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Three Simple Tips for Managing Stress

Chronic stress can take its toll on our physical and mental wellbeing, causing problems such as headaches, fatigue, insomnia, digestive upset, weight gain, depression, anxiety, and heart disease. It seeps into other facets of our lives, negatively affecting our personal relationships and our ability to be productive in daily activities.

The good news is that there are things you can do to manage your stress in a positive way. **Try these three simple tips to start:**



1. **Move Your Body.** Physical activity produces endorphins, which help reduce pain perception and also create that euphoric or positive feeling you may have experienced post-workout. Exercise is known to help boost our self-esteem, reduce cortisol levels (stress hormone), and improve sleep quality.
2. **Practice Gratitude.** Studies have shown that people who express gratitude on a daily basis have lower blood pressure, better immune function, and improved mood. Start a gratitude journal and keep it by your bedside to write down at least one thing for which you are grateful each day. Don't keep your gratitude to yourself; speak it out loud to others for an additional boost!
3. **Breathe.** Deep breathing helps slow your heart rate and lower your blood pressure. When experiencing stress, take a few minutes to simply focus on your breath, the inhale and exhale. This will give pause to racing thoughts and allow you recover control of your thoughts.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Promotes Stress Relief



When dealing with stress, many people find relief through progressive muscle relaxation. With this method, you tense up targeted muscle groups and then relax them. To begin this process, first lie on your back and stretch. Inhale and tense the muscle group for 4-10 seconds, then release. Relax for 10-20 seconds before moving on to the next group.

- **Hands:** Clench into a fist.
- **Wrist and Forearms:** Expand them and bend wrist back.
- **Biceps and Upper Arms:** Flex your biceps.
- **Shoulders:** Shrug them.
- **Forehead:** Wrinkle into a deep frown.
- **Eyes and Nose:** Close your eyes as tightly as possible.
- **Cheeks and Jaws:** Smile as widely as you can.
- **Mouth:** Press your lips together tightly.
- **Back of Neck:** Press your head back.
- **Front of Neck:** Touch chin to chest.
- **Chest:** Take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale.
- **Back:** Arch back up and away from the floor.
- **Stomach:** Suck it into a tight knot.
- **Hips and Bum:** Squeeze tightly.
- **Thighs:** Tighten muscles.
- **Lower Legs:** Point toes toward your face. Then point toes away & curl them downward.
- **Entire Body:** Tighten all muscles in your body.

Turn to Healthier Foods to Reduce Stress



We all deal with stress at some point in our lives. Our stress can be due to a variety of factors, but one thing many of us have in common is a tendency to overeat unhealthy foods when stressed. According to the American Psychological Association, we turn to these comfort foods because they help make us feel better and distract us from the stress. Unfortunately, this stress relief is temporary; most of us regret those unhealthy food choices and feel their effects once the stress had subsided.

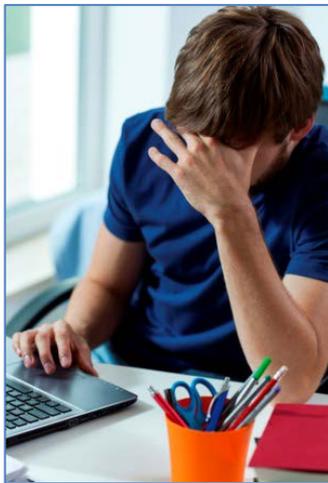
Try incorporating more of these stress-reducing foods into your life:

1. **Leafy green vegetables** — Foods like spinach contain folate. Folate produces dopamine, which is a pleasure-inducing chemical in the brain.
2. **Salmon** — According to the National Institutes of Health, the Omega-3 fatty acids reduce the effects of stress hormones.
3. **Avocado** — Avocados are full of B vitamins. B vitamins promote healthy brain cells, which can help lower anxiety.
4. **Yogurt** — According to a study at UCLA, the bacteria in yogurt may reduce activity in an area of the brain that controls emotion.
5. **Milk**— Vitamin D found in milk increases happiness. Low vitamin D can cause an increased risk of feelings of panic, according to the UCL Institute of Child Health.

Overwhelmed by Stress? When to Seek Help.

Stress is a part of our daily life, and none of us can escape from it completely. There are times when the stress becomes too much, and we should consider getting additional assistance.

Some signs you may need additional help to manage stress include the following:



- You are feeling sad, stressed, irritable, or overwhelmed for most days for about two weeks or more.
- You are struggling to complete daily tasks, such as taking a shower, getting to work on time or at all, or keeping up with household chores.
- You notice trouble with memory, concentration and/or sleep.
- New or increased physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches, indigestion, or chest pain.
- You feel like you have exhausted your resources or run out of options.
- You start to feel like this situation or feeling will never end.
- You are tired of feeling stressed and just need some new ideas!

Managing stress is a common reason people seek help from their family doctor or a counselor. An Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if your employer offers this benefit, also can be a great resource for assistance. You don't have to do it alone; ask for support when you need it!