

12 Ways to Reduce Stress with Music

Fill Your Life with Music that Reduces Daily Stress



When it becomes hard to find your way out of the downward spiral caused by overwhelming stress and anxiety, try turning to music.

Music has the ability to quickly shift our mood, affecting our subconscious mind where pesky negative thoughts feed on our fears and fuel the fires of stress.

Listening to music is a relatively inexpensive, quick-acting solution that's almost always available, and it could just save your life.

Here are 12 ways you can use music in your daily routine to help manage stress and create more joy in your life.

1. Starting Out Right – Rise with Music

Imagine if the sun bolted into the sky each morning like the sudden switching on of a floodlight, or if every day started with a sonic boom. That's what it may feel like when you wake up to a clock radio blaring the morning news, a soda commercial, or just buzzing a harsh alarm.

Consider being a little kinder to yourself. Try waking to a familiar piece of music that eases you into the day like a beautiful sunrise, and starts you out in a good mood. This is easy to program if you have a smart phone that allows you to assign a song as your alarm.

Once you are up and moving, fill your room with beautiful and inspiring music. Create a playlist or CD of music that relaxes and inspires you. A positive morning music ritual is a sure way to start your day off in a better mood and keep your busy mind from dragging you back into the worries of yesterday, today, or tomorrow.

2. Daily Medicine – Sing with Music

If you want to take the positive effects of listening to music to another level, try singing. Singing is one of the best ways to shift the vibrations of our thoughts and the very cells of our body, helping slow and regulate breathing and promote relaxation. Sing in the shower; sing in the car; hum a lullaby before you go to sleep. You can sing “a capella,” or to a recording. Don’t worry if you think you are a “good” singer or not; this is not about performing or putting yourself in another stressful situation. Just enjoy the feeling of melody moving through you.

If you’re going to sing, pick songs you know will put you in a better mood, inspire you, or help you relax. Pay attention to how different you feel after a few minutes of singing aloud, and make note of the songs that make you feel best so you can return to them when you need them most.

3. Instrumental Moments – Play with Music

Whether you are a well-versed musician or just beginning to learn how to play an instrument, spend a few minutes in the morning playing music. It can be simple scales or rudimentary exercises, a favorite song, or something improvisational. Playing music is like a mega-vitamin, engaging more areas of the human brain than any other activity. Music’s ability to help us shift thought patterns and moods, and even improve our physical well-being, is quite remarkable.

It is important, however, that you approach the exercise with a positive attitude and avoid taking on something too challenging that might lead to frustration or negative self-judgment about your skill level. There is a reason they call it “playing” music and not “working” music. The point is to connect to your instrument in a positive, relaxed, and joyful way, and then let the vibration of the music do its magic. The more you can be present and truly enjoy the experience, the more it will help keep the stress at bay.

4. Mantra – Reprogram with Music

Unfortunately, our brain is built with a negativity bias. Due to pre-historic man’s primary need for survival and self-preservation, our brain has more neurons dedicated to respond to and process negative thoughts and stimuli than positive ones. We tend to hold onto those negative impressions longer and repeat them more often, either consciously or subconsciously, reinforcing those anxiety and fear producing vibrations. This is one of the reasons it can be difficult to pull ourselves out of that downward spiral when we feel overwhelmed with stress and anxiety.

Although it takes more effort to trigger the part of our brain that reassures us it is okay to relax, music can help us do so. One of the keys to breaking repeating negative thought patterns that fuel stress is to create new and stronger positive ones. This is the reason for repeating positive affirmations, focusing on more self-assuring thoughts, or chanting mantra—to reprogram our brain, all the way down into our subconscious.

Adding music or melody to those positive thoughts engages more areas of the brain and can

help us, over time, reprogram our general demeanor or basic outlook, making us less susceptible to stress triggers. A mantra can be a couple of syllables or an entire phrase or verse. It can come from a sacred prayer, a familiar hymn, a tune you create, or a short refrain from your favorite song—something that encapsulates the feeling you want to create. The repetition of the mantra, especially if set to music, can be a great technique to use as a daily practice, or one to turn to whenever you start to feel stressed or overwhelmed. Accompanied by your clear intention and a little faith, you will be able to transform yourself to a more centered, relaxed, and joyful state. The more emotion and the greater the number of repetitions you do, as well as the more frequently you do the practice, the stronger the effect will be.

5. Emotion in Motion – Move with Music

If you have a daily exercise routine, try taking music along with you. A morning walk or run, or even yoga or stretching, can become easier and more enjoyable if you have music as your personal coach and companion. Again, it is important for you to choose music that works for you and that you know will have the effect you are trying to achieve. This may take a little trial and error to sort out at first, so be sure to take note of the musical selections that help you feel inspired and promote a sense of personal wellbeing.

Movement—whether walking, stretching, yoga, running, playing sports, or other kinds of workout—can also be one of the best ways to eliminate built-up tension and lactic acid that gets trapped in our bodies and creates stress and disease. Adding music can enhance the effect.

For a great daily routine to manage stress, try what I like to call the 3Ms: Music, Movement, and Meditation. A good blend of 10 – 20 minutes of each on a daily basis will transform your life. If you don't know how to meditate, try a different meditative practice like journaling, stretching, or reading something that inspires you.

6. Traffic Jammin' – Commute with Music

I don't know about you, but one of the quickest ways I become stressed is by sitting in gridlock traffic and worrying that I might be late for an important appointment. Unfortunately, getting stressed or worrying about it doesn't make the time go slower nor the traffic move faster. Because a traffic jam is one situation where it is difficult to change the external circumstances, we must resort to changing our own internal state to avoid and relieve stress. You can always use the commute time to catch up on the news and your phone calls, but the secluded environment of a car is the ideal place to practice shifting your mood through music.

Keep a collection of your music in your car that helps you de-stress, release tension, or lift your spirits. Singing along will take the effect to another level. If you are sharing the ride, encourage the others to join you as you explore musical ways to improve the quality of your life and your relationship with others and the world around you. You might do this by simply agreeing on some relaxing background music to play behind your morning dialog, sharing

your favorite new music with one another, or finding something you all enjoy and singing along together. If you have a regular commute, it can be a great time to listen to a variety of music to explore what works best for you and determine what you will want to add to your driving playlist.

7. On the Job – Work with Music

Work environments are often quite stressful. This can be especially true when there are several different personalities in the same space, or when overwhelming work pressures are compounded by office politics or an individual's personal issues.

The right background music can help everyone work through routine tasks in a better mood, and listening to inspiring music on breaks can help us recharge our own systems. Relaxing background music can also help mask potentially annoying distractions in noisier work environments.

Just like in a family household, however, different people at work may have quite different musical likes and dislikes. Music that is relaxing or inspiring for one person may be annoying to another. Sharing musical preferences and introducing our musical discoveries to co-workers can sometimes be a good way to build stronger interpersonal relationships and understanding, which in turn helps diminish stress created through prejudice or lack of communication and acceptance. Discovering common musical interests within shared environments helps build a more connected and nurturing community at the office.

8. A Sonic Diet – Meet with Music

When choosing locations to eat, hold business meetings, or visit with friends, be conscious of the sound environment, including the noise level and type of music that is played. Loud noisy environments, as much as we try to ignore them, can contribute to unconscious stress and tension build-up without us even knowing it.

Just as eating junk food increases stress and toxicity in our system, an unconscious or unhealthy sonic diet can do the same. Quieter environments, with more soothing and relaxing music, will help you relax more naturally.

9. Active Listening – Tune In with Music

There is more than one way to listen to music. We can let it play in the background while we give our attention to something or someone else, or we can become actively involved in the listening process. "Active Listening" engages more areas of the human brain and resonates more deeply in the cells of our bodies. This makes it a more powerful process for transforming our thoughts and emotions. Active Listening, however, requires you to give your full and undivided attention to the sonic experience.

