

How to Manage Stress with Mindfulness and Meditation

What Is Stress?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, stress is the brain and body's response to change, challenge, or demand. It is the body's natural defense against danger brought on by an event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, or nervous. When a stressful event occurs, the body is flooded with hormones to avoid or confront danger. This is commonly referred to as the fight-or-flight response.

Stress can become a chronic condition if the proper steps to manage it are not taken. Chronic stress can cause chemical changes in the body that may raise blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar levels. Long-term stress or high levels of stress may also lead to mental and physical health problems.

How Do You Respond to Stress?

Strategies like ignoring or denying stress (what experts call avoidance coping), or distracting ourselves, which may be effective short-term, can also undermine our health and happiness in the long run. Research published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* shows that present-moment awareness, a key feature of mindfulness, increases stress resilience and effective coping.

Present-moment awareness involves monitoring and attending to current experience rather than predicting future events or dwelling on the past. Studies show that an individual's disposition toward remaining in the present moment is linked to numerous health benefits including lower levels of perceived stress, anxiety and depression, improved mood, and a sense of improved well-being.

In the study, a team of Australian researchers examined the effects of present moment-awareness in a sample of 143, well-educated university students and staff (76.3% female) who were part of an online mindfulness training course. The researchers surveyed the study participants with a focus on three stress response variables.

Three stress response variables:

Your perceived competence in dealing with a stressful situation. Whether people believe they have the ability to handle a situation or not, plays a role in how they deal with stress. This is called coping self-efficacy and is an indicator of our ability to motivate ourselves to effectively respond to stressful circumstances.

Your reliance on core values when responding to stressful situations. Relying on values rather than reacting to immediate short-term situations is described as “values-consistent responding.” This describes when your responses are consistent with long-term goals and aspirations, rather than being influenced by the current situation. Being present, research shows, allows you to be more aware of your options and values, which translates to a heightened sense of well-being, diminished psychological distress, and greater pain tolerance in the presence of stressful circumstances.

Your level of avoidance of stressful feelings. Avoidance coping is characterized by a tendency to retreat from stressful life events. This coping style is associated with increased psychological distress, and reduced well-being across the lifespan.

Results of the study confirmed that those with greater present-moment awareness were more likely to respond to stress with strategies that lead to greater health and well-being. Specifically, being present in the moment when stressed was directly linked to greater perceived ability to handle that stress and more reliance on core values to navigate the situation.

4 Ways to Calm Your Mind in Stressful Times

The stress response is supposed to be short-lived because it wears down your body, your health, and your energy. Stress makes us narrowly focused, preventing us from seeing the bigger picture. When we're calmer, our attention becomes broader.

The question becomes, then, how do you wind down? Research suggests several practices that not only feel good but also put us into a calmer, more relaxed state—a state from which we can cope better with whatever life throws at us.

1. Practice Breathing Exercises

Our breathing is a powerful way for us to regulate our emotions, and it is something we take for granted. Through your breath, you can activate your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)—the calming response in your body.

One of the most calming breathing exercises you can do is to breathe in (e.g., to a count of four), hold, and then breathe out for up to twice as long (e.g., to a count of six or eight). You can gently constrict your throat, making a sound like the ocean, which is used in deep relaxation breathing. As you're doing this, especially thanks to those long exhales, you're activating the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing your heart rate and blood pressure.

2. Adopt an Attitude of Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is the ability to be mindful of your emotions—aware of the emotions that are going on inside whenever you fail at something. It doesn't mean you identify with them; you can just observe and notice them, without feeding the fire. Self-compassion also involves understanding that everyone makes mistakes and that it's part of being human. And it is the ability to speak to yourself the way you would speak to a friend who just failed, warmly and kindly.

3. Foster Genuine Connection

How often are we actually present for another person 100 percent? When was the last time somebody was 100 percent present with you?

