

secrets to stress-free living

Ever feel as if life is about to topple over? Throw away everything you thought you knew about beating stress. We've got the real goods on what it takes to find your calm

by Kira Vermond



aROUND THIS TIME LAST YEAR, I took on a Herculean project: a 60,000-word book that needed to be written in less than three months. I jumped in headfirst, thinking, There's nothing like a tight timeline to cue the creative juices, right?

I realized how wrong I was when I found myself curled up on the kitchen floor, waiting for the room to stop spinning, explaining to my kids with a kind of manic, hollow sweetness, "Don't worry about me! I'm just a little stressed." But the truth was, I'd hit rock bottom.

While not everyone is "lucky" enough to write a book, I'm sure you can relate to that overwhelmed feeling, which can be triggered by almost anything:

You're convinced your boss gave you the evil eye in a meeting (and you have no idea why). You had a silly spat with your boyfriend over whose turn it was to clean the bathroom. Or worse, you just remembered it's your best friend's birthday — and didn't you tell her you'd whisk her away to her favourite Indian place for dinner? Or was that a dream?

Let's face it: Women today have too much on their plates; it's enough to drive anyone straight to the headache meds. And there's proof that this too-much-to-do-too-little-time reality makes us collectively feel like we're going to snap. A recent Statistics Canada survey revealed that nearly a quarter of women report their days are "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful. >



Learn to Breathe

Think you need to take big, deep breaths to feel calmer? In reality, timing may be everything. When we're stressed, our breathing can be uneven. To regulate it, breathe out for at least as long as you breathe in. Try this: Breathe in through your nose for a count of three. Hold your breath for a count of two. Breathe out through your mouth for a count of five. Repeat.



Good Stress

Stress has a bad rap, but good stress exists too. Every time your husband gives you a passionate kiss, you race down the track on a roller coaster or you run a race, you're experiencing the exhilaration of the stress response. Revel in it. Stress is a problem only when it causes distress.

in saturated fat and refined sugar, which spike blood pressure and blood glucose levels and make you feel more stressed. Instead of reaching for a bag of chips, grab a handful of almonds or other nuts instead. You'll still get the fat that you're after, plus an extra bonus: some protein and a healthy dose of vitamin E. Just don't go overboard: A quarter cup is all you need.

Cadman swears by drinking a cup of hot chocolate made with skim milk when anxiety strikes. Milk sugar actually has a calming effect, while small amounts of chocolate have been shown to boost mood-enhancing serotonin levels.

THE MYTH:

Multi-tasking works

Believe us, it doesn't. A recent study at Stanford University in California showed multi-taskers are worse at focusing their attention, organizing information and switching gears. In short, they quickly feel overwhelmed.

While you might be tempted to check email, talk on the phone, organize your desk and mentally plan a dinner party simultaneously, you'll feel less harried if you learn to compartmentalize. If you're at work, be at work. If you're out for dinner with friends, focus on the conversation and not tomorrow's to-do list.

"Our brain does only one thing at a time. We don't multi-task; we sequentially task. Paying attention to one thing will calm you and sharpen your mind — as opposed to driving you crazy," says Edlund.

THE MYTH:

Taking frequent breaks reduces stress

If you often find yourself using lunches and coffee runs to escape a task you hate, you're not doing your stress level any favours — procrastination just makes you feel worse eventually.

Next time you want to walk away from an unpleasant task at work or at home, try this instead: Commit to sticking it out for 30 more minutes. That extra little promise to yourself may be the boost you need to finish it. And you'll feel better in the end, because how we behave changes how we feel about ourselves, says Mark Berber, a psychiatrist at Markham Stouffville Hospital in Ontario and an assistant professor at Queen's University, in Kingston, Ont.

"Suddenly you're thinking, 'I'm competent. I'm not a procrastinator.' That positive self-talk translates into feeling good about yourself," he says.

THE MYTH:

We perform better when the heat is on

If you've ever left preparing your taxes to the last minute, you've probably experienced a state of all-out panic, or at least self-loathing. And that's part of the problem, says Nedd. Once you begin to doubt your abilities or believe a task is overwhelming, it's incredibly difficult to stop thinking that way and focus on what needs to be done.

At times like this, he suggests, try a self-talk technique that calms anxiety in less than two seconds: Just say, "I can handle this."

A lot of stress comes from a secret belief that we're going to fail. When you remind yourself how strong and capable you are, your anxiety levels drop and you're able to finish the task.

"You're putting yourself into a state where you will be able to deal with the multiple stressors. It doesn't actually change them — they're still there — but you have changed yourself," he says.

THE MYTH:

All stress is bad

If you thrive on deadlines or go through periods where you willingly take on more work, you might be attracted to feeling stressed. And that can be a good thing, say the experts, as long as it happens in small doses. Some people simply need the heart-pumping, run-like-hell feeling to get the job done. It motivates them.

The most important thing to understand is that these situations should be temporary. Once you hit a permanently stressed state, you no longer get any boost in productivity from increased stress. In fact, just the opposite happens.

Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*, says women are more predisposed to stress addiction since it feeds emotional needs.

"Women say, 'I feel important because I'm accomplishing and you're noticing.' They're getting validation — and delegating tasks to other people would, of course, take that validation away," she says. >

Kira Vermond is a regular contributor to Chatelaine. The book project she referred to at the beginning of this story is Chatelaine's own money-management guide for women: Earn, Spend, Save. Sorry for stressing you out, Kira!