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STRESS BENEFITS

## Find Your Stress Sweet Spot

Being frazzled can do nasty things to your bod. But in small doses, angst-provoking situations can improve your health, slow down the signs of aging, and even help you live longer.

MELINDA WENNER

Here's a statement you never hear: "I'm so stressed out—it's awesome!" But the fact is, certain pressure-filled situations—say, the occasional public-speaking gig or cramming for an exam—can be good for your health.

"There are good and bad types of [stress](#). The bad kind is chronic and uncontrollable, like the tension caused by an unhappy marriage or a sick relative," says Edward Calabrese, Ph. D., a toxicologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "But there are a lot of positives associated with short bursts of stress that ease up quickly," such as being stuck in a snarl of traffic or sweating through a presentation at work.

In a recent Ohio State University study, mice that experienced brief but intense [stress](#) were better able to fight the flu. And a smattering of research has linked acute short-term stress to a reduced risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's.

The reason? Stress jolts you into repair mode. It works like this: When you injure yourself, your body snaps to attention and starts to fix itself—healing your injury and revving up your immune system to protect against infection. Short-term stress works the same way. Initially, it produces free radicals and hormones such as cortisol that wreak havoc on your tissues. But then, when your body senses the damage, it calls in the cleanup crew. If the stress is short-lived, you can heal quickly and still have enough energy left over to repair everyday wear and tear, like a scratch or a bruise. (It's like when you decide to tidy up a room for 10 minutes and end up in the midst of a full-on spring cleaning—your body goes into a kind of self-repair overdrive.)

Some researchers who study aging even go so far as to conclude that low-intensity stress could actually help extend your life. The concept makes sense: As you age, your body can't mend as easily, says Edward Masoro, Ph. D., professor emeritus in the department of physiology at the University of Texas. If mild stress ramps up the recovery process, "it stands to reason that it would slow down aging," he says.

There is research to back up the theory. When scientists periodically stress out flies and worms by exposing them to heat, they live longer. Human cells grown in the lab survive longer after being exposed to taxing conditions. Other studies suggest that mild mental tension in the form of intellectual and social challenges, such as doing a crossword puzzle or attending a party where you don't know anyone, can help people fare better well into their senior years.

But stress on its own won't help you; you've got to relax afterward. Your body can't begin repairing itself until the tension has stopped, so "if stress is too severe or too prolonged, you'll have no chance to recover," says Mark Mattson, Ph. D., a neuroscientist at the National Institute on Aging. Not all R & R is created equal, though. Experts say you should avoid activities that, though they seem relaxing, actually tax you further: Knocking back three margaritas after work or inhaling a pile of nachos would fall into this category. It might be better just to rest on the couch with a good book or play fetch with your pup.

The other key to reaping the benefits of tension is finding just the right balance between too much and too little, says Debbie Mandel, a stress-management specialist and the author of *Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7 Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life*. While feeling frazzled occasionally can be good for you, 89 percent of American women ages 30 to 43 report being significantly stressed out, according to a recent survey by the American Psychological Association. On the flip side, legions of mellow surfers and Jack Johnson fans may not have to face the strain of daily deadlines or scheduling nightmares (good news), but that means that their normal wear and tear has a greater chance to accumulate (not-so-good news). With this in mind, we've found five expert-recommended ways to help you find your stress sweet spot.

**1 Keep a stress calendar.** You know when you're tense, but it's hard to remember how long you've been knotted up. Experts say it's important to keep track of how your tension levels vary over time, so every day, rate your stress on a scale from 1 to 10. If you write down a 5 or above for more than two days in a row, try some relief tactics (such as the games to the left).

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**2 Put yourself out there.** Mental, physical, or psychological challenges generate the good kind of stress. So sign yourself up for something you've always wanted to do but have been afraid to try: rock-climbing, Mandarin classes, or open-mic night at your local bar. But be sure to switch things up periodically; once an activity becomes routine, it no longer stimulates you.

**3 Focus on your accomplishments.** When it comes to your tension levels, some weeks are doozies and there's nothing you can do about it. According to Mandel, one way to turn prolonged stress into beneficial stress is to have not only a to-do list but also a "look what I did today" list. Recognizing what you've accomplished sends a signal to your brain that it's OK to relax, she says, and this helps you restore your balance.

**4 Step out of your safety zone.** Good stress can come in many surprising forms, like visiting a sauna or eating food made with spices you don't usually eat. Anytime your body experiences a challenge, it revs up its internal repair system.

**5 Work up a sweat.** Exercise provides the same health perks as a shot of stress (and it can help relieve extra anxiety). A tough workout increases the production of free radicals and other bad chemicals, but it's only temporary: Your body starts to fix the damage as soon as you hop off the treadmill.

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