Our greatest human need, after food and shelter, is to connect with other people in a positive way. The good news is that by taking care of yourself and your own well-being with practices like breathing and self-compassion, you are able to turn more attention outward to feel more connected, as well.

4. Practice Having Compassion for Others

Imagine a day when things aren't going well for you—you spilled your coffee on yourself, and it's raining. And then a friend calls who's having a true emergency in their life, and you jump up and go help them immediately. What happens to your state of mind in that moment?

All of a sudden you have high energy; you're completely at their service. That is what practicing altruism, service, and compassion does to your life. It increases your well-being tremendously, as many of us have experienced when we perform little acts of kindness.

What Can Stress Do to Your Body?

We often use the words "I'm stressed" casually in our everyday conversations, with little acknowledgment of the adverse effects of stress in our lives. But evidence suggests that we should be much more concerned about our stress levels than we are.

The Centers for Disease Control found that 66 percent of American workers say they lie awake at night troubled by the physical or emotional effects of stress, and stress has been linked to many health problems, including obesity and heart disease—especially among low-income Americans. Stress not only affects us, but it can impact those around us, too, especially our children.

Prolonged stress changes the brain. The part of our brain that helps process threatening situations, the amygdala, can appear larger in people who are chronically stressed. Researchers have also seen that the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex can appear smaller.

Stress among adults is rising at an alarming rate, according to the 2019 Stress in America Survey. This means that more Americans are walking around with high levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, which is linked to most diseases, including cancer, diabetes, and depression

Chronic Stress, Inflammation, and Mindfulness

Over time, the effects of chronic stress are insidious and reflected in our lifestyle choices: we toss and turn each night struggling to sleep; use caffeine to jolt us into alertness in the morning; confront mid-afternoon slumps with a cookie or soda; and then numb and soothe ourselves at night with junk food, alcohol, social media, or medication.

In the body, all types of stress lead to one destination: inflammation—that “fire” in our cells. Inflammation is simply the body’s protective immune response to any kind of toxin or injury. Think of how your skin recovers from a cut, for example—there may be swelling and redness followed by scab formation and, finally, healing.

When our life spins out of control, we turn on genes that cause chronic inflammation, the root cause of the largest global health epidemic of our time: lifestyle-related chronic disease.

How can productivity, creativity, and innovation thrive under such circumstances? While there are many systemic issues that need to be addressed, there is something we all can do to start taking better care of ourselves. The path to inflammation and chronic disease, fortunately, is not a one-way street. We can reverse overwhelm and build resilience.

How Intentional Breathing Eases Stress

Certain kinds of mindful breathing can activate your parasympathetic nervous system which initiates the relaxation response, depresses heart rate, blood pressure and respiration, and allows your body to engage in reparative and restorative functions. While not everyone experiences relaxation right away, most report feeling a sense of calm and a reduction in the feeling of stress after this exercise. Give it a try:

A Breath Practice: Relieve the Symptoms of Stress

This simple yet effective form of deep breathing defuses the stress feedback loop and teaches your brain and body to relax.

We can get in touch with our breath with a simple yet effective form of deep breathing called intentional breathing. Unlike other breathing techniques, the emphasis here is to allow the natural flow of the breath by inhaling from the top down and exhaling from the bottom up.

How to Practice Intentional Breathing

1. Sit comfortably and observe your natural breath. Start by finding a comfortable position like sitting upright in a chair or lying on your back. Begin to observe your breath just as it is. Notice where the breath flows—upper chest, lower belly, front, back, or sides. As you do, try to avoid placing judgment on how you are breathing or attaching a story to it. Just as if you were a scientist studying a cell under a microscope, see if you can examine all of the details of your breath one at a time and make mental notes of them. Observe how you are breathing just as you are. It's an interesting exercise. You may notice that the act of observing your breath slows down your respiration rate.
2. Place your hands on your chest and belly. Place your right hand on your breastbone (sternum) in the center of your chest. Place your left hand so that your thumb is below your navel. Continue to breathe normally and observe whether you are breathing more into your right hand or left hand. See if you can resist the urge to change your breath or make it deeper. Breathe as normally as you can and observe how it is to be in your body, breathing normally. How does it feel? What do you notice? Continue for at least 10 breaths.
3. Breathe into your chest. Try breathing just into your right hand that is resting in the middle of your upper chest. Without forcing the breath, see how it feels to breathe into the space below your right hand. What do you notice? Can you slow your inhalation or is that difficult or uncomfortable? Just see what happens. Keep observing for 10–20 breaths. After 10–20 breaths, take a few deep inhalations and exhalations and resume breathing normally for a minute or so.
4. Breathe into your lower lungs. Next, try breathing just into your left hand that is resting on your abdomen. Without forcing the breath, see how it feels to breathe into the space below your left hand. What do you notice? Can you slow your inhalation or is that difficult or uncomfortable? Just see what happens. Keep observing for 10–20 breaths. After 10–20 breaths, take a few deep inhalations and exhalations and resume breathing normally for a minute or so.
5. Take half breaths into your chest and then your lower lungs. Now, try breathing half of your inhalation into your right hand, pause for a second or two, and then breathe the remainder into the space below your left hand and pause. Then exhale from the bottom up, first releasing the air below your left hand, then allowing the exhalation to continue from below your left hand to below your right hand, traveling up and out either through your nose or mouth. Continue to your

next inhalation, first into the area beneath your right hand and then into the area beneath your left hand, then exhale from the bottom up. Can you slow your inhalation or is that difficult or uncomfortable? How does it feel? What do you notice? Keep observing for 10–20 breaths. After 10–20 breaths, take a few deep inhalations and exhalations and resume breathing normally for a minute or so.

6. Take full breaths. Finally, try breathing deeply and fully from top to bottom as you inhale and bottom to top as you exhale, without pausing. If possible, see if you can slow the exhalation so that it is longer than the inhalation. If you like, you can count 1, 2, 3, and so on to see which is longer: your inhalation or your exhalation. After 10–20 breaths, take a few big deep inhalations and exhalations and resume breathing normally for a minute or so.

7. Notice how you feel. Was the exercise simple or difficult? Did breathing slowly and fully seem usual to you? How do you feel physically? Emotionally? Energetically? If you like, write down your experience.

Mindfulness for Stress

Mounting scientific evidence from hundreds of universities—including dedicated centers at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in the United States and the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom—strongly suggests that mindfulness gently builds an inner strength, so that future stressors have less impact on our happiness and physical well-being.

How Mindfulness Reduces Stress

1. You become more aware of your thoughts. You can then step back from them and not take them so literally. That way, your stress response is not initiated in the first place.
2. You don't immediately react to a situation. Instead, you have a moment to pause and then use your "wise mind" to come up with the best solution.
3. Mindfulness switches on your "being" mode of mind, which is associated with relaxation. Your "doing" mode of mind is associated with action and the stress response.
4. You are more aware and sensitive to the needs of your body. You may notice pains earlier and can then take appropriate action.

5. You are more aware of the emotions of others. As your emotional intelligence rises, you are less likely to get into conflict.
6. Your level of care and compassion for yourself and others rises. This compassionate mind soothes you and inhibits your stress response.
7. Mindfulness practice reduces activity in the part of your brain called the amygdala. The amygdala is central to switching on your stress response, so effectively, your background level of stress is reduced.
8. You are better able to focus. So you complete your work more efficiently, you have a greater sense of well-being, and this reduces the stress response. You are more likely to get into “the zone” or “flow,” as it’s termed in psychology by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.
9. You can switch your attitude to stress. Rather than just seeing the negative consequences of feeling stressed, mindfulness offers you the space to think differently about the stress itself. Observing how the increased pressure helps energize you has a positive effect on your body and mind.

The Stress Breath Practice

Andrés González offers a breathing practice for anxiety and stress that may arise in any situation.

The stress breath is great for any type of stress or anxiety: test anxiety, performance anxiety, any type of anxiety at all. It’s also a good exercise for heating up your body. With this breath, you can pull in a lot of energy and store it in your body.

Use an everyday object as a signal to do the stress breath. I use my keys. When I drive to work in the morning and take my car keys out of my ignition, that’s my cue to do the stress breath. I’ll do 12 right before I go into the office so I can leave home at home and focus on work. And then when I drive home, I park my car, take my keys out of the ignition, and that’s my cue—I do 12 more before I go into my house. That allows me to leave work at work so I can be a hundred percent with my family when I get home. It’s like hitting the reset button with your brain.

The 3 Basic Elements of the Stress Breath

1. Fog the mirror

The most important thing about this breath is that it’s audible. Take your hand and hold it up in front of your mouth and act like it’s a mirror that you’re fogging up. So, you’re exhaling with a haaaaaaaa sound as if you’re fogging a mirror.

2. Make it audible

Now, do the same thing, but only have your mouth open for two seconds and then close your mouth while still pushing out the same way—but now push out through your nose. Practice making that same sound as you inhale, so the sound comes from the back of your throat (almost like a Darth Vader breath).

3. Hold and lock

When you inhale, hold your breath, and then lower your chin to your chest. Hold there for a count of five and then lift your head as you exhale. Let's put it all together...

The Stress Breath Exercise

1. Inhale nice and deep, using the “fog the mirror” technique, so the sound is vibrating at the back of your throat.
2. Hold your breath and bring your chin down to your chest.
3. Count back from five.
4. Exhale (audibly through your nose) while you bring your head up.
5. That's one cycle. Do twelve in a row, if you can, during the day and then again at nighttime.

Why the Stress Breath Works

The reason the breath has to be audible is because the vibrations from the sound signal the vagus nerve—that connection between the mind and the body—triggering a shift in your autonomic nervous system from the sympathetic (stress response) to parasympathetic (restorative response). So, if you just walk around breathing audibly, you're basically doing the stress breath.

How to Manage Stress

Waging a battle against stress doesn't make much sense, does it? It's the surest way to increase the stress. Mindfulness lets us interrupt the stress cycle and let in some space and air. Here are 11 easy ways to take time for what matters and put stress in its place.

1. Take a walk

Modern life seems designed to make us stay in one place—sitting, standing, or lying down—for long periods of time. Many people don't even remember a time when you had to get up off your

butt to walk across the room and change the channel on the TV or go over to the bookshelf to consult the dictionary. Moving has gone out of style, and the balance of mental to physical energy expended can get way out of whack. Find an excuse to use muscles that are feeling lonely and neglected. Raise your heart rate a little. Your body, and mind, will thank you.

2. Eat lunch somewhere pleasant

Taking lunch at your desk ensures your mind will stay in the same frame of reference while you're eating, particularly if you're checking email or doing work at the same time. Go somewhere else to have lunch, hang out with co-workers, let go and enjoy. Then come back to work a little refreshed.

3. Relax your muscles with a body scan

Progressive muscular relaxation can help you notice where you're holding stress. It doesn't take long and it's simple to do: Lie down comfortably on your back with your legs straight. Close your eyes. Start by tensing muscles in your feet, then relax. Work your way up your body doing the same thing in sequence from your feet to your head. Often it's only by experiencing muscle tension and letting it go that we become aware of just how much tension our bodies are retaining.

4. Minimize multitasking

Sometimes it's necessary to be doing several things at once (or at least in rapid succession). But too much multitasking, jumping around from one thing to another to another—in a constant state of partial attention—is exhausting, inefficient, and highly stressful. Instead of checking emails, planning supper, writing a report, and texting your sister, try giving full attention to one thing at a time.

