Runner, the Worrier, the Freezer, the Pleaser, the Negative Self-Talker, the Distracted and the Thriver. Knowing yours can help you tailor stress-management strategies. For example, a Fighter, who attacks first and asks questions later, might benefit from deep breaths or a long walk, while a Runner, who avoids discomfort, might need alone time. According to Hodges, you can find your stress personality by journaling every day for a few weeks about your thoughts, behaviors and emotions during stress. "Look for the patterns, and you'll find the personality," she says.

## 2. Learn anchoring

"One of the things that causes stress is overthinking — replaying things that happened that were upsetting to us and anticipating the next upsetting thing," says Jenny Taitz, a clinical psychologist and the author of *Stress Resets: How to Soothe Your Body and Mind in Minutes*. She recommends a practice called anchoring — taking a moment to ground yourself in the present instead of focusing on the upsetting past or the hypothetical future. To practice anchoring, ask yourself these questions: What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What am I doing right now? "It's about coming back to the demands of this moment," says Taitz, adding that a quick time-out allows you to assess your next steps and make choices that move you forward, not hold you back.

## 3. Practice radical acceptance

You can't avoid stressful situations entirely, but you can reduce their impact by learning to accept them, according to Taitz. She says people who don't accept challenges and obstacles end up ruminating on them, which only worsens their stress. Instead, Taitz suggests rating your acceptance of a stressful situation on a scale from zero to 10, where 10 is total acceptance. Next, ask yourself what you would do if you were to accept the situation instead of resisting it, then do that. For example, if you're stressed by the prospect of a difficult task, you might take steps to actually complete it. Finally, rate your acceptance again to see if it's improved. "Meeting difficulty with acceptance changes how we feel and keeps pain as pain without turning it into suffering," Taitz says.

## 4. Don a half-smile

When people are under stress, their bodies usually follow their minds. They might clench their fists, tense their muscles or grind their teeth. If you're deliberate about it, Taitz says you can flip the script in stressful situations by leading with your body. She recommends forcing a half-smile by relaxing your face, neck and shoulders and slightly raising the upper corners of your lips. "It's so easy to scowl when things aren't going the way we want them to, and that creates a negative loop," says Taitz. "When we're scowling, we're more prone to think negatively. And when we're thinking negatively, we feel worse." Research shows that smiling may induce positive emotions. For example, a 2022 study in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour* found that people who altered their facial expressions to appear happier actually felt happier as a result. At the very least, as Taitz notes in her book *Stress Resets*, a half-smile can make you more approachable to others, and their conversation and company might lift your mood.

*At the end of your usual warm shower, turn the dial to cold and see if you can stand it for 15 or 30 seconds.*
SAM ISLAND

## 5. Take a cold shower

On a physiological level, a certain amount of mild stress can be good for the body. Scientists call this hormetic stress, and one way to address it is to take a cold shower. Hormetic stress can help you build resilience so that your cells — and perhaps even your mind — can tolerate more stress and recover from stress more quickly, says Elissa Epel, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the school's Aging, Metabolism and Emotions Center. "Hormetic stress works almost like a vaccine — you receive a microdose of the 'virus' (stress), and then, later, when you face a large, intense similar stressor, you're essentially inoculated against it," Epel notes in her book *The Stress Prescription: Seven Days to More Joy and Ease*. A cold shower is an easy way to get a good dose of hormetic stress, according to Epel. "At the end of your usual warm shower, turn the dial to cold — as cold as you can stand it," she writes in *The Stress Prescription*. "Can you stay under the cold stream for 15 or 30 seconds? A minute? ... Match the shock of the stress response with a relaxed mind as much as possible. This is what builds resilience." (Note: If you have a heart condition, it's best to skip this one, as sudden cold-water exposure can cause a spike in blood pressure.)

## 6. Follow your plan, not your mood

According to Taitz, studies show that the psychotherapeutic treatment known as behavioral activation can work just as well at treating depression as antidepressant medications. She says the practice can also manage stress. But what is it, exactly? It boils down to a simple axiom: How you feel is connected to what you do. So don't cancel plans or procrastinate if you feel stressed. Instead, forge ahead with plans and activities that make you feel joy or accomplishment. "Stick to a plan rather than a mood," Taitz says. "It doesn't have to be hour by hour, but it's important to do even just a few things each day that make you feel alive and make you feel like you're moving toward your goals."

