



10 Essential Tips for reducing stress

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Every day we're confronted by multiple challenges that send our stress levels sky high, such as meeting deadlines, juggling family and work life, or paying bills. A small amount of stress can be positive – it can force us to perform well, keep alert, and be full of energy. Too much stress, on the other hand, can have detrimental effects on our health and well-being. It can make us tense, anxious, and cause sleep problems and other illnesses. To protect our health, let's not wait for the fight-or-flight response to kick in.

Let's take the right steps now to reduce our stress levels.

“It's not stress that kills us; it is our reaction to it.” – Hans Selye

By taking a deeper look at the root cause of stress, we discover that the journey to illness does not usually start suddenly. Illness often manifests over time due to one's lifestyle, chronic stress, and diet. But if you embrace the mind, body, and spirit to create treatment plans that quickly restore health, you will be able to reduce the stress in your life.

The following 10 healthy tips are a guide for reducing stress in your daily life and regaining control over your health and happiness.

#1. Stay Physically Active

When our body feels good, so does our mind. Exercise lets us blow off steam. It releases endorphins, our mood-enhancing chemicals which relax our body. As endorphin levels increase, our blood sugar and blood pressure decrease. Our mind is

able to think more clearly and be focused. Our body also loves feeling tired and relaxed at the end of the day, allowing us to sleep better.

Exercise also helps decrease stress hormones, like oxytocin and cortisol. These stress hormones accelerate the aging process because of the wear and tear placed on our body. When cortisol levels stay high, it is hard to stay focused and be calm. Our heart begins to race. Our palms begin to sweat and our blood pressure begins to increase.

We feel stressed!

Exercise helps us physically and mentally feel stronger, and more connected to our body.

Pro Tip: Incorporate exercise into your daily routine.

Try to be physically active at least an hour each day. For example, make walking a part of your daily commute. Stretch when you wake up in the morning or before settling into bed at night. Join a walking club to have fun outside and be social. Another idea is to check out your local yoga studio each week. The supportive environment of others doing yoga will help you feel excited about making yoga a part of your life.

#2. Do Deep Breathing Exercises

Shallow breathing through your upper chest triggers a subconscious feeling of anxiety. Use your abdominal muscles to take deep breathes instead. You will be able to lower your heart rate and blood pressure. The back and chest muscles will begin to relax allowing for better alignment of your posture. As your posture improves, your upper and lower body feels better because less stress is being applied to each joint.

Getting into the habit of taking deep breaths regularly allows us to feel calmer. Our concentration and focus become sharp. We are able to perform tasks better and more efficiently.

Pro Tip: Breathing exercises are used in many types of health and lifestyle practices, including yoga, meditation, and dance.

An easy way to learn how to take deep breaths is by first breathing in slowly through the nose. Hold your breath for five counts and exhale slowly through the mouth.

Practice doing deep breathing exercises for 15 to 20 minutes upon awakening in the morning and before going to bed at night.

Try to also do deep breathing exercises for just one minute every hour of each day. Eventually you will form a habit of taking deep breaths without having to make a conscious effort.

#3. Do One Task at a Time

When we attempt to juggle many tasks at once, we subconsciously start feeling overwhelmed and stressed. When we feel these negative emotions, we gradually become less efficient and content with our work.

We need to manage our time more efficiently by creating a routine schedule that first prioritizes our self-care. Self-care incorporates breathing, eating, exercising, working, playing, and resting. Each component is critical to our livelihood and must be given adequate attention. When sufficient time is consistently allocated for self-care, we don't feel so depleted and overwhelmed.

When we don't allocate time to care for ourselves, we become overwhelmed and stressed by the frequent distractions in our lives. In today's world we are often distracted every few minutes because of emails, texts, social media, phone calls, and more.

It takes over five minutes to reset our attention so we can get back to focusing on the task at hand. If we are distracted every few minutes throughout the day, we realistically can only accomplish a few hours of work each day – and the work we accomplish is less satisfying.

No wonder we feel overwhelmed. Our task lists are getting bigger and our ability to accomplish these tasks with ease is becoming more difficult.

Pro Tip: Make a list of all the things you need to do, and prioritize the most important things first. Be mindful of being present so you can focus on one task at a time.

If you can't get to everything on your list in one day, move the task to the next day.

Be proud of what you have accomplished! Be even more proud of staying present and how you have given quality care to yourself and those around you!

