

How To Deal With Stress

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No one is exempt from having stress in their life. Everyone is affected some time by tension and stress - it's part of life. Philippa Jones explores the ways to deal positively with stress.

For many people, coping with stress is a challenge. The key to handling it is getting it to work for you, and not against you.

Without some stress, life would be dull and unexciting. As Auckland psychologist Katherine Findlay says, "If you had no stress at all you'd be so laid back you wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning."

There are times in your life, though, when taking time out or getting away from it all is the healthy option and, as Katharine says, when stress turns into DIStress you need to do something about it.

Here are some suggestions for simple ways to take a mental break.

How to relax when you're stressed:

Breathing

Twenty thousand times a day you take a breath. For such a practised activity you would think we would have it sussed. But just because we do it all the time doesn't mean we're good at it. Do you breathe well?

Try this: lie flat on your back, relax and draw air into your belly first, then into the part of your chest where the middle section of ribs are located so that you feel your chest gently pressing against your armpits, then the upper part of your lungs so that you feel the collar bone, or clavicle, rising slightly.

Breathe slowly out, concentrating on the sensation of the abdomen dropping, then the ribs dropping and squeezing inwards, then the clavicle. This is yogic breathing. Breathing techniques like this can reduce stress, improve concentration and boost energy.

Walking

Fresh air and a change of scene is a great way to rejuvenate yourself. Motion is soothing and takes your mind off problems. Walking combines them all gives you all round benefits.

Try this: warm up, get the blood moving, and then quicken the pace.

Concentrate on stepping with the heel first, then the toe. This protects your shins. For a good powerwalking style pump your arms with the elbows bent at 90 degrees. Try not to lose momentum going uphill. Lean into it. If the hill's too tough and slows you down too much, plan your route to take in a less challenging gradient. Going downhill lean back slightly. Be kind to your knees, keep the bend in them slightly to avoid jarring the joints.

Visualisation

Visualisation is a very simple concept. You already do it: you daydream, you explore your memories, you talk to yourself mentally. By using this natural inner dialogue and combining it with your creative imaginative, you can give yourself constructive and positive messages that overcome worry and negative thinking.

Try this: lie down and close your eyes gently. Scan your body looking for tension, and try to relax all your muscles as best as you can. Take a deep breath in and out. Visualise a place where you can be safe and relaxed.

Here's an example from *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* which the Mental Health Foundation recommends: involve all your senses - sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Imagine a green forest with the trees, blue sky, white clouds, and pine needles underfoot.

Add the sounds: wind in the trees, water running, birdcalls and so on.

Include the feel of the ground under your shoes, the smell of pine, and the taste of a grass stem or mountain spring water.

When your place is as real as you can make it repeat short positive statements that affirm your ability to relax. For example: "tension is flowing out of my body" or "I am totally relaxed". These are affirmations and are a well recognised and powerful way to beneficially refocus your mind on the positive.

Relaxation tapes

Relaxation audiotapes have been available for some time very cheaply from the range of resource material from the Mental Health Foundation and recently they have become available on CD. The recording introduces two scientifically researched relaxation methods, one to relax your mind, the other your body.

I tried this: I was able to follow through the exercise where I was sitting writing, at my computer. All it required was that I have my feet square on the ground and my hands cupped in my lap.

It took 20 minutes to perform the exercise fully. All it involved was to simply breathe normally and on every out breath to say silently the word "one".

As the commentary says, it sounds easy but does require some effort of concentration. The recording takes you through a couple of timed practice sessions first, and gradually the distracting thoughts do evaporate. When the session was over I did indeed feel refreshed.

Clearing the mind of clutter with exercises like this is beneficial if done on a daily basis. Because it's so simple and only requires you to be seated, it could easily be incorporated into your day.

The CDs cost \$10 plus postage and can be ordered either online at: resource@mentalhealth.org.nz or by contacting the Resource and Information Centre, PO Box 10051, Dominion Rd, Auckland.

To find out more information on mental health check out the Mental Health Foundation's website: mentalhealth.org.nz