## 7. Embrace casual connections

Taitz says social isolation can cause stress and also worsen it, adding that loneliness can be so toxic that it elicits a physical response in the body. Although close friendships are an obvious salve, she says even casual connections can be healing. Taitz recalls a study in which volunteers went to a Starbucks with instructions to either avoid or embrace impromptu conversations and interactions with others. Those who embraced the casual connections reported better moods and increased feelings of connection. "A lot of us think in all-or-nothing ways about relationships," Taitz says. "We're either really close or total strangers. But what if you start to chat with the person at the store or introduce yourself to a friend of a friend, or a neighbor? Working on casual connections can be really helpful, because social support is such a powerful stress buffer."

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## 8. Sweat it out

Exercise is another reliable source of hormetic stress. In fact, a 2024 study in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* found that greater physical activity correlated to lower stress levels in more than 50,000 adults ages 45 to 70. For the most stress-busting benefits, both Epel and Taitz recommend short bursts of intense exercise — provided your doctor says you're healthy enough for it. "Try one round of high-intensity interval training (HIIT)," says Epel. HIIT cycles vary and can include jumping jacks, planks, squats, crunches or lunges, weight lifting and running. You do 30 seconds of exercise at maximum effort, then rest for 10 seconds, then exercise for another 30 seconds, and so on.

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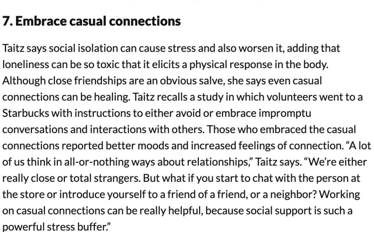
## 9. Learn proper deep breaths

"Take a deep breath" is probably the most common advice for people experiencing stress. That's because it works, according to Taitz. Most people take about 18 breaths per minute, she says. Taitz recommends slowing that down to as few as six breaths per minute by inhaling for five seconds, then exhaling for five seconds. Breathing techniques that reduce the number of breaths per minute have been shown to increase activity in areas of the brain responsible for impulse control while reducing emotions like sadness and anger. "Deep breathing has been shown to reduce stress, encourage relaxation and support emotion regulation," says Robyne Hanley-Dafoe, author of *Stress Wisely: How to Be Well in an Unwell World*. She recommends what she calls "birthday cake breathing," which pairs deep breathing with visualization. "In your mind's eye, try calling up an image of your favorite cake with lots of candles," says Hanley-Dafoe. "Take a deep breath in, and slowly blow out every last candle."



*When you're feeling stressed, start belting out a funny tune — it may help!*
SAM ISLAND

## 10. Sing ludicrous songs

If you're ruminating on stressful thoughts, try putting them into the form of a song and singing them to yourself as an upbeat tune, suggests Taitz. This can disarm stressful situations by making them feel silly, she says. "Most of us have thoughts that are unhelpful and basically are the mental equivalent of spam," Taitz says. "If you have one of those thoughts — like 'I'm a loser' — instead of taking it seriously, sing it to an upbeat tune like 'Do You Believe in Magic.' If you do that, it loses its grip.... The sense of humor is so much better than feeling derailed and governed by something that's so ludicrous."

## 11. Zoom out

You've probably heard the phrase "miss the forest for the trees." It means you're so mired in the details that you fail to see the bigger picture. That's exactly what happens when you're experiencing stress, says Ethan Kross, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan and author of *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It*. When we're experiencing stress, "we tend to zoom in really narrowly on the problem," says Kross, who recommends "zooming out" and "taking a step back." One way to do that is to engage in what he calls "mental time travel." "When you're in the midst of something stressful, you're focused on that experience," Kross says. "You're zoomed in. Instead, think about how you're going to feel about this event tomorrow, next week, next month or next year. All of our emotions come and eventually go. We lose sight of that in the moment of stress, but simply reminding ourselves of that by engaging in mental time travel gives us hope by highlighting the [transience] of what we're going through."

## 12. Loosen your expectations

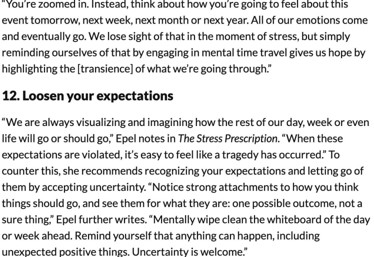
"We are always visualizing and imagining how the rest of our day, week or even life will go or should go," Epel notes in *The Stress Prescription*. "When these expectations are violated, it's easy to feel like a tragedy has occurred." To counter this, she recommends recognizing your expectations and letting go of them by accepting uncertainty. "Notice strong attachments to how you think things should go, and see them for what they are: one possible outcome, not a sure thing," Epel further writes. "Mentally wipe clean the whiteboard of the day or week ahead. Remind yourself that anything can happen, including unexpected positive things. Uncertainty is welcome."

