

FIFTEEN STEPS TO MINIMISE STRESS

- 1. Deep breathing.** Deep breathing is fundamental to meditation, yoga, sleep, sex, aerobic exercise - just about everything that's deeply relaxing. But if you don't have the time to meditate or take a nap, a few deep breaths can help nip your stress in the bud. The reason is that your respiratory system is a key link between your mind and body. Stress leads to shallow, rapid breathing, which limits oxygen transfer into your blood. To keep your blood-oxygen level where it should be, your heart has to pump harder, which is a strain. The emotional centre of your brain reacts to your shallow breathing and heart strain with tension and anxiety. When you breathe deeply, your blood becomes well oxygenated without straining your heart, and your mind and body relax.

Exercise: Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Breathe deep into the abdomen, taking the breath deep into the belly and allowing the ribs to expand out to the sides and the belly to the front, hold the breath for a moment and breathe out using a 'sigh' sound. Repeat at least five times.
- 2. Visualisation therapy.** Recall or imagine an idyllic setting, a place where you are surrounded by beauty, where you feel totally relaxed. Close your eyes, breathe deeply and imagine the scene in as much detail as possible. Focus on the sights, sounds, smells and allow yourself to be totally absorbed by the beauty around you.
- 3. Mindfulness triggers.** Create a mindfulness trigger for yourself. This is something that reminds you to relax. It could be an action, like putting the phone back on the hook, or closing your diary. Every time you do this action, take a deep in-breath and then let it out, physically noticing how your muscles relax. The tension will probably tend to creep back again, but by repeating this exercise you'll get better at letting go of physical tension and find it easier to achieve a relaxed state.
- 4. Take control of your thinking.** You have the power to choose your thoughts. When a worrying or stressful thought enters your mind, acknowledge the underlying feelings (anxiety, anger, fear etc.) and allow yourself to be with that feeling. Don't immediately try to escape the negative feeling – know that you have the ability to cope. As your mind will often attempt to escalate your worry, change your self talk to a firm statement such as 'I am not going to exaggerate this problem'. Ask yourself if there is anything constructive you can do to deal with the problem. If there is, plan one small step towards that. If not, ask yourself what you can do instead to occupy your thoughts in another way.
- 5. Make contact with a friend.** Reaching out to others helps you gain perspective and changes how you think and feel about your problems, which helps relieve your stress. All of psychotherapy is based on the idea that talking about your troubles helps eliminate them. But most people don't need therapists. You can reap similar benefits by talking with a trusted friend.

6. **Volunteer somewhere.** There's nothing like helping people who are less fortunate to remind you how lucky you are - despite all the stress in your life. That's the selfish reason for being altruistic - volunteering helps you count your blessings.
7. **Learn to say 'no.'** Be clear about your personal boundaries and learn how to say a gentle but firm 'no' when people make requests of you that push those boundaries. No one will respect your limits until you respect your own limits.
8. **Delegate.** Ask for help rather than complaining – you may be surprised at how willing others are to share the load.
9. **Schedule 'worry time.'** Some stressors demand immediate attention - a smoke alarm or a police car's red light behind you. But many minor stressors - bills, phone calls, emails - can be dealt with at another time. File your minor stressors away in a little mental compartment and deal with them when you decide the time is right. Don't let them take control of you.
10. **Plan something.** Buy concert tickets or schedule a weekend getaway. Make a restaurant reservation or an appointment for a massage. Looking forward to something is calming.
11. **Time management.** Planning well and being organised are very powerful tools for managing stress. When you anticipate what the future might bring, you can be prepared for it. Steven Covey's book, 'The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People' is a great guide to effectively managing your life.
12. **Play time.** Taking time out for a 'healthy' obsession can be very beneficial. This doesn't include passive activities like watching television, but rather, creative and active pursuits. Giving yourself time to play is a wonderful way to beat stress.
13. **Laughter.** See a funny movie, 'lighten-up' with your family and friends and remember to see the humour in your life.
14. **Get healthy.** Eat well, exercise, take a yoga or tai chi class.
15. **Meditate.** Dress in warm, comfortable clothing, find a quiet place to sit (a comfortable chair is perfect) and take the phone off the hook. Close your eyes and practise a few deep breathing exercises. Begin your meditation, repeating the mantra 'release' silently in your mind for a period of twenty minutes. (It's ok to check a clock to see how long you have been meditating). While you meditate, thoughts will come into your mind and interrupt you...simply let them go and return to your mantra. Once the time is up, sit quietly for a few moments before returning to your usual activities.