

8 Ways to Keep Stress in Check

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Yes, you know it's important to keep stress in check. And you know the basics: Eat well, exercise, make time for [self-care](#), get enough sleep. But that's all easier said than done when you barely have the time and energy to brush your teeth.

Sometimes, the only option is to forge ahead. But just because you're under intense pressure to perform doesn't mean you can totally ignore your mental health.

Behavioral health therapist and mind-body coach [Jane Pernotto Ehrman, MEd](#), offers tools to keep stress in check while you power through.

Stress-relief tools for tough times

Stress is a normal response to tough times. Unfortunately, stress primes our body for negativity, says Ehrman.

"When we're in extreme stress, we go into our heads and start to catastrophize," she says. "Our minds can't tell the difference between what's happening now, what we're reliving from the past or what bad things we're anticipating."

When everything seems terrible, it can be hard to see a way out. Ehrman offers these eight tips to help you through.

1. Take a breath

"Paying attention to your breath is the first and most powerful thing you can do to turn down stress," she says.

Several times a day, pause to take some slow, deep breaths — in through the nose and out through the mouth. "Focused breathing takes you out of your head and begins to calm your body's response to stress," she says.

2. Relinquish control

"Start asking yourself: Where do I have control in this situation, and what's outside my power?" Ehrman suggests. There's nothing productive about worrying what your coworkers are doing, or whether a family member might get sick.

"Give your focus and energy to the things you can control, and try to let the rest go," she says.

3. Worry with purpose

Sometimes there's good reason to be concerned. But dwelling on that worry isn't doing you any good unless it points you toward a plan.

Instead of stressing about whether you might be laid off, channel that energy into updating your resume, talking to friends who might have job leads or coming up with a Plan B. "Use the worry to come to a solution, instead of just spinning around in the stress," Ehrman says.

4. Schedule tantrum time

"If you have a stressful situation that's out of your control, you might want to rant and rave. Give yourself 10 minutes," Ehrman says. Use that time to get mad, wallow in your anger or vent to a family member. Then be done. "When your mind goes back there, remind yourself that you're done with that for today," she adds.

5. Put your imagination on a short leash

When you're in a pressure cooker situation, it's easy to imagine the worst. But often we end up stressing about stuff that hasn't even happened yet — and might not happen at all.

"Just like you wouldn't let a new puppy run everywhere, you don't have to let your imagination run wild. Put in on a leash," she says. "We can't control the thoughts that pop into our heads, but we can decide whether we choose to entertain those thoughts."

6. Turn to mind-body tools

Practices like mindfulness [meditation](#) and guided imagery can lower blood pressure and stress hormones and help you stay calm. Feels like one more thing on your to-do list? It doesn't have to take up a lot of time. Begin with just five minutes a day (there are tons of apps to get you started) and work your way up to 15 or 20 minutes, Ehrman suggests. "It takes practice, but after a while it becomes second nature."

7. Focus on the good

Every night before bed, write down three good things that happened that day, Ehrman suggests. Whether big (you finished a tricky project) or small (you're wearing your most comfy PJs), the activity helps spark positive emotions. Also note for yourself the good feeling or feelings that those things sparked, such as joy, happiness, love or appreciation.

"It's important to become aware of the simple goodness in our days," she says. "Studies show that doing this exercise improves sleep and moods. Over time, it can actually reduce symptoms of [depression](#)."

8. Make space for calm

Some days, you aren't able to get out for a walk or even stop for a proper lunch. But you can spare a couple of minutes, a few times a day, to calm your body and brain. You might do some deep breathing or a guided meditation. "It can be as simple as looking out a window for two minutes, watching the birds and the rustling leaves," Ehrman says.

"It doesn't have to be a long break, but it's so important to step away mentally and physically for a few minutes to unplug and relax."

Sadly, there is no trick to make your stress magically disappear. (If there were, we'd be shouting it from the rooftops.) But periods of intense stress don't last forever. Carving out a few minutes a day to relax and refocus will help carry you through to the other side.