## 13. Put away your phone

Smartphones can be huge sources of stress, says researcher Melissa Huey, assistant professor of psychology at the New York Institute of Technology. For many, the issue is addiction. "Smartphones have the same chemical reaction in the brain as drugs and alcohol," she says. "Getting likes, messages and notifications from your phone releases dopamine, which makes us feel good." Huey says some people become so dependent on their phone that they develop a fear of being without it, which is known as nomophobia. "For other people, having a continuous stream of updates and being at others' beck and call can generate a sense of urgency, leading to increased anxiety and stress," she says. To curtail phone-related stress, Huey recommends keeping your phone outside the bedroom when you sleep, turning off notifications or using your phone's "do not disturb" setting, and regularly taking breaks from the device for set periods, like 30 minutes or an hour. "A good time to start doing this is also when you're engaging in a particular hobby you enjoy, perhaps while watching your favorite television shows," Huey says.

## 14. Turn off the news

For a lot of smartphone users, it's not the phone that creates stress. Rather, it's the content they're consuming on it, including news and social media. "Before smartphones and social media, most people got their news from reading the morning paper or [watching] the evening newscast," Huey says. "In other words, news consumption was contained to certain times of the day. We're now living in a 24-hour news cycle, and thanks to our smartphones, we have instant access to events happening virtually anywhere in the world right at our fingertips. Understandably, some of this news is distressing and can contribute to feelings of stress and anxiety." The answer isn't to cut yourself off entirely from news and social media, but to manage your consumption. "Schedule a specific window of time during the day to check the news," Huey says. "In other words, try to re-create the former, less intrusive way we used to consume news."



*Timeboxing — or scheduling a "worry window" — may reduce worry for the rest of the day by limiting it to a specific time.*
SAM ISLAND

## 15. Schedule stress

"Some people worry all day — it's like a news ticker of worries is running constantly in their mind," says Taitz. However, you might be able to short-circuit your inner breaking-news alerts by what is sometimes called timeboxing. Whether you do it for 5, 10 or 20 minutes, what's important is creating a dedicated time and place for worries so you can sit with them mindfully. "It turns out that setting a time to worry reduces worry for the rest of the day," Epel writes in *The Stress Prescription*. "You may very well end with a sense of having 'gotten it out of your system' for the day."

## 16. Schedule serenity

While you're scheduling time for stress, it might also be wise to schedule time for serenity, suggests Hanley-Dafoe. "Schedule microbreaks and opportunities for active recovery in your calendar and honor them as you would any other important meeting," she says. "We know that even 15-minute blocks of rest, reflection, self-compassion and active recovery can make a big difference." To maximize the benefits of scheduled rest, Hanley-Dafoe suggests dividing your day into quarters, such as morning, midday, afternoon and evening. "Within each of the quarters, try integrating some form of recovery or rest behavior that helps you tend to your body, mind and heart," she says. "This may be standing up from your office chair and stretching, listening to one song or doing one act of service. These micro-behaviors, done consistently, can help us move toward our desired state."

## 17. Take inventory

Because stress can sneak up on you, it can be helpful to create a stress inventory, says Epel. She recommends writing down a list of everything that makes you feel pressure, stress, anger or uncertainty. When your list is complete, ask yourself which items are within your power to change and which aren't. If you're stretched too thin at work, for example, can you establish boundaries with colleagues or otherwise change your working conditions? If you're exhausted by social commitments, can you reprioritize relationships to focus on deeper friendships with fewer people? Better yet, check your list for stressors you can delete entirely. "Cross out any situations that you can exit or end," Epel notes in *The Stress Prescription*. "Visualize your day minus that particular stressor."

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## 18. Be grateful

Hodges notes that gratitude has a long history as a valid resilience tool. "Regular gratitude practice — giving and receiving gratitude — has been found to [help us] improve our quality of life, better manage our stress, feel more happy and ... better manage the challenges, changes and storms of life," she says. "Personally, I set reminders to express gratitude on a regular basis — though after a while, I stopped needing reminders." Don't just feel gratitude in the moment; try to capture it so that you can feel it again later, suggests Hanley-Dafoe.