#4. Follow a Healthy Diet

When we are busy, it is often easier to eat “easy, ready-made” food, sugary/caffeinated drinks, and calorie-rich, nutrient-poor food. It is also easy to search for food when we become hungry versus having prepared healthy meals available to us in advance. When we are rushed, stressed, or overcome by our hunger, we tend to eat quickly and overeat. The stress the body experiences leads to food not being properly digested.

Poor digestion of food causes difficulty absorbing essential nutrients from food and poor utilization of the nutrients in each cellular function. Nutrient deficiencies often set in from poor eating habits. These deficiencies cause the body a great deal of stress because it must function without sufficient resources available to do its job properly. Not surprisingly, these bad eating styles quickly dampen our mood.

We need to make a choice to consume only fresh, whole foods made from ingredients we understand. We shouldn't spend our time deciphering the ingredient list on food packaging and deciding if the item is “healthy”. Food packaging's purpose is to sell the item, not to nourish our body. Real foods do not need attractive labels since their natural beauty sells health.

We need to make a choice to be mindful of the eating process. Plan what you are going to eat for each meal, instead of “hunting” for food when you realize you are hungry.

Take your time to enjoy each bite. You will be able chew your food properly allowing a sufficient amount of digestive enzymes to be released in your mouth so food can be broken down properly and nutrients are easily absorbed into the body's cells.

Take awareness of what you are doing and thinking while eating. If you are focused on doing another task, like watching TV, reading a book, or talking on the phone, you may overeat and not chew your food properly.

Pro Tip: If your body feels great, your mind feels great. Nourish yourself with fresh, whole foods consisting of more than 50% vegetables, 15% small beans and seeds, 15% whole grains, and 10% fruit. The remaining 10% can be allocated to eggs, dairy products, meat, and fish.

Limit your intake of wheat, soy, and corn since they are genetically modified in the U.S. and hence are not easily digested. Poor digestion of these foods causes spikes in our blood sugar level, hurts our mood, and decreases our energy levels.

Limit your intake of animal protein (i.e., dairy, eggs, fish, and meat) to two or three times per week. Try to avoid animal protein for dinner since they are too difficult to digest when the body is tired. Animal protein consumed at night may cause us to have poor sleep, not feel rested in the morning, and be more moody or bloated throughout the day.

Limit your intake of white rice since it quickly causes spikes in the blood sugar level. Switch to brown rice and other grains like millet, buckwheat, barley, oats, or amaranth.

#5. Avoid Sugar and Junk Food

Refined sugars plus processed, pre-packaged, and ready-made meals are low in nutritional value. The nutrients have been stripped off of these foods so they can sustain a long shelf life. These foods are actually dead since they contain little to no nutritional value but are full of calories which drain the body of energy. These foods and drinks make our body feel sluggish, anxious, sad, and irritable while also compromising our focus, attention span, and ability to grasp new information.

Pro Tip: Reduce your intake of sugar to 10 grams per day.

Remember, sugar is masked in most ready-made items like bagels, bread, fruit juice, yogurt, granola bars, baked goods, deli meats, condiments, and sauces.

Stick to natural sugars which come in fresh fruits and vegetables. By having 60% of your diet consisting of vegetables like dark leafy greens and fruit, your body will feel lighter, have lots of energy, and feel amazing.

#6. Keep a Healthy Eating Cycle

Try to consume most of the day's food during the day when the body needs the immediate energy to function properly. You can then have a light dinner many hours before bedtime.

Try to avoid animal protein (i.e., dairy, fish, eggs, meat), alcohol, caffeine, tobacco, and sugar at night. The body is too tired at the end of the day to adequately digest these heavy foods and beverages leading to the body feeling overworked at night. The body is now stressed leading to further havoc during the day.

Due to the body being overworked at night by heavy dinners, alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, or sugar, the blood sugar quickly jumps up. Regular spikes in blood sugar eventually

damage the liver, thyroid, and kidneys. Damage to these essential organs leads to high levels of inflammation in the blood. Physically this inflammation/stress will quickly manifest as disruptive sleep, elevated blood pressure, joint aches, increased pain, headaches, mood shifts, hot flashes, and/or fever. Maintaining these bad habits will cause illnesses and chronic disease to set in.

Pro Tip: Fast for over three hours before bedtime, and for over 12 hours between dinner and breakfast. Break the morning fast with a big breakfast.

“Skipping dinner is for kings – skipping breakfast is for paupers.”

Try to make breakfast or lunch the biggest meal of the day.

#7. Don't Overeat

Many of us turn to food when feeling stressed, depressed, or anxious. Food gives us comfort and an escape from our feelings. When we stress-eat we forget the emotional triggers, but as soon as we stop eating, the negative emotions return. On top of that, we may feel disappointed with ourselves, which increases our stress level even more.

Overeating places excess stress on our internal organs. Eating smaller, healthier meals reduces the stress on the digestive system and subsequently, the rest of the body. It is also best to eat until you feel satisfied versus until you feel full.

Pro Tip: Break the cycle by eating slowly and without being distracted. Eat just enough to still be a bit hungry so the stomach has sufficient room to easily break down the food.

#8. Eat Before You Become Hungry

When we are famished, we make different food choices than if we start to eat before being hungry. We may choose unhealthy varieties or overeat, both of which can cause our stress levels to rise.

Being hungry also typically corresponds with a dip in blood sugar levels. When this happens, we can have difficulty concentrating, making decisions, and focusing on our goals for a healthy lifestyle. There's a reason why people recommend never to go grocery shopping on an empty stomach!

Pro Tip: Eat on a planned schedule, and don't go without food for more than six hours during the day.

#9. Get a Good Night's Sleep

New research shows that sleep loss increases hunger and negatively affects metabolism, immune system, and hormone balance. Chronic sleep loss is directly linked to weight gain, heart disease, arrhythmias, stroke, diabetes, and cancer.

A recent study published in the medical journal *SLEEP* found a link between poor sleep quality and both ADHD and cognitive decline in all ages. Another study showed that sleep is essential in early childhood development, learning, and for the formation and retention of memories. Sleep is just as important to your well-being as a healthy diet and regular exercise.

A good night's rest regenerates our energy levels and increases our ability to manage stress better. When we are tired, we are more easily prone to becoming anxious and are less patient with others.

Pro Tip: Most people need between seven and nine hours of sleep each night. Improve your sleep quality by going to bed at the same time each evening and awakening at the same time each morning. Going to bed by 10 pm, rather than staying up late, is more aligned with a person's natural physiology and how the body is designed to work when we are resting.

Give yourself at least two hours free of electronics before bed as it will help you fall asleep more easily and have more restful sleep.

#10. Take Melatonin Supplements

Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland. Its production is only triggered by darkness and stopped by sunlight and the blue light emitted from electronics. Melatonin is critical for optimal sleep quality, pushing food effectively through the digestive system, effective absorption of essential nutrients, balancing hormone levels, and maintaining a strong immune system.

Melatonin production is hindered by electronic exposure at night, long working hours, working nights, and a poor diet void of sufficient nutrients. Insufficient melatonin production leads to sleep problems, hormonal and digestive issues, and a weaker immune system.

Pro Tip: Melatonin supplementation can help increase your melatonin levels and directly improve your health. Take Melatonin 0.5 to 1 mg two hours before bedtime. The dose can be increased based on your health and response to Melatonin supplementation. Talk to your doctor to determine your ideal dose.

Melatonin supplementation can sometimes take up to 12 weeks to dramatically improve your health. Supplementation with Melatonin is safe and not habit-forming. It is actually necessary to maintain quality of life in today's fast-pace world.

Conclusion

How well we handle stress comes down to one or more choices we need to make. Choose to make lifestyle changes to manage your pressures better. Choose to make dietary changes to combat tension. Sometimes – when you're in an unhealthy relationship or soul-crushing job – no amount of healthy food and habits will resolve your angst completely, and the only choice you can make is to walk away.

Choose you!

“A diamond is just a piece of charcoal that handles stress exceptionally well.”

Need help managing your stress? If you think stress is affecting your health and lifestyle, please reach out! I'm happy to help you live a happy, healthy life.

About Dr. Payal N. Bhandari M.D.

Dr. Bhandari went into the field of medicine to help people improve their health. After completing medical school at West Virginia University and her family practice residency at the University of Massachusetts, Dr. Bhandari joined a neighborhood practice in San Francisco in 2005. After eight years, Dr. Bhandari helped transform the practice into San Francisco's first nationally recognized patient-centered medical home. Thereafter, she launched her own solo practice, Advanced Health, focused on blending the best in the advances in western and eastern medicine with personalized healthcare.

Advanced Health focuses on the importance of the patient-doctor relationship. Through active listening, accessibility, and compassion, Dr. Bhandari gives personalized care to each patient. She has taken her two decades of clinical experience to clearly understand that illness does not occur suddenly. Sickness instead manifests over time

due to one's lifestyle, chronic stress, and diet. By first determining the root cause to any health problem, Dr. Bhandari creates personalized treatment plans which embrace the mind, body, and spirit. Her goal is to transform patients' lives into wellness so they can continue living life to their optimum.

Learn more about Dr. Payal Bhandari M.D. at www.sfadvancedhealth.com