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Got anxiety?

By Vicky Uhland, Oct 22, 2010 4:45 PM

Seven simple ways to calm down—and lift mood and energy levels—during hectic times

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Rest rather than sleep

Your night-owl schedule might not be as much a factor on your stress levels as how you spend your time when you're awake, says Matthew Edlund, MD, author of *The Power of Rest* (HarperOne, 2010). "Rest is the process where the body rebuilds, resets, and renews itself," he explains. "But unlike sleep, rest can be an active process where we consciously direct that rebuilding." People who are [rest-deprived](#) end up with overloaded emotions, minds, and nervous systems, and feel sluggish and tired no matter how much they [sleep](#). "We've forgotten what it feels like to be truly refreshed," Edlund says. "Fortunately, there are all these little, simple things we can do throughout the day to rest that fit into even the busiest schedules."

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*Focus your attention on one muscle, releasing any tension. Then do the same with another muscle. "You can actually feel your blood pressure and heart rate go down as you relax each muscle," Edlund

says.

* Consciously connect with something outside your everyday physical or mental environment. “Look around wherever you are and imagine, ‘What was this place like ten years ago, a hundred years ago, a billion years ago?’ It gives you a little sense of wonder and helps you relax,” he says.

*Socialize with friends who put you at ease. This can be as easy as walking to lunch with a colleague and talking about work.

*Clear your senses. Start by closing your eyes and putting your index fingers in your ears deep enough to stop the noise; then quickly pull out your fingers, Edlund says. Open your eyes and look around you. First, look just in terms of color; a second time, look at forms; and a third time, focus on sounds. “Spend five to ten seconds on each one of these. It gives you a perceptual reset of your visual and auditory systems when you feel like you’re losing it and allows you to come back to yourself,” he says.

Make a “to-don’t” list

In our multitasking culture, you may find yourself becoming addicted to getting things done and subsequently taking on more than you’re physically able to do. “People lose touch with how to relax and put the BlackBerry aside and just enjoy the moment,” Gulati says. **Do this:** To reverse the cycle, swap your to-do list once a week for a list of things you’re either not going to do at all, that you can delegate, or that you can do another day. Spend the time you saved doing something you find relaxing—guilt-free. A great way to start, says Gulati: Take a “technology holiday” at least one day per week.

Step down your exercise

Sure, a good workout reduces your emotional stress by boosting your endorphins, but keep in mind that exercise is also a physical stress on your body. A half-hour walk is actually better for your cortisol levels than an hour-long step class, Gulati says. Likewise, it may not be a good idea to start a new exercise class or learn a new workout routine when you’re feeling anxious. “For instance, yoga is good for stress, but if you’ve never done it before it could actually add to your stress because you may be worried you don’t know how to do it,” says Pete McCall, MA, exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise. **Do this:** For optimum stress reduction, aim for 20 to 30 minutes of low- to moderate-intensity exercise daily. “Focus on exercises like biking, walking, or hiking, where you don’t have to do a lot of heavy thinking,” says McCall.

Or any tune—studies show that not only does singing decrease cortisol levels, but belting out a ballad is a more effective stress reliever than just listening to one. Why? Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), theorizes that singing makes us feel better on a variety of levels. “We’re creatures of rhythm, so anything that introduces rhythm to our lives calms us down. We have comforting memories associated with songs, and singing distracts you and breaks you out of your worry loop,” she says. **Do this:** Turn up your favorite tunes and sing along in your car or while cleaning the house. With any luck, the traffic—and maybe even the mess—will soon feel less like a big problem and more like just another little bump in your daily road.

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