

# Stress Tips



## 1. Breathe Easily

"Breathing from your diaphragm oxygenates your blood, which helps you relax almost instantly," says Robert Cooper, Ph.D., the San Francisco coauthor of *The Power of 5* (Rodale Press, 1996), a book of five-second and five-minute health tips. Shallow chest breathing, by contrast, can cause your heart to beat faster and your muscles to tense up, exacerbating feelings of stress. To breathe deeply, begin by putting your hand on your abdomen just below the navel. Inhale slowly through your nose and watch your hand move out as your belly expands. Hold the breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly. Repeat several times.

## 2. Visualize Calm

One study done at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, has found that it's highly effective in reducing stress. Dr. Cooper recommends imagining you're in a hot shower and a wave of relaxation is washing your stress down the drain. Gerald Epstein, M.D., the New York City author of *Healing Visualizations* (Bantam Doubleday Dell Press, 1989), suggests the following routine: Close your eyes, take three long, slow breaths, and spend a few seconds picturing a relaxing scene, such as walking in a meadow, kneeling by a brook, or lying on the beach. Focus on the details -- the sights, the sounds, the smells.

## 3. Cut back on Caffeine

Wean yourself slowly, or you might get a caffeine-withdrawal headache that could last for several days, cautions James Duke, Ph.D., the Fulton, MD, author of *The Green Pharmacy* (Rodale Press, 1997). Subtract a little regular coffee and add some decaf to your morning cup. Over the next couple of weeks, gradually increase the proportion of decaf to regular until you're drinking all decaf. You should also consider switching from regular soft drinks to caffeine-free ones or sparkling mineral water.

## 4. Just Say No

Trying to do everything is a one-way ticket to serious stress. Be clear about your limits, and stop trying to please everyone all the time.

## 5. Say Cheese

Smiling is a two-way mechanism. We do it when we're relaxed and happy, but doing it can also make us feel relaxed and happy. "Smiling transmits nerve impulses from the facial muscles to the limbic system, a key emotional center in the brain, tilting the neurochemical balance toward calm," Dr. Cooper explains. Go ahead and grin. Don't you feel better already?

## 6. Do Some Math

Using a scale of one to 10, with one being the equivalent of a minor hassle and 10 being a true catastrophe, assign a number to whatever it is that's making you feel anxious. "You'll find that most problems we encounter rate somewhere in the two to five range -- in other words, they're really not such a big deal," says Dr. Elkin.

## 7. Stop Gritting Your Teeth

Stress tends to settle in certain parts of our bodies, the jaw being one of them. When things get hectic, try this tip from Dr. Cooper: Place your index fingertips on your jaw joints, just in front of your ears; clench your teeth and inhale deeply. Hold the breath for a moment, and as you exhale say, "Ah-h-h-h," then unclench your teeth. Repeat a few times.

## 8. Compose a Mantra

Devise an affirmation -- a short, clear, positive statement that focuses on your coping abilities. "Affirmations are a good way to silence the self-critical voice we all carry with us that only adds to our stress," Dr. Elkin says. The next time you feel as if your life is one disaster after another, repeat 10 times, "I feel calm. I can handle this."

## 9. Put It on Paper

Writing provides perspective, says Paul J. Rosch, M.D., president of the American Institute of Stress in Yonkers, NY. Divide a piece of paper into two parts. On the left side, list the stressors you may be able to change, and on the right, list the ones you can't.

## 10. Count to 10

Before you say or do something you'll regret, step away from the stressor and collect yourself, advises Dr. Cooper. Use your time-out to take a few deep breaths, stretch, or recite an affirmation.