

"STRESS-BUSTERS"

...to help you work productively and live to tell about it.

Create a pleasant environment.

Bring in plants, hang pictures, substitute harsh overhead lighting with lamps, reduce the noise level, play soft music.

Take control of your time.

Schedule "no interruption" time and hang a "do not disturb" sign on your door. Read mail in the afternoon so you don't start the day fragmented by a dozen different tasks. Reduce telephone time by returning calls one-half hour before lunch or closing time. Begin telephone conversations with the reason you called, not "How are you?" or "What's new?". At the end of each day, list the five most important tasks for tomorrow, in order of priority. Tomorrow, start with number one. Don't worry if you don't get through the list; you'll always be working on your most important task. Read books on time management, and practice what you read.

Take a stress audit.

List all the things that really tick you off. Focus your time and talent on the ones you can do something about, and avoid the others. Control only what you can control and ignore the rest.

Do the unpleasant things first.

Deal with stressful situations as soon as possible. The longer you put them off, the more stress you accumulate.

Put on a happy face.

Smile more often. It's a fact that in times of stress, even the slightest smile will help prevent you from overreacting. Laugh, use humor.

Welcome deadlines.

Setting specific target dates for the completion of every project, preferably as a joint effort between supervisor and employee, prevents stress-inducing last-minute crises. Set personal goals, give yourself a sense of purpose.

Take a walk.

A five-minute walk is both energizing and calming. Studies show that just minutes of walking will significantly reduce tension. A short walk around your building or parking lot a couple of times a day provides a quick distraction and will keep you fresh and alert. A longer daily walk of 15 or more minutes will increase your brain's production of endorphins, mood-elevating chemicals, and will boost your self-esteem by improving your physical fitness. In one study, 8 weeks of daily walking reduced job stress by 30%.

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Eat right.

Cut down on caffeine, sugar, salt and fat. The average American overconsumes on all four, and the greatest overconsumption can lead to serious illness and will increase tension and anxiety. It is impossible to "relax" over a cup of coffee, a candy bar, a bag of peanuts (and maybe even a cigarette). Eat a light lunch to prevent afternoon sluggishness.

Be assertive.

Keep your frustration level down by saying exactly what you want and what you feel, without deliberately injuring others.

Don't slouch.

Slouching increases stress by restricting breathing, reducing blood flow to the brain, and creating low back strain. Carry yourself in a way that amplifies self-esteem and sends a message to your brain about what it's like to feel poised and confident. Keep your shoulders down and relaxed, your head balanced with chin up, your chest lifted and legs strong.

Don't work eight straight hours.

Take breaks. Create diversions. Take a walk, read a magazine, listen to music, do relaxation exercises, and don't eat lunch at your desk. Take a 5-Minute Vacation: Sit comfortably at your desk, close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and in your imagination reconstruct a scene from the most pleasant vacation you've ever had. Really put yourself in the scene; smell the suntan lotion, feel the sun, taste the cool drink, hear the ocean. If outside thoughts interrupt your fantasy, just say to yourself, "I can't be bothered I'm at the beach now". Enjoy the peacefulness a few minutes, slowly open your eyes, stand up and stretch. You're not "goofing off". By stopping when you get tired to refuel, you'll increase your productivity in the long run.

Clean up your thoughts.

Refuse to criticize yourself. Give up all the "I should have's and "If only's. Reward yourself for what you do well instead. Substitute negative thoughts with positive action. And stay away from negative thinkers. People with a "can't do" approach to work sap your energy. Surround yourself with enthusiastic, positive people, and become one of them. Every time a negative thought enters your mind, pinch yourself and mentally say "Stop!", then replace it with two positive thoughts. Say nice things when you talk to yourself. Practice optimism and positive expectancy. Hope is a muscle---develop it.

Seek self-fulfillment.

Feeling accomplished and appreciated are basic human needs. If your work doesn't satisfy those needs, make up for it by finding a hobby or volunteer work that does.

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Control your breathing.

Try this test: Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Breathe normally for 30 seconds. Did your chest move more than your stomach? If so, you haven't learned how to use your breathing to control stress. Breathing affects your entire body. Stress causes fast, shallow breathing. Relaxation produces slow, deep breathing. And correct breathing short-circuits the stress response. In correct breathing, your diaphragm expands downward when you inhale, and moves your stomach out. It takes a lot of energy to lift a heavy rib cage. Try the test again. This time, put your hand on your stomach, then lift your hand by gently pushing your stomach out. You will inhale effortlessly, and stay much more relaxed, if you practice this method of breathing, particularly before and during stressful situations.

Meditate.

Get still, center.

Count your blessings.

Make thankfulness and gratitude a habit daily.

Forgive.

Grudges are too heavy to carry around.

Put an aquarium in your office.

Research has shown that watching fish in an aquarium lowers blood pressure. And, any distraction that holds your attention for several minutes a few times a day will measurably lower your stress level by keeping you from thinking and worrying.