



Maintaining Your Mental Equilibrium

Over time, chronic stress and anxiety can cause a hormonal chain of events that can lead to illnesses such as heart disease, depression and ulcers. Out-of-control stress can also impair your job performance and drain your energy. But you can take steps to deal with your physical response to stress.

"Performing a daily de-stress routine can effectively counteract stress and anxiety, so that the results of stress don't build up and cause problems," says Gerald W. Vest, professor emeritus of sociology at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.

Stress Exercises

Belly breathing. For immediate stress relief, Mr. Vest recommends placing your left hand over your heart, your right hand on your belly and breathing deeply." Just notice your breathing," he advises. "By observing the rise and fall of your breath, you'll naturally begin to relax." At home, or at work if you have privacy, you can also do this technique lying down. Do it for several minutes any time you feel anxious or stressed.

Arm yourself. Pull up your right shirt sleeve and massage your right shoulder with your left hand. Then feather down your arm with gentle soothing motions. Repeat on the other arm. "The nervous system is connected to all the cells of the body. By soothing the skin of your shoulders and arm, you'll immediately start to relax," says Mr. Vest. And whenever you're using touch, continue to focus on your breathing.

Hand care. To discharge tension that can accumulate in the hands, knead your left palm with your right hand. Repeat on the other hand. Also, spread your fingers and use the thumb and forefinger of your opposite hand to lightly press each joint and work out the tension between your fingers. Switch hands. Then make circles in your palm with your opposite hand. Switch hands.

Saving face. Massaging the face also reduces cumulative tension. For quick stress relief before a meeting or important presentation, Mr. Vest recommends lightly massaging your temples, smoothing your eyebrows and massaging your cheekbones and jaw. Also, spend a few seconds pinching and stretching your ear lobes, a typically tense area.

Progressive breath relaxation. Use your breath to relax your muscles. "Starting with your feet, visualize each muscle and imagine that your breath is going to the muscle and relaxing it," says Mr. Vest. "Working your way up, spend a few seconds on each part of the body, going through it consciously."

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