



Stress Management

Learn about the hidden sources of stress

Identify the sources of stress in your life:

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Your true sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it's all too easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, you may know that you're constantly worried about work deadlines. But maybe it's your procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that leads to deadline stress.

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

- Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can't remember the last time you took a breather?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that's all”).
- Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control.

Look at how you currently cope with stress

Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. Your stress journal can help you identify them. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

Unhealthy ways of coping with stress: These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

- *Smoking*
- *Drinking too much*
- *Overeating or undereating*
- *Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer*
- *Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities*
- *Using pills or drugs to relax*
- *Sleeping too much*
- *Procrastinating*
- *Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems*
- *Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)*

Learning healthier ways to manage stress

If your methods of coping with stress aren't contributing to your greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it's helpful to think of the four As: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control, however here some basics that might prove helpful...

- **Keep a positive attitude; rather than defaulting to negatives ("Nothing goes right for me," or "Bad things always happen to me"), give yourself positive messages ("I'm doing my best," or "I'll ask for help").**
- **Halt stress in its tracks; if you feel overwhelmed, take a walk or drive in the slow lane to avoid getting angry at other drivers.**
- **Manage your time. Give yourself time to get things done; set your watch so you have more time to prepare for an event.**
- **Do things that are pleasurable, like reading or gardening.**
- **Take 15-20 minutes every day to sit quietly and reflect. Learn and practice relaxation techniques like yoga or deep breathing.**
- **Exercise regularly by bicycling, walking, hiking, jogging, or working out at the gym. Your body can fight stress better when it is fit.**
- **Avoid alcohol and recreational drugs. And don't smoke.**
- **Eat healthy, well-balanced meals.**
- **Get enough rest and sleep. Your body needs time to recover from stressful events.**
- **Seek out social support.**

Types of Relaxation Techniques

Health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach various relaxation techniques. But if you prefer, you also can learn some relaxation techniques on your own.

In general, relaxation techniques involve refocusing your attention on something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly to reap its benefits.

There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this relaxation technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to relax and reduce muscle tension. For example, you may imagine a peaceful setting and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or feeling different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this relaxation technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. You become more aware of physical sensations. One method of progressive muscle relaxation is to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. You can also start with your head and neck and work down to your toes. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.
- **Visualization.** In this relaxation technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. During visualization, try to use as many senses as you can, including smell, sight, sound and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about such things as the smell of salt water, the sound of crashing waves and the warmth of the sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other common relaxation techniques include:

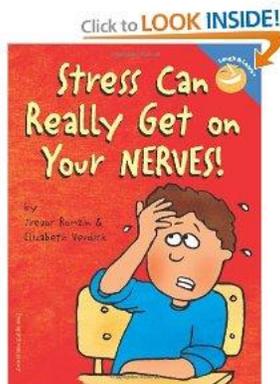
Hypnosis, massage, meditation, tai chi and yoga

Relaxation techniques take practice...

As you learn relaxation techniques, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.

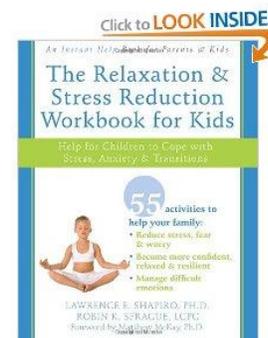
Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself — don't let your effort to practice relaxation techniques become yet another stressor. If one relaxation technique doesn't work for you, try another. If none of your efforts at stress reduction seem to work, talk to your doctor about other options.

Also, bear in mind that some people, especially those with serious psychological issues and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during some relaxation techniques. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation techniques, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional or mental health provider.



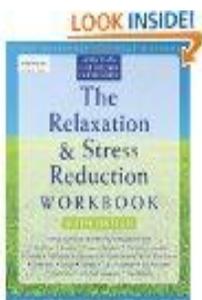
By: Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick

Stress Can Really Get on your Nerves!



By: Lawrence Shapiro, PHD and Robin Sprague

***The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook
for Stress, Anxiety and Transitions***



The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook (New Harbinger Self-Help Workbook) By: Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay