

Stress-Management Techniques

► Part 1 Techniques to Relieve Stress

Deep Breathing

When you're under stress, muscles tense and breathing becomes shallow and rapid. When you breathe slowly and deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down. The brain then sends this message to your body. Deep breathing increases the oxygen available to your body and produces a relaxed feeling. Practice this technique a few times each day, and deep breathing will become a tool you can use to help you relax whenever you feel stressed.

Here's how to do it:

- Sit in a comfortable position and take a few breaths. Notice how your belly pushes out as your lungs fill with air, and how it naturally goes back in as the air leaves your lungs.
- Then take some deep breaths. Breathe in for a count of 6. Pause for a count of 3. Then breathe out for another count of 6.
- Do this 20–30 times.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This is a good technique to use any time you're tense. *Progressive* means something that happens a little bit at a time. In this technique, you tense different muscle groups one at a time and then let them relax. The tension helps the muscles relax more deeply when you let go.

Here's how to do it:

- Start with your toes. Curl them under as far as you can. Hold for 5 seconds, then relax.
- Then move to your ankles. Bend your feet toward your body as far as you can. Hold for 5 seconds then relax.
- Continue to move up your body, tensing different muscle groups, holding for 5 seconds and then relaxing. Do this with your thighs, hips, abdomen, back, shoulders, elbows, hands, neck and face. Notice how your body feels as you tighten and relax the different muscles.
- End by tightening all the muscles in your body for 10 seconds and then relaxing. All your muscles should now be more relaxed.

Guided Imagery

Deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation reduce stress by helping your body relax and calm down. Guided imagery is a way to help your mind do the same thing. In guided imagery, you picture a calm place and imagine a restful experience.

Here's how to do it:

- Choose a place you're familiar with and one that you find beautiful or that feels safe. You might picture a deserted beach, a green meadow or a quiet place in your home.
- Close your eyes and imagine yourself leaving wherever you are at the moment and going to the calm, safe place you've chosen.
- See yourself in that place, with all your senses experiencing the sights, sounds, smells and other details. Really imagine what you'd see, hear, smell and feel on your skin in that place.
- Picture yourself relaxing in the place—you might lie down on the beach or the grass, sit on a bench or in a tree, wrap a warm blanket around you—whatever helps you feel calm and safe.
- Stay in this imaginary place until you feel fully relaxed. Then slowly picture yourself leaving it and coming back to where you actually are, knowing that you can return any time you want to relax.

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Stress-Management Techniques *(continued)*

► Part 2 Ways to Reduce or Prevent Stress

Physical Activity

Being physically active is a good way to help manage the stress in your life. Here's why:

- Doing some form of aerobic activity that makes your heart rate and breathing increase and works your heart and lungs for about 30 minutes causes your brain to release endorphins. *Endorphins* are natural chemicals that help people feel good and balance the effects of stress.
- Endorphin levels have been found to stay higher even after physical activity has ended. So a person continues to feel good after working out and moving the body.
- People who are physically active every day cope better with stress and sleep more soundly at night.

Time Management

A lot of daily stress can be reduced or even prevented if you learn how to make the best use of your time and be organized. Here are some things you can try:

- Plan ahead.
- Make a list of things you need to do. Circle what you need to do first, or put things in order from most to least important.
- Make sure you have all the materials you need before starting a project.
- Don't wait until the last minute to start something.
- Do a little at a time. Break big tasks into smaller steps.
- Work with a friend to help a task go faster or be more fun.
- Focus on what you need to do. Don't let yourself get distracted. For example, you might turn off your phone or the TV.
- Allow extra time to get to appointments or places you need to be.

Talking About It

Talking to someone about what's causing you stress is another technique you can use. Sometimes just describing or sharing your feelings about a stressful situation to a friend or trusted adult can help you feel better. Let the person know if you need him or her to just listen and understand your feelings, or if you'd like help thinking of things you could do to relieve the stress. Talking to others can also help you get more information or come up with ways to help prevent stress in the future.

Some ways you could start:

- "I'm really stressed about this situation. Could I tell you about it?"
- "I don't know what to do for this assignment. Could I run some ideas by you?"
- "What do you do when you're feeling stressed? Could you give me some ideas?"
- "Could you give me more information about...?"