5. Get your face out of your phone

Your phone is your everything, all-the-time, go-to, distractor device. It's like having someone nudging and nagging you all day. It constantly steals your attention. Set some boundaries on when, where, and how you will use it. Beware letting it dominate during social occasions. Try putting it away completely during meals and parties. Pick a few places—doorways, elevators, in line at the store—where you can make a mental note to avoid it, and take those moments when you'd be deep in cyberworld to follow your breath instead.

6. Look at something green

Are your sightlines constantly filled with brick, concrete, glass, and carpet? How about spending a little more time where things are growing, breathing, giving off fragrance, swaying in the wind, and glistening in the sun? Nothing like a little nature to slow you down and show you the big picture.

7. Play

All work and no play...and yes, that means you. Playing isn't restricted to children. Playing simply means doing something that has no purpose, plan, or aim. Wander the streets, play cards, go bowling, read for pleasure. The surprises that come from letting yourself go can exhilarate and refresh.

8. Go for a swim

Swimming some laps is just the right kind of boredom to help you de-stress. The rhythmic splash, splash, splash and the weightlessness are like being rocked in a cradle. It uses a lot of muscle groups and is great if you have old injuries that would make an activity like running difficult. And, bonus: You can't use your phone or watch TV while submerged in water. You can hear yourself think. Or not think, as the case may be.

9. Read something out loud

A good piece of writing or poetry read aloud can have a very soothing effect. That's why children love to be read to. If you're not a fan of your own voice, try listening to an audiobook.

10. Listen, really listen, to a piece of music

Sit or lie down and listen to an entire album, symphony, opera, or whatever suits your taste. You may feel yourself twitching or reaching for your phone at first, but soon you'll sink into the sounds.

11. Take a vacation

Americans took less vacation time in 2014 than in four previous decades, according to the US Travel Association. Only 57% of the nation's workers used all of their paid vacation time, and people with higher annual incomes took the fewest days off. Definitely not a good way to avoid stress and its harmful effects. Time off actually makes you a more productive worker. Plus, your family will appreciate it and you'll have time and space to really take care of yourself.

4 Strategies to Manage Stress Before Bed

Stress is one of the top contributors to insomnia, which impacts around 30% of US adults at any given time. If you've experienced a nerve-wracked night, it's not too hard to understand why: Stress makes it hard to mentally wind down, and physically relax before and during sleep as well.

The relationship between stress and sleep works both ways, too. Missing out on rest compounds stress and affects physical and mental health over time, which can create a cycle that exacerbates both problems. A study published in the journal *Sleep* found that how a person responds to stress may impact the development of insomnia. Having a few relaxation techniques in your mental toolkit can be helpful for those times when stress rears its head and keeps you up. Here are four practices you can explore to ease stress before bed.

1. Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. There are a variety of health benefits associated with mindfulness, and one of those is improved sleep. One 2015 study found that people in a mindfulness training program improved on sleep, depression, and fatigue measures over six weeks, compared to people in a sleep hygiene education program.

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced independently. The steps are simple: take a seat, pay attention to the breath, and when your attention wanders, return. Following a guided meditation can also be helpful for beginners.

2. Deep Breathing

Since breathing is typically an autonomic function, it's easy to overlook its role in relaxation. However, considerable evidence shows that depth and pace of breathing can affect things like heart rate and blood pressure. Certain breathing techniques involving deeper, slower breaths can be practiced for inducing relaxation.

Diaphragmatic Breathing: This technique is easy to try: sitting or lying down, inhale through your nose, counting to ten and focusing on drawing breath from your abdomen rather than your chest. Exhale slowly through your nose at the same pace, counting to ten. Complete the cycle five to ten times, repeating as often as needed. Research has found that even a single session of deep, slow breathing can reduce blood pressure and heart rate.

