

# Stress Relief in the Moment

## Using Your Senses to Quickly Change Your Response to Stress



Ever wish a stress superhero could save you from traffic jams, chaotic meetings, or a toddler's tantrums? Well, you can be your own stress-busting superhero. Everybody has the power to reduce the impact of stress as it's happening in the moment. With practice, you can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds. Learning quick stress relief won't happen overnight. Like any skill, it takes time, self-exploration and above all, practice. But think of it as an education with a huge payoff.

### Learn to recognize stress

Recognizing stress is the first step in lessening its impact. Many of us spend so much time in a stressed state, we have forgotten what it feels like to be fully relaxed and alert. Being stressed out feels normal.

What does it feel like to be calm and stress-free? You can see that "just right" inner balance in the smile of a happy baby—a face so full of joy it reminds adults of the balanced emotional state that most of us have misplaced. In adulthood, being balanced means maintaining a calm state of energy, alertness, and focus. Calmness is more than just feeling relaxed; being alert is an equally important aspect of finding the balance needed to withstand stress.

**If you don't feel calm, alert, productive, and focused most of the time in your daily life, then too much stress may be a problem for you. Tips for recognizing when you're stressed**

Hush the voice that's telling you, 'Oh, I'm fine.'" Notice how you're breathing has changed. Are your muscles tense? Awareness of your physical response to stress will help regulate the tension when it occurs.

When you're tired, your eyes feel heavy and you might rest your head on your hand. When you're happy, you laugh easily. And when you are stressed, your body lets you know that too. Try to get in the habit of paying attention to your body's clues.

- **Observe your muscles and insides.** Are your muscles tight/sore? Is your stomach tight or sore? Are your hands clenched?
- **Observe your breath.** Is your breath shallow? Place one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Watch your hands rise and fall with each breath. Notice when you breathe fully or when you "forget" to breathe.

### Identify your body's stress response

Internally, we all respond to stress the same: blood pressure rises, the heart pumps faster, and muscles constrict. When stressed, our bodies work hard and drain our immune system. Externally, however, people tend to respond to stress in three different ways: some become angry and agitated, others space out or withdraw, and still others freeze up.

The best way to quickly relieve stress may relate to your specific stress response.

### How do you act when stressed?

When it comes to managing and reducing stress quickly in the middle of a heated situation, it's important to be familiar with your specific stress response.

- **Overexcited stress response** – If you tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that quieten you down.
- **Under excited stress response** – If you tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system.
- **Frozen stress response (both overexcited and under excited)** – If you tend to freeze—speeding up in some ways while slowing down in others—your challenge is to identify stress relief activities that provide both safety and stimulation to help you “reboot” your system.

### The basics of quick stress relief

There are countless techniques for preventing stress. [Yoga](#) and [mindfulness meditation](#) work wonders for improving coping skills. But who can take a moment to chant or meditate during a job interview or a disagreement with your spouse? For these situations, you need something more immediate and accessible. That's when quick stress relief comes to the rescue.

The speediest way to stamp out stress is by engaging one or more of your senses—your sense of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, or movement—to rapidly calm and energize yourself.

The key to practicing quick stress relief is learning what kind of sensory input helps your particular nervous system find calm and focus quickly. Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so an awareness of your preferences is essential for reducing stress.

## Talking to someone who listens: a rapid stress reducer

Want to know a quick social stress reliever? Talk to someone! It's true, talking about your stress with a calm and balanced listener will make you feel better instantly. Although it's not always realistic to have a pal close by to lean on, building and maintaining a friendship network is ultimately good for your mental health. Between quick stress relief techniques and good listeners, you'll have all your bases covered.

## Bring your senses to the rescue

Here comes the fun part. Grownups can take a tip from school lessons by revisiting the senses and learning how they can help us prevent stress overload. Use the following exercises to identify the sensory experiences that work quickly and effectively to reduce stress for you.

As you experiment, be as precise as possible. What is the most perfect image, the specific kind of sound, or type of movement that affects you the most? For example, if you're a music lover, listen to many different artists and types of music until you find the song that instantly lifts and relaxes you.

The examples listed below are intended to be a jumping-off point. It's up to you to hone in on them and come up with additional things to try.

## Sights



If you're a visual person, try to manage and relieve stress by surrounding yourself with soothing and uplifting images. You can also try closing your eyes and imagining the soothing images. Here are a few visually-based activities that may work as quick stress relievers:

- Look at a cherished photo or a favourite memento.
- Bring the outside indoors; buy a plant or some flowers to enliven your space.
- Enjoy the beauty of nature—a garden, the beach, a park, or your own garden.
- Surround yourself with colours that lift your spirits.
- Close your eyes and picture a situation or place that feels peaceful and rejuvenating.

## Sound



Are you sensitive to sounds and noises? Are you a music lover? If so, stress-relieving exercises that focus on your auditory sense may work particularly well. Experiment with the following sounds, noting how quickly your stress levels drop as you listen:

- Sing or hum a favourite tune. Listen to uplifting music.
- Tune in to the soundtrack of nature—crashing waves, the wind rustling the trees, birds singing.
- Buy a small fountain, so you can enjoy the soothing sound of running water in your home or office.
- Hang wind chimes near an open window.

## Smell & Scents



If you tend to zone out or freeze when stressed, surround yourself with smells that are energizing and invigorating. If you tend to become overly agitated under stress, look for scents that are comforting and calming.

- Light a scented candle or burn some incense.
- Lie down in sheets scented with lavender.
- Smell the roses—or another type of flower.
- Enjoy the clean, fresh air in the great outdoors.
- Spritz on your favourite perfume or cologne.

