

10 ways to manage stress

We often assume that stress is an inevitable aspect of our modern-day existence. But there are many simple ways we can minimise stress and its harmful impacts, and enjoy healthier, happier lives.

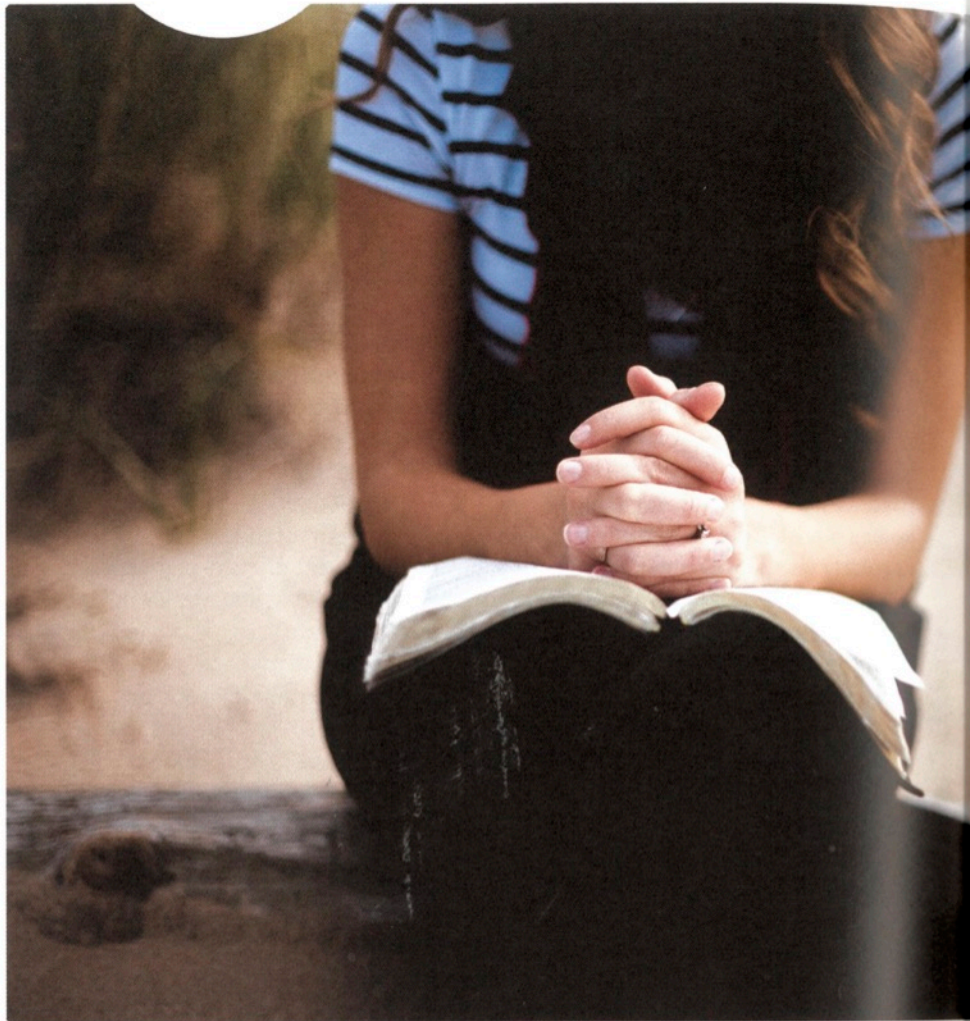
by Narjes Gorjizadeh

Stress seems to be an inevitable part of our daily life these days. Advances in technology may have afforded us more physical comfort, but the pace of life is getting so fast and we are encountering more stress than before. We are busy all the time, always doing something. Even in our relaxed time we are not fully relaxed. For most people relaxation means watching TV or checking their mobile phone. But this is far from true relaxation, as it keeps our minds even busier than they already were and does not invoke relaxation response in our bodies.

Stress is not necessarily a negative thing. Short-term stress is actually good. It is part of our survival mechanism and it can motivate us to take action to achieve more, such as studying for an exam. But prolonged stress, if not managed, can be harmful to our health and the quality of life.

Neuroscientists have found that chronic stress shrinks the area of the brain responsible for memory, learning, and decision making, which can lead to impaired cognition. Chronic stress can also contribute to other significant health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune diseases, anxiety, depression, and more.

But the good news is that stress can be managed and its harmful



effects on your mind and your body can be reversed. Research shows that reduction in stress contributes to a happier life. Instead of accepting daily stress as a natural part of human life, it's better to understand its negative effects on your well-being and learn the techniques to manage it to promote your health and to have a more rejuvenating life.

There are simple things that you can do to manage daily stress. Here are some effective ways. You can integrate one or a few of these strategies to your daily routine to minimise the negative effects of stress on your health and your life experiences.

