



GENERAL WELLNESS

## HOW STRESSING LESS HELPS OUR PHYSICAL HEALTH

By *Your Health Staff*

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Is stress bringing you down? Rest assured that you are not alone.

America now ranks as one of the world's most "stressed out" nations, with 55% of Americans reporting feelings of stress on a daily basis. Moreover, 3 out of 4 Americans indicate that stress affects their relationships, and more than 4 in 5 Americans routinely experience workplace stress.

So, what's a body to do in the face of all this stress?

"Stress is a natural reaction to life experiences, and in the short term, it can actually benefit our health, readying our body to respond in potentially serious situations," said Allison White-Stewart, LCSW and Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare [Living Well Network](#) supervisor. "The problem comes when our stress responses don't stop firing, and our stress, or cortisol, levels stay elevated, leading to chronic stress."

Chronic stress can wreak havoc on our health, from weight gain, fatigue and "brain fog" to high blood pressure, trouble sleeping, type 2 diabetes and a weakened immune system.

### 10 Tips to Help You Stress Less

In recognition of [National Stress Awareness Month](#), [Healthier 901](#) is offering up ten tips (beyond exercise, good nutrition and good rest) proven to help you stress less:

## 1. Get Out of Your Head (if only for a moment).

When you find yourself fixated on a specific topic or running your worries on a loop, find a "pattern interrupt" that can help you clear your mind. It might be listening to a calming app on your phone, taking a brief walk around the block or diving into a book to send your mind on a mini vacation.

**Pro tip:** In moments of immediate stress (e.g., road rage, getting scolded on the job, fighting with a spouse), remember to take a pause before reacting.

## 2. Keep a Sense of Humor

Sometimes, laughter really is the best medicine. While laughing can work wonders for your mental health, it's *also* proven to boost your physical health, aiding in muscle relaxation, increasing oxygen intake and decreasing heart rate and blood pressure. Look for the humor in stressful situations and lean into laughter as a strong coping strategy.

## 3. Cultivate an Attitude of Gratitude

"Thank you" is a powerful phrase. Saying (and hearing!) Those two simple words can work wonders for our outlook on life and improve our physical well-being. Studies show that practicing gratitude lowers stress hormones in our body and improves the quality of our sleep—two factors that lead to better feelings and higher functioning throughout the day.

**Pro tip:** Feeling grateful for something or someone? Put it out there in the world! Call, text, post, or journal about what makes you thankful.

## 4. Make time to do things you enjoy

Hobbies and passions are important. Doing things we care about helps us maintain a sense of purpose and connectedness—not to mention activating the parts of our brain that light up when we engage in meaningful activity.

**Pro tip:** Busy as a bee? Schedule time on your calendar to do things that bring you joy. Prove to yourself that you deserve to be a priority by putting a little "me time" on the books!

## 5. Practice Deep-Belly Breathing

Studies show that just three minutes of deep-belly breathing (read: deep breaths that expand and fill your abdomen, not just your chest) can reset our body's natural stress response. Intentional breathing has also been proven to reduce anxiety and depression, lower blood pressure, improve sleep quality and bolster our immune system. Not bad for something our body does on autopilot, right? The important thing is to practice intentional or mindful breathing. Here are some [basic breathing techniques](#) to get you started.

"Breathwork isn't a new phenomenon—it has ancient roots dating back thousands of years," says White-Stewart. Present-day breathwork can be found in yoga, mindfulness activities, and meditation exercises, and it can also be done as a standalone practice. The best part of breathwork is that you can do it anytime, anywhere."



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## 6. Spend Time in Nature

Spring has sprung, which means longer days, fresher air (well ... aside from pollen), and plenty of sunshine to help chase those blues away. Whether you're going on a run, taking a walk through the park, or simply spending time outdoors taking in the wonders of creation, fresh air and natural beauty are tried-and-true cures to help dissipate negative feelings.

## 7. Think Positively

Easier said than done, we know—but when it comes to your health, positive "self-talk" is worth its weight in gold. Believe it or not, negative thoughts actually spark chemical reactions in your body that can multiply your stress (no bueno) and weaken your immune system. Positive thoughts, on the other hand, release stress-fighting chemicals that help your body ward off sickness. Pretty amazing, no?

**Pro tip:** Limit your exposure to negative environments and individuals as best you can, and try to avoid catastrophic thinking, focusing instead on those things in your control.

## 8. Lean into Healthy Connections

Positive relationships can serve as stress buffers and remind us that we are not alone. When times are tough, or you're feeling overwhelmed, it's important to reach out to close friends or family members to let them know what you're going through. Odds are, they can offer a fresh perspective—plus practical support and assistance, as applicable—to help you navigate those things that are bringing you down. You can also talk to someone with the [Living Well Network](#) for support, encouragement, and guidance regarding community-based resources to help you navigate your next steps.

## 9. Ink What You Think

Are you looking for an outlet for those stressful thoughts and feelings? Try your hand (literally) at journaling, which is a proven practice for processing thoughts, releasing emotions and setting goals to aid in self-improvement. If keeping a physical journal seems daunting (or dated), type things out in your own form of digital diary. You can also write letters to yourself and others as a processing exercise, whether you choose to send those letters or not.

**Pro tip:** Consider writing down the causes of your stress throughout the day to help you identify key triggers and develop a plan for addressing them.

## 10. Launch the Healthier 901 Stress Management Program

Complete with 30 days of challenges (read: simple actions to help you cope) to aid in identifying and overcoming your stressors; the Healthier 901 [stress management program](#) is completely free, accessible online or through the Healthier 901 app after you join the [Healthier 901](#) movement.

When deciding which path or practice(s) to choose, the most important thing is not to stress about it!

"Try to find something that works for you and be consistent with it," says White-Stewart. "Rarely will something work the first or second time you do it, but if you stick with any of these practices consistently over time, you're all but guaranteed to see a benefit."

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