## Touch



Experiment with your sense of touch, playing with different tactile sensations. Focus on things you can feel that are relaxing and renewing. Use the following suggestions as a jumping-off point:

- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket.
- Pet a dog or cat.
- Hold a comforting object (a stuffed animal, a favourite memento).

- Soak in a hot bath.
- Give yourself a hand or neck massage.
- Wear clothing that feels soft against your skin.

## Taste



Slowly savouring a favourite treat can be very relaxing, but mindless eating will only add to your stress and your waistline. The key is to indulge your sense of taste mindfully and in moderation. Eat slowly, focusing on the feel of the food in your mouth and the taste on your tongue:

- Chew a piece of sugarless gum.
- Indulge in a small piece of dark chocolate.
- Sip a steaming cup of coffee or tea or a refreshing cold drink.
- Eat a perfectly ripe piece of fruit.
- Enjoy a healthy, crunchy snack (celery, carrots, or trail mix).

## Movement



If you tend to shut down when you're under stress, stress-relieving activities that get you moving may be particularly helpful. Anything that engages the muscles or gets you up and active can work. Here are a few suggestions:

- Run in place or jump up and down.
- Dance around.
- Stretch or shrug your shoulders a few times.
- Go for a short walk.
- Squeeze a rubbery stress ball.

## The power of imagination

Sensory-rich memories can also quickly reduce stress. After drawing upon your sensory toolbox becomes habit, try simply *imagining* vivid sensations when stress strikes. Believe it or not, the sheer memory of your baby's face will have the same calming or energizing effects on your brain as seeing her photo. So if you can recall a strong sensation, you'll never be without access to quick stress relief tools.

## Tips for finding sensory inspiration

Inspiration is everywhere, from sights you see on your way to work to smells and objects around your home. Explore a variety of sensations so that no matter where you are you'll always have something you can do to relax yourself. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **Memories.** Think back to what you did as a child to calm down. If you had a blanket or stuffed toy, you might benefit from tactile stimulation. Try tying a textured scarf around your neck before an appointment or keeping a piece of soft suede in your pocket.
- **Watch others.** Observing how others deal with stress can give you valuable insight. Baseball players often pop gum in their mouth before going up to bat. Singers often chat up the crowd before performing. Ask around about what people you know do to stay focused under pressure—it could work for you too.
- **Parents.** Think back to what your parents did to blow off steam. Did your mother feel more relaxed after a long walk? Did your father do garden work after a hard day? Try some of the things they did to unwind; they might work for you too.

## Take a break from technology

Taking a short hiatus from the television, computer, tablet, and mobile phone will give you insight on what your senses respond to best. Here are some "unplugging" tips:

- Try tuning into relaxing music instead of talk radio during your commute. Or try riding in silence for 10 minutes.
- Stuck in a long line at the supermarket? Instead of talking on your mobile phone, take a moment to people watch. Pay attention to what you hear and see.
- Instead of checking e-mail while waiting for a meeting to begin, take a few deep breaths, look out the window, or sip some aromatic tea.
- While waiting for an appointment, resist the urge to text and give yourself a hand massage instead.

## Make quick stress relief a habit

Let's get real. It's not easy to remember to use our senses in the middle of a mini—or not so mini—crisis. At first, it will feel easier to just give into pressure and tense up. The truth is, quick stress relief takes practice, practice, and more practice. But with time, calling upon your senses will become second nature. Here's how to make it habit:

Learning to use your senses to quickly manage stress is a little like learning to drive or to play golf. You don't master the skill in one lesson; you have to practice until it becomes second nature. Once you have a variety of sensory tools you can depend on, you'll be able to handle even the toughest of situations.

- **Start small.** Instead of testing your quick stress relief tools on a source of major stress, start with a predictable low-level source of stress, like cooking dinner at the end of the day or sitting down to balance your accounts.
- **Identify and target.** Think of just one low-level stressor that you know will occur several times a week, such as commuting. Vow to target that particular stressor with quick stress relief every time. After a few weeks, target a second stressor. After a few weeks more, target a third stressor and so on.

- **Test-drive sensory input.** Experiment with as much sensory input as possible. If you are practicing quick stress relief on your commute to work, bring a scented handkerchief with you one day, try music another day, and try a movement the next day.
- **Make “have fun” your motto.** If something doesn’t work, don’t force it. Move on until you find your best fit.
- **Talk about it.** Verbalizing your quick stress relief work will help integrate it into your life. It’s bound to start a fascinating conversation—everyone relates to the topic of stress.

### Quick acting stress-busting tips

The best part of quick stress relief is the awareness that you have control over your surroundings. Even if you share a work area, you can personalize your space to serve as a “stress prevention zone” or to put quick stress relief within arm's reach. We all have our stress hotspots. Where are yours?

### Quick stress relief at home

- **Entertaining.** Prevent pre-party jitters by playing lively music. Light candles. The flicker and scent will stimulate your senses. Wear clothes that make you feel relaxed and confident instead of stiff and uncomfortable.
- **Kitchen.** Cool the kitchen commotion by breathing in the scent of every ingredient you use—even if you’re just opening cans. Delight in the delicate texture of an eggshell. Appreciate the weight of an onion.
- **Children and relationships.** Prevent losing your cool during a spousal spat by breathing and squeezing the tips of your thumb and forefinger together. When your toddler has a tantrum, rub lotion into your hands then breathe in the scent.
- **Sleep.** Too stressed to snooze? Try using a white noise machine for background sound or a humidifier with a diffuser for