

Music to Ease the Stress of Chronic Disease

Researchers from Temple University in Philadelphia who reviewed 23 studies involving more than 1,400 heart-disease patients concluded that listening to tunes helps patients relax, and may even help them lower their blood pressure and heart rate. Those benefits seem strongest, the study suggests, when people choose their own music.



Reminiscing

Talking about past good times can give older adults an emotional boost. And feelings of nostalgia – from, say, looking at photos or listening to a song – might help reignite a sense of connectedness.

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7 Ways to Stress Less

A study conducted during the summer of 2016 found that our overall stress levels were going down – part of an encouraging nationwide trend. But a follow-up survey in early January of 2017 showed a troubling change, the first statistically significant spike in stress in 10 years.

Whether acute or chronic, stress can affect you physically, changing your hormone levels and activating your body's inflammatory response. There's evidence that people under chronic stress are more susceptible to the common cold and flu, and are at greater risk of developing depression and coronary heart disease. Under long-term stress, many of your body's physical systems do not respond normally.

And though older adults usually report less stress than younger ones – thanks to years of experience in developing coping strategies – age may make us more susceptible to the negative effects of chronic stress.

Fortunately, evidence-backed strategies can help relieve stress. Whether you're planning a budget or dealing with a sick relative, here's how to turn down the volume on tension the healthy way:

LEARN TO RELAX

Focus on the now. Research has found that practicing mindfulness – being focused on the present moment without judgement – can reduce stress. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back.

In a recent study, people who had generalized anxiety disorder either took a lecture-type class on healthy lifestyle habits or participated in mindfulness-based stress reduction, an eight-week course that teaches mindfulness via meditation, breathing, and yoga. When challenged with a stressful task, those who took the MBSR program showed reduced levels of stress-related hormones and inflammatory compounds, suggesting their bodies had become physically better at handling stress.

For guidance on how to get started, check your local community college for a mindfulness meditation class. The UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center also offers free guided meditations online at marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations.

Spend time with family and friends: When stress hits, its physical symptoms could be reduced by strong interpersonal connections. Knowing that people are there for you can help – even when they don't do anything especially helpful.

We know that people with strong social support networks do better under stress. They protect you from the adverse effects of stressors. Family and friends can also help you reinterpret and cope with stressful challenges.

Connect with nature. Exercise has been shown to relieve stress, and being out in nature while you do it could help as well. A small study found that urban residents who walked for 90 minutes in nature had lower self-reported scores on rumination – overthinking or hyperfocusing on a negative situation than those who walked in a city.

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7 Ways to Stress Less

Even a short stroll in the woods is beneficial. A study in the journal *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine* found that people who sat and looked at a forest for 15 minutes, then spent 15 minutes walking in it showed lower levels of cortisol, a lower heart rate, and lower blood pressure – all physical indications of reduced stress – than people who did the same in an urban environment.

Get more (and better) sleep. When you're stressed you often have trouble sleeping, and when you don't have a good night's sleep, it's harder to cope with daily stresses. It's a vicious cycle. Chronic sleep deprivation is also associated with an increased risk of a variety of illnesses and acute infections, such as colds. The sweet spot for sleep seems to be between 7 and 8 hours per night. (Too little or too much can increase your risk of certain illnesses.)

If you're having trouble nodding off or staying asleep, keep potential distractions out of the bedroom (pets, snoring, glowing screens, bright lights, an uncomfortable temperature) and make time before bed to practice deep relaxation or mindfulness to help calm your brain.

Breathe slowly. When you're stressed or anxious, your breathing can become fast and shallow. This stimulates the sympathetic ("fight or flight") nervous system, which in turn can trigger more stress. Studies have shown that controlled breathing – the kind you might do in a yoga class – can help turn on the more soothing parasympathetic system. The way people ordinarily breathe when stressed enhances the stress they feel.

The average adult takes about 12 to 20 breaths per minute. Slowing down your respiration for up to 20 minutes per day, with the goal of getting to 5 or 6 breaths per minute during that time. With this kind of breathing, your heart and lungs work better and deliver more oxygen to your system. This can decrease blood pressure, improve sleep, and give you both energy and relaxation.

DEAL WITH BAD HABITS

Make smart choices. Coping with stress by turning to alcohol, drugs, overeating, or other tempting comforts might make you feel better temporarily. But in the long run, these can have negative health consequences, potentially leading to addiction, weight gain, and other problems.

When we're stressed we tend to smoke and drink more, get less exercise and sleep, and eat poorly. All can potentially impact disease processes – and make stress worse. Instead, try meditating, exercising, or taking a walk outside.

Take technology breaks. Electronic device use can be a double-edged sword. Although it can help keep you engaged and connected, too much screen time can disrupt sleep and increase stress.

A report from the Pew Research Center found that women who used social media to tweet, message, or share photos reported less stress than those that didn't use social media at all. But that connecting had negative impact by making the women more aware of – and stressed out by – other peoples' life challenges. Pew calls that "the cost of caring," and notes that such stress is normal – in moderation.

When You Need More Help

Sometimes stress can be overwhelming and at-home strategies just aren't sufficient. If this is the case, you may need formal and/or professional help. Ask your doctor whether any of the following are right for you.

1. **Biofeedback.** Via sensors attached to your body, you learn to control your heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and even skin temperature. The goal is to increase awareness of how your body reacts to stress so that you can learn to exert some control over your response.
2. **Cognitive behavioral therapy.** Commonly used as part of talk therapy, CBT involves identifying unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and replacing them with more helpful ones. You're trying to turn unreasonably negative thoughts into realistic thoughts – not necessarily positive ones.
3. **Medication.** If your symptoms have gotten so bad that they're impeding your happiness and daily function, your doctor might prescribe antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication. But drugs should be just one piece of a comprehensive plan. These medications can come with serious side effects.

Is it something else? In some cases, stresslike symptoms could actually be signs of a medical problem. For example, if you suddenly experience chest pain or your heart starts racing, you break into a sweat, and feel nauseated and lightheaded, you could be having a stress-induced panic attack. But these could also be signs of a heart attack or arrhythmia. Head to the ER if you're at all unsure.

Insomnia, tight muscles, back or neck pain, headaches, and fatigue can all be the result of significant stress – but they can signal medical problems as well. See your doctor if such symptoms persist.

Likewise if you have worsening abdominal pain or bloody stools, or notice a change in bowel movements. These can be stress-related – or can signal an ulcer or a more serious problem, even (rarely) cancer. Schedule a check up with your doctor, so he or she can evaluate you more fully.