4-7-8 Breath: This technique was developed for inducing sleep and relaxation by Andrew Weil, based in yoga breathing principles. To try it: place the tip of your tongue behind your upper teeth. Exhale fully through your mouth, making a "whooshing" sound. Close your mouth, and inhale through your nose to a count of four. Hold your breath for a count of seven. Exhale through your mouth making the whoosh sound for a count of eight. Repeat three more times.

3. Listen to Music

Have you ever noticed how certain songs can make you feel relaxed? It's not just in your head—music really can help you calm down and fight stress. Music-based therapy is a professional clinical practice involving trained therapists, backed by significant research.

Music relaxation techniques have been shown to reduce stress and pain as well as insomnia symptoms. Listening to soothing music (Pachelbel's Canon in D in one study) may have a preventive effect against stress, and according to research, music may even be more effective than progressive muscle relaxation at anxiety and insomnia relief. A study of college students found that listening to classical music at night improved sleep and decreased depression compared to either audiobooks or nothing.

When choosing music to relax at home, it's best to pick instrumentals with a calming pace, including classical, light jazz, and stringed tunes as well as nature soundtracks, depending on what you personally find most appealing. Lie back, turn out the lights, and focus on the melody and beat of the music.

4. Mindful Movement

Meditative movements like those found in yoga can be a helpful way to reduce stress. Yoga has been studied as an insomnia intervention, for cancer survivors, in elderly individuals, and in pregnant women, showing positive results. Typically the studies involve regular daytime practices, though yoga can also be utilized at night for relaxation, with poses like forward bends, child's pose, and legs-up-the-wall for gentle stretching and stress relief.

Since relaxation can be an individual thing, testing out different programs and even different instructors can be helpful. But remember, as with most strategies, results can take time to see and most studies find benefits over a span of several weeks to months.

Finding a healthy stress relief method that works for you and practicing it regularly can make a significant difference when life throws you curveballs. Coping strategies that help you process stress and induce relaxation offer a positive way to manage problems and work to prevent its negative effects, including insomnia.

Guided Meditations for Stress

In a recent study, researchers assigned 47 healthy young adults to either a body scan group, or an audiobook control group. People in the body scan group were given an Android phone loaded with a 20-minute guided body scan adapted from the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. The body scan involved paying attention to momentary physical sensations beginning with the feet and ending at the head. Although MBSR also includes meditation and yoga, researchers wanted to see if the body scan portion alone might help reduce stress. Book group members were given an audio book of "The Madman's Tale" by John Katzenbach. Both groups were asked to listen to their recordings for 20 minutes per day, each day, for eight weeks.

At the end of eight weeks, cortisol levels declined in the body scan group, but went up in the book group. Both groups showed increases in DHEA; their levels of the hormone were about the same. The body scan group also showed a greater decrease in the ratio of cortisol to DHEA than the control group. This means that the body scan group, as a whole, showed less biological stress at the end of the study than did the control group.

A 20-Minute Body Scan Meditation for Stress

As we begin the body scan, guided by Dr. Mark Bertin, we'll be slowly and systematically moving attention through the various regions of the body, from the feet to the top of the head, noting any physical sensations as we go along. Remember that, as always, there's no need to strive to make anything happen. Simply observe what you find and practice letting things be for a while.

[AUDIO: A Simple Body Scan Practice]

A 2-Minute S.T.O.P. Practice to Ease a Worried Mind

Creating space in the day to stop, come down from a worried mind, and get back into the present moment has been shown to be enormously helpful in mitigating the negative effects of our stress response. When we drop into the present, we're more likely to gain perspective and see that we have the power to regulate our response to pressure.

[AUDIO: A Guided S.T.O.P. Meditation for Stress]

A 3-Minute Breathing Practice in Response to Stress

Take a moment to hold a stressful event in mind—identifying who's involved, identifying what happened. Then, when you have that in mind, allow yourself to practice the 3-minute breathing space in any way that feels comfortable.

[AUDIO: A Meditation to Find Focus and Calm]