



Life Can be a Stress Test

A 2004 world-wide study demonstrated that emotions and stress were the third leading risk factor for heart disease—right after smoking and high cholesterol. Men and women of all ages and from 52 countries were more likely to have a heart attack if they were depressed, anxious, cynical, hostile, or under high stress. We don't know everything about how your mood affects your heart, but there is good evidence that it does. Heart-mind techniques have been shown to lower heart rate and blood pressure, increase the oxygen in the blood, improve circulation, and reduce anxiety and hostility. Try these out for yourself. You might just find they not only improve your mood, they improve your health, too!

Slow, Deep Breathing

Breathing is closely tied to your emotional state. Ever notice that when you are angry or upset you breathe faster and less deep? Simply slowing your breathing down can calm you down. You can do this practice anywhere and anytime.

1 Either lying down or sitting quietly, place your hands on your stomach.

2 Take a deep breath in through your nose; your stomach should expand or rise. Count to 10 while breathing in.

3 Pause.

4 Breathe out through your mouth – you may want to make a blowing sound as you breathe out.

5 The breathing out should be about half as long as the breathing in. Count to 5 while breathing out.

6 Each time you breath out, try to release feelings of tension and stress.

7 You may wish to picture breathing in energy, hope and peace and breathing out what is old, tired, and negative.

8 Deep breathing can be practiced throughout your day—at a stop light, when on the phone and you're placed "on hold", waiting in line, or when you get into bed at night.



Life Can be a Stress Test

Mindfulness Meditation

The goal of mindfulness is to be aware of what is happening right now, to focus the mind on the present moment—not the future, nor the past. During this practice you focus on one thing—a word or phrase, the breath, body sensations or sounds.

1 Get in a comfortable position either sitting or lying down. If sitting, try to have your back straight while letting your shoulders drop or relax.

2 Close your eyes softly.

3 Try to follow your breath—breathing in and out—without changing how you breathe.

4 Follow the air coming in then follow the air going out. You might focus on one spot like the tip of your nose, as the air passes by or you can pay attention to your belly rising and falling with each breath. Imagine you are riding the waves of your breathing—in and out, in and out.

5 When you notice your mind has wandered off the breath, just bring your attention back and start over again. Try not to get upset with yourself for getting “off track.” This is natural. The goal of this practice is to notice when your mind has wandered and to gently bring it back to the object of focus.

6 If you have chosen a word or phrase for your focus, silently repeat the word or phrase. Notice when your mind has wandered off and start over, silently repeating the word or phrase.

7 Start out with 10 or 15 minutes of practice like this each day. Over time you may wish to stretch out the time to 20, 30, even 40 minutes.



Life Can be a Stress Test

Guided Imagery

Daydreaming is an example of how our mind or imagination creates mental pictures. Guided imagery allows you to create a safe, relaxing place where information can be shared between your body and mind. The idea behind guided imagery is that when you imagine you are doing something, you activate the same areas of your brain as when you actually do them. This practice can be used to relax—by going to a special place where you feel safe and calm, or it can be used to create healing images—for example a healthy heart. The example below guides you to a special place for relaxation.

1 Allow yourself to sit back and relax. Loosen any tight clothing. Take off your glasses and gently close your eyes.

2 Allow your attention to move to your breathing. Let your breathing become even and comfortable.

3 Now, think about a special place. It can be a real place, a place you may actually have been; a beautiful spot in the woods or at the beach or a comforting place in your own home. Your special place may be an imaginary place—indoors or outdoors—it doesn't matter. If more than one place comes to mind, allow yourself to stay with one of them.

4 The only thing that matters is that you are in a place where you are completely comfortable and safe. Appreciate this scene with all of your senses. Smell the smells, feel the air as it caresses your skin, experience the ground securely under you, and touch and feel the whole environment that you are in.

5 Notice what you are wearing. Notice what you have on your feet, what time of year it is, the time of day, how old you are. Notice whether you are alone or with another person or people. Notice the color that surrounds you. What is the temperature? Warm? Cold? Notice the things about the place that make it safe and comfortable.

6 Look around you. Is there anything else that would make this place safer for you? Perhaps you need to remove something from the place. Or, do you need to bring something in? Notice how your body feels in the place. Take some time to enjoy this feeling of safety in your special place.

7 Thank yourself for taking this time for yourself. You may wish to promise yourself you will visit this place again when you need to.

8 When you are ready, at your own pace, let your breathing deepen. Gradually let the awareness of your body against the chair return. Bring yourself back slowly and comfortably. When you are ready, gently open your eyes with a smile on your face.



Life Can be a Stress Test

Yoga

Yoga is a series of gentle stretching and strengthening exercises or postures that can improve strength, balance, flexibility and awareness. If you do it slowly, yoga can be a form of meditation and an excellent way to help manage stress as well as exercise the body.

Tai Chi

Tai chi (pronounced “tie chee”) is similar to yoga in that it’s slow, gentle movements are like a meditation in motion. Besides helping to manage stress, tai chi may help to increase fitness, strength, balance and flexibility. Tai chi is low impact. It doesn’t put too much stress on the muscles and joints so it is a safe exercise for people of all ages and levels of fitness. Some studies have shown fewer symptoms of heart failure and a lower risk of falls in older adults who practice tai chi regularly.

Exercise

Physical activity and exercise improves your emotional as well as your physical fitness. Getting outside for a walk or bike ride can take you away from a stressful situation and help you to get rid of nervous energy. Being active helps you relax and sleep better. When you get a good night’s sleep you are better able to manage stress.



Life Can be a Stress Test

Manage Your Time – Just Say No!

We all have just 24 hours a day. Learning to manage time better may help you get done what you need to get done, and feel less stressed.

These are some things you can try, in order to better use the time you have:

- Decide what is the most important thing to do that day and do that first.
- Avoid over-commitment. Don't schedule too much in a day. Say no!
- Use a calendar or planner and check it before you agree to do something.
- Limit time wasters—such as surfing the internet.
- Experts recommend setting aside a certain time each day to check and return email and phone calls rather than constant interruptions incoming information.
- Get organized. If your physical surroundings are well organized, you won't be faced with the stress of misplaced objects and clutter. Make it a habit to regularly clean out and sort through the messes of paperwork and clutter that build up over time.

Check off the things you will do to lower your stress

- Exercise
- Practice deep breathing
- Get organized
- Learn to meditate
- Just say no
- Keep my calendar up to date
- Limit time wasters