

How to Stay Calm Among Chaos

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Average reported stress levels increased in the U.S., with money, work, family responsibilities and personal health concerns rounding out the top sources of significant stress
- › The relaxation response is the counterpart of the stress response; a physical state of deep rest that changes physical and emotional responses to stress and may, in fact, counter stress' harmful effects
- › Relaxation techniques like meditation, breathing exercises and guided imagery help activate your body's built-in relaxation response

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In 2015, 24% of U.S. adults reported experiencing extreme [stress](#), according to the American Psychological Association's annual Stress in America survey.¹ In addition, average reported stress levels increased over the years, with money, work, family responsibilities and personal health concerns rounding out the top sources of significant stress.

Even barring any major stressful events like job loss, health problems or a death in the family, most people deal with stress day in and day out. It's a fact of 21st-century life and one that can quickly derail your healthy habits and goals — if you let it.

A Reminder on Why It's Important to Stay Calm

Although stress is often regarded as a psychological issue, stress is definitely not all in your head. Whenever the chaos that is life starts to get to you – maybe you missed your train this morning or are worrying about an unpaid bill – excess stress hormones are released, including cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine.

This is what's supposed to happen, as your body is getting ready to face this real or perceived threat. The problem is that in today's world, most of us are faced with such "threats" 24/7, which means your stress response is in overdrive and becomes imbalanced; it basically doesn't shut off.

It doesn't take long for this potentially beneficial system to backfire. When stress becomes chronic, your immune system becomes increasingly desensitized to cortisol, and since inflammation is partly regulated by this hormone, this decreased sensitivity heightens the inflammatory response and allows inflammation to get out of control.²

Chronic inflammation is a hallmark of many chronic diseases. Meanwhile, virtually no systems in your body will work as they should. You may find you have trouble sleeping, come down with colds often and have flare-ups of asthma or [eczema](#). All of this is the cost of ignoring your body's need for calm.

Relaxation Techniques to the Rescue

Virtually everyone can benefit from having an arsenal of relaxation techniques at the ready. There are many to choose from, and you can pick those that work best for you, but their purpose is the same – to help your body deal with an onslaught of stress by inducing your body's relaxation response.

The relaxation response is the counterpart of the stress response. Specifically, it's a physical state of deep rest that changes physical and emotional responses to stress and may, in fact, counter stress' harmful effects.³ By evoking your body's built-in relaxation response, you can actually change the expression of your genes for the better.

According to one study in PLOS One:⁴

"RR [relaxation response] elicitation is an effective therapeutic intervention that counteracts the adverse clinical effects of stress in disorders including hypertension, anxiety, insomnia and aging ...

RR practice enhanced expression of genes associated with energy metabolism, mitochondrial function, insulin secretion and telomere maintenance, and reduced expression of genes linked to inflammatory response and stress-related pathways."

Health Benefits of Learning to Relax

Relaxation techniques can be used to help you get through the daily grind as well as to help address specific health conditions or stressful scenarios. For example, such techniques may help you to lower blood pressure, relieve insomnia and lessen symptoms of depression.⁵ They may also reduce stress hormones, lower your heart rate, improve your mood and relieve muscle tension and pain.

Relaxation techniques can also be used to offer relief from symptoms such as nausea and reduce pain, including during labor and childbirth. Indeed, entering a state of deep relaxation, in which your body is free of tension and your mind is free of distracting or negative thoughts, yields impressive results.

Taking part in a stress management program has been shown to alter tumor-promoting processes at the molecular level in women with breast cancer, for instance.⁶ Genes responsible for cancer progression (such as pro-inflammatory cytokines) were down-regulated while those associated with a healthy immune response were up-regulated, which means relaxation may help fight cancer.⁷ In addition, relaxation may help:

- **Boost immunity** – **Meditation** is known to have a significant effect on immune cells,⁸ and research shows relaxation exercises may boost natural killer cells in the elderly, leading to increased resistance to tumors and viruses.
- **Fertility** – Research suggests women are more likely to conceive when they're relaxed as opposed to when they're stressed.⁹

- **Heart health** – Relaxation via meditation (done once or twice daily for three months) significantly lowered blood pressure and psychological distress, and also bolstered coping ability in people at increased risk of hypertension.¹⁰
- **Mental health** – People who meditate note reductions in psychological distress, depression and anxiety.¹¹
- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)** – When people with IBS practiced relaxation meditation twice daily, their symptoms (including bloating, belching, diarrhea and constipation) improved significantly.^{12,13}

Examples of Relaxation Techniques

There are many different methods to help you invoke your body's relaxation response and counter the effects of daily stress. Among them:¹⁴

Emotional freedom techniques (EFT)	Breathing exercises	Guided imagery
Progressive muscle relaxation	Self-hypnosis	Rhythmic movement
Meditation	Yoga	Tai chi
Massage therapy	Biofeedback-assistance relaxation	Autogenic training, in which you focus on physical sensations in your body

Research by Dr. Herbert Benson, cardiologist and founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, and colleagues has shown that people who practice relaxation methods such as yoga and meditation long-term have more disease-fighting genes switched "on" and active, including genes that protect against pain, infertility, high blood pressure and rheumatoid arthritis.¹⁵

Deep breathing, meanwhile, activates your parasympathetic nervous system, which induces the relaxation response, but taking even 10 minutes to sit quietly and shut out the chaos around you can also trigger it,¹⁶ as can using EFT (also known as Tapping). Research has shown that EFT significantly increases positive emotions, such as hope and enjoyment, and decreases negative emotional states, including anxiety.¹⁷

EFT is particularly effective for treating stress and anxiety because it specifically targets your amygdala and hippocampus, which are the parts of your brain that help you decide whether or not something is a threat. You can watch a demonstration of how to use EFT in the video below.

Reframing Your Thoughts to Shut Out Chaos

The use of relaxation techniques is something you should strive to do daily, whether it be a yoga session, EFT or meditation. The idea is to provide regular time for your body to unwind and regroup in a state of calm.

You can also use these techniques while during a stressful event, such as practicing breathing exercises or using EFT. When you're in a stressful moment, it can also help to reframe your thoughts and take back control of the situation, at least on a personal, mental and emotional level. Greatist life coach columnist Susie Moore shared several useful tips for doing this:¹⁸

Take a deep breath and say this (out loud or in your mind): "I am here. I am still. I am safe. I can feel my inhale and exhale. Everything's OK."

Look at the situation rationally. Is this a life-and-death situation? Is it really that serious? Put things into the proper perspective.

Refuse to catastrophize. Moore explained:¹⁹

"Once you realize the very worst that can happen is you miss a flight, or you're going to be 10 minutes late for a date or you may have to work

overtime – understand that is all it is. There will be another flight. You can take those 10 minutes sitting in traffic to start a new podcast or catch up on the news. And working late once in a while never killed anyone."

Focus on something else. When stress is bogging you down, distract your mind with thoughts of pleasant things, such as an upcoming vacation (real or imagined), a phone call to a friend or another activity (even cleaning out your closet might do the trick).

Take back control. While you can't always control the causes of your stress, you can control what you do at that moment. If you're delayed by a long line, for instance, pull out a pad of paper and make a to-do list or read a few pages of a book if you have one on hand.

Have faith that things will work out. Sometimes even seemingly dire situations work out for the better. For instance, when you miss out on renting the apartment you really wanted only to find a better one the next day. Have faith that things are moving along smoothly as they should.

Sources and References

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