1 MEDITATE

Meditation is very effective in releasing stress. It is an ancient and scientific method that helps you slow down your mind and increase your focus. This can have tremendous benefit in your physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Studies show

that meditation strengthens the area of the brain associated with memory, learning, and decision making, the same part that shrinks with chronic stress. Meditation is a natural antidote to stress that reverses the damage that stress does to your brain and your body. It enhances your cognition, lowers blood pressure and heart rate, improves immune system, reduces anxiety, fights depression and increases inner peace.

Meditation is the most effective technique to train your brain and take control of your mind to choose your thoughts consciously. Vikas Malkani, renowned meditation master, says, "Stress is created not by the event or circumstance itself but by the way we respond to what happens to us in any moment of our life." Meditation gives you mental clarity and helps you have more control over your thoughts and improve how you react to life's situations.

Learn meditation from a good teacher and have a daily meditation routine. It can be only a few minutes or even a few

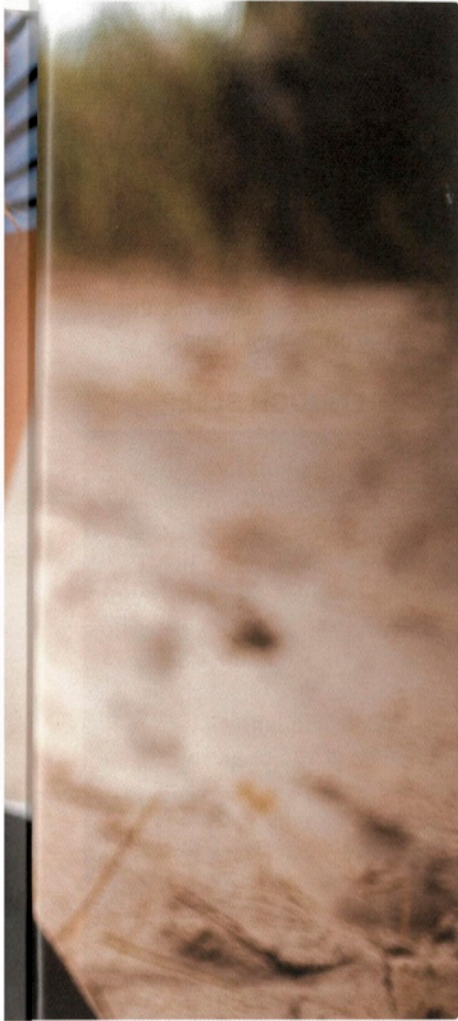


PHOTO BY BEN WHITE ON UNSPLASH

seconds a day, but the important thing is to maintain it and include it in your daily schedule.

2 PRACTISE GRATITUDE

Gratitude is about recognising and appreciating the good things that are present in your life. Similar to meditation, gratitude is a natural antidote to stress and it is strongly associated with happiness. Learning to identify and to acknowledge the blessings in your life shifts your focus from what is missing to what is present in your life. This simple habit can change the structure of your brain, strengthening the areas responsible for higher level thinking, and at the same time shrinking the area of your brain associated with stress. Vikas Malkani says "If you keep your face to the sunshine, you cannot see the shadows." Practising gratitude and being mindful of the many blessings that you have in your daily life reduces stress and reshapes your brain to create a happier

life. Studies confirm that gratitude expands happiness, improves emotional well-being, reduces stress and anxiety, fights depression, improves sleep, and increases mental strength.

Practise identifying and acknowledging the good things you encounter during the day with a deep feeling of appreciation; and at night before you go to bed, remember those moments and reconnect with the good feeling they created for you. The more you practise this, the more you will recognise the blessings hidden in each moment of your life.

3 BREATHE DEEPLY

Your breath is a powerful tool to release stress and reduce tension in your body. Your emotions affect the way you breathe and your breathing affects your emotions and your whole body. When you are stressed, you tend to breathe shallowly, holding your breath and taking in less air. While you are relaxed, on the other hand, you breathe slowly and deeply. When you consciously breathe deeply and slowly, your breathing calms your nervous system, lowers your blood pressure, reduces your heart rate, relaxes your muscles, and decreases stress and anxiety. Take a break from your activity a few times during the day and breathe deeply for a couple of minutes while paying complete attention to your breath and watch how you feel afterwards, noticing the relaxation in your body and your mind. You can do this practice before and after stressful events, such as an interview or exam, and it can have a great impact in your performance.

4 GO TO NATURE

It is scientifically proven that spending time in nature has many health benefits, including improved cognition, reduced stress and anxiety, reduced blood pressure, improved immune system function, and increased sense of vitality. In Japan the term *shinrin yoku* (which translates to 'forest bathing') refers to spending time in nature, and it is part of preventive healthcare in

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Japanese medicine. In today's modern lifestyle, we are spending most of our time indoors and we have become dissociated from nature. We are looking at screens (TV, computer, phone) much more than the natural scenes. Prof. Yoshifumi Miyazaki, who has done extensive research on the positive effects of nature in our well-being, says, "Throughout our evolution, we've spent 99.9 percent of our time in natural environments. Our physiological functions are still adapted to it. During everyday life, a feeling of comfort can be achieved if our rhythms are synchronised with those of the environment."