Start by eliminating any distractions and choosing a slower piece of music with which you resonate deeply. Then close your eyes, slow down your breathing, and tune into something

inside the music with which you can follow along—like the melody or a particular instrument.

Taking a few minutes out from the computer, the phone, internal mind chatter, and the worries and stress of work and life, to stop and actively listen to a piece of music, can serve as a great tune up—to de-stress, recharge, or simply enjoy a musical journey through the fields of your imagination.

10. Happy Hour – Recline with Music

Instead of rushing to catch the evening news, jumping on the Internet, or flipping through the TV channels to unwind when you finally arrive home, try making music part of your end-of-day unwinding ritual. Put all the connections to and from the outside world on pause and replace it with a few of your favourite tunes. This time however, instead of practicing Active Listening, let the music do the work. If there is too much distraction in your home, try lying down with some headphones and an eye pillow. Allow the sound to move through you and simply let go—of your thoughts, of your day, of your stress. Ease your transition from the challenging world outside, and slip into the healing world of sound.

If you are a parent and find the kids to be a big contributor to your stress, teach them to join you. You can share the same musical selections together or have each family member listen to their own music on headphones during the designated time. Music is a great resource to help parents manage the sometimes-overwhelming energy of their children.

11. Getting In Sync – Unite with Music

Playing music with others in a caring and supportive environment can be a great way to channel pepped up energy from frustration or stress. Join a drum circle or local choir or band, or play music with friends or family members at home. Remember to “play.” The key to playing music for fun and relaxation is to be sure all the participants agree that the main purpose is for everyone to enjoy themselves and the music making process, so there is no competition or fear of being judged. There is a kind of shorthand communication and physiologically entrainment that can take place when people play music or sing together. With the right balance, performing in a group can be a great outlet to alleviate stress and break the patterns of the day.

12. Daily Groove – Dance with Music

Dancing, and especially dancing to music, is an incredible way to reduce stress and land you in a better mood. You receive all the benefits of physical exercise and Active Listening while having fun. Simply add a few cool moves to your five-minute tune up, dance around your home or office alone, or join your partner or group of friends dancing out on the down. Taking a dance class can be a great way to raise your spirits, release your stress, improve your health, and help you feel more confident and relaxed when you decide to step out.

If you are someone who worries that dancing is not a productive way to spend your time, you can relax about that, too. According to a report in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, dancing can even make you smarter. The author of the study claims that one of the best things we can do to improve our cognitive functions is to dance in rhythm with music.

Your Personal Playlist – Choosing the Right Music

I am often asked: What music should I listen to if I want to relax, be happier, and feel more in balance? The answer can vary widely for different individuals. Although music has been scientifically proven to be beneficial on a number of levels, musical preferences are very subjective. One thing that is for sure, however, is that we want to be conscientious about the music we choose to listen to and the musical and sonic input that we expose ourselves to.

Music is a powerful alchemy that affects our perceptions, emotions, and physical well-being, whether we are paying attention or not. As much as music can relax us, the wrong music can agitate us and add to our stress. Typically slower, more pattern-oriented music can help regulate and relax our systems, and more up-tempo music can get us up-and-going. Happier songs can often lighten the mood quickly, and sometimes bring back fond memories.

Even sad songs can sometimes help us process heavy emotions we need to move through before we can shift to a new and happier place. Other times, a session of hard rock music can help us release our anger before we can calm down enough to relax.

Lyrics also affect us. Like mantras, these words and ideas are implanted into our subconscious through the music, reinforcing thought patterns that can affect our mood or outlook. I usually recommend omitting songs that have harsh or condescending lyrics, or that don't emotionally resonate with you on a deep level.

Happiness = *Life with Music*

Try one or two of the above suggestions. The key to determining what works best for you is to pay attention to how you feel—before, during, and after listening, singing, or playing. Note the state of your mood when you start versus after you are done. Ultimately, it will be most effective to create your own playlists or choose a couple CDs of music you have discovered to be most effective at helping to improve your mood and alleviate your stress. The one thing I can guarantee you is that life feels better with music.