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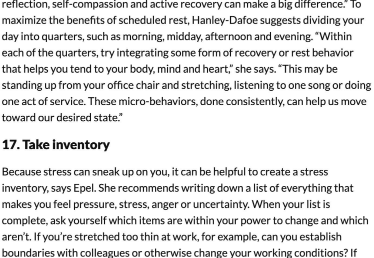
## 19. Be your own bestie

We often treat ourselves differently than we treat our friends, making stressful situations worse with negative self-talk instead of positive affirmations and encouragement. Kross suggests one solution: Silently talk yourself through stressful circumstances using the second person — as if you were talking to a friend instead of to yourself. "Most people have had the experience of it being much easier to give advice to someone else than to give advice to themselves," he says. "When you use your own name and you try to coach yourself through your problem, it's like you're talking to someone else. And that makes it easier to generate wise solutions to problems."



*Experiencing awe, which is often inspired by nature, may slow our perception of time — which is the opposite of what happens with stress.*
SAM ISLAND

## 20. Spend time outside

A simple walk outside can do a lot to build resilience, says psychologist Emma Seppälä, a lecturer in management at Yale University and author of *Sovereign: Reclaim Your Freedom, Energy & Power in a Time of Distraction, Uncertainty & Chaos*. "Studies have shown that a simple walk in nature — as opposed to an urban environment — can significantly decrease anxiety, preserve positive mood and even improve our memory," she says. Nature also can produce awe, Seppälä notes. "Research on awe, which is often inspired by beautiful natural sceneries such as a starlit sky or a vast horizon, suggests that it slows our perception of time — which is the opposite of what happens with stress — by bringing us into the present moment and thereby enhances our well-being and decreases our stress." If you can't get out in nature, bring nature to you, says Epel, who recommends filling your space with plants and flowers, listening to nature sounds or even experimenting with essential oils.

## 21. Clean away the chaos

When you're experiencing stress, what you're often feeling is a lack of control, according to Kross. He says you can compensate for things you can't control by focusing on things you can, like your environment. "Creating order around you by cleaning up and tidying up can be helpful for giving you a sense of control," Kross says. Indeed, numerous studies have linked clutter and mess to increased anxiety and stress, and cleanliness to increased feelings of calm and well-being.

## 22. Eat away inflammation

Although stress feels mental, it has a physical impact, too. That's because of the stress hormone cortisol. According to the Mayo Clinic, overexposure to cortisol through prolonged and chronic stress can cause anxiety, depression, digestive problems, headaches, sleep problems, weight gain and heart disease, among other things. Research suggests that one way to naturally lower your cortisol levels is to eat anti-inflammatory foods like those found in a Mediterranean diet, which includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, beans, nuts and seeds and has long been touted for its health benefits.

## 23. Seek wise counsel

Although sharing stress with trusted friends can be helpful, some friends can do more harm than good, according to Kross, who says it's important to choose your confidantes wisely. "Talking to other people can be helpful ... but it has to be the right people," he says. "Simply venting about problems doesn't tend to help people. Ruminating about something is good for strengthening the bonds between two people, but if all you do is vent about a problem, you often leave that conversation feeling just as upset." Instead of talking with people who will amplify your stress by reinforcing it, turn to friends who will reduce your stress by helping you solve it.

## 24. Preempt your stress

"Wherever and whenever possible, cope ahead of time," Hanley-Dafoe suggests. "There are always going to be a number of stressors that show up in our days, yet coping ahead of time is all about doing what we can to proactively make 'later' easier and more manageable." If mealtimes are stressful, for example, it can be helpful on busy days to decide in the morning what you'll make for dinner so you don't have to scramble at 6 p.m. If you have a stressful meeting or appointment, on the other hand, consider scheduling something relaxing afterward — a massage or pedicure, or even just a walk in the park.

## 25. Replace multitasking with monotasking

Although American culture tends to revere people who can juggle multiple activities and responsibilities, multitasking can be a major source of anxiety for many. If that's you, consider rejecting multitasking for monotasking. "Research has shown that multitasking can increase stress levels and lead to decreased productivity," Hanley-Dafoe says. "Rather than taking on multiple tasks at once, monotasking allows you to be present in the moment and immerse yourself in one thing at a time. In our very full lives, tackling one item on our to-do list at a time can help relieve some of the overwhelm we tend to feel from constant multitasking."

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