Spending time in nature – like taking a walk in a green area or gardening – are natural ways to reduce stress. Even having a plant in your room can reduce your stress.

5 FOCUS

Avoid multi-tasking. It is tiring for your brain. Instead of juggling between different tasks, focus on one thing at a time. When you have many things to do, multi-tasking may look like a good idea at first. But your brain cannot multi-task; it quickly switches between tasks so it appears to us that we are multi-tasking. In fact it takes more energy from your brain, it is less efficient, and it only adds to your stress. It is more efficient to do one thing at a time and do each task with focus. By having more focus on what you are doing, you will increase your performance and will actually finish the task earlier with better outcome and less stress.

6 SLOW DOWN

The speed of life is getting so fast. We are constantly immersed in activity, leaving not much quality time for ourselves. Although speed is rewarded

by society and it can make us believe that we are doing better because we are doing more, it causes stress and it harms our health and the quality of our life. Not only that, but by rushing through tasks and jamming up our day with 'stuff', we can often overlook the important things in our life. We get disconnected from the delicate things that are hidden in the moments, like the laughter of a child or a smile from our loved ones. By not being present to the things that enrich our lives, we disconnect ourselves from feelings of contentment.

The world is speeding up, but we can be mindful of our own speed, and slow down consciously to calm our mind and enhance the quality of life. If we don't slow down consciously, we can easily get overwhelmed by the endless to-do lists, and stress is the outcome. Be mindful not to jam up your day with tasks. Have a list of the things you need to do in a day. And if there are too many things on that list, prioritise the tasks that need to be done in that day and reschedule the ones that can be done later. Make sure you have at least a few minutes for yourself every day to relax and to connect with yourself.

7 EXERCISE

Exercise is another very effective way to reduce stress. It pushes more blood to your brain, helps to relax your muscles, and relieves tension in your body. Physical activity increases focus, improves memory, and regulates many bodily functions, such as optimising blood sugar levels, blood pressure, and sleep. Regardless of your fitness level, you can choose some form of physical activity to help you reduce stress. The key is to move your body every day and to stay physically active. Look for opportunities to include more activities in your day. For example, take the stairs rather than the elevator. It's also a great move to choose an activity or form of exercise that you enjoy and make it a regular routine. Activities such as walking, running, swimming, dancing, gardening, etc., are excellent choices.

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8 LAUGH AND SMILE MORE

Laughter is a natural antidote to stress and it has many psychological and physiological benefits. Studies show that laughter enhances intake of oxygen, increases energy, boosts immune system, protects your heart, reduces stress, relieves tension in your body, and relaxes your muscles.

Make it a habit to laugh with your friends and spend more time with those who are willing to share a good laugh with you. Laughter is contagious. By laughing more you can help those around you laugh more and enjoy its amazing benefits.

Even smiling can improve your mood, release tension, and reduce stress. Research has shown that even with a fake smile and lifting your facial muscles into a smile position, your brain remembers that this muscular action is associated with positive memories and reactivates happy emotions. Make a habit to have a smile on your face. Just this simple habit can have a great impact on your life and help you relax.

9 MAKE ART

Creating art is another great way to reduce stress. It calms your nervous system, encourages focus, and slows down your mind. Take some time in a day to connect to your creative side and express yourself through creating art. You do not have to be an artist to enjoy the benefits of art-making. You can use some colours to splash on a piece of paper with a brush or your fingers and enjoy the forms that appear on the

paper; or you can use any other material or any creative way to express yourself and make an art form. Think of creating an abstract art work. The end result is not of concern here. The process of expressing yourself and enjoying the moment is the important thing.

10 GET ENOUGH SLEEP

Having the right amount of sleep is an important factor in keeping you healthy, as sleep restores your body. A good night's sleep improves your alertness and concentration, reduces inflammation, regulates mood, reduces stress, and sharpens decision making. Not getting enough sleep can increase your stress. A high level of stress can consequently interfere with your sleep. If you think you are not getting enough sleep, gradually increase your sleep time by going to bed a few minutes earlier each night, keeping your wake-up time the same, until your bedtime is adequate to afford you the amount of sleep you need.

To improve your sleep quality, do not watch TV or look at other electronic screens for at least an hour before you go to bed. Instead, read a book or listen to light music. It helps more if you can meditate or do a gratitude practice; remember the good moments you had in your day with a deep feeling of appreciation, or write them down. You can also breathe deeply for a few minutes, paying attention to your breath, before you go to bed. If you still feel that you are having worry and anxiety, you can write your worries down on a piece of paper and decide that you are going to leave them on the paper and not take them to bed.

Using these strategies you can manage stress effectively and enjoy a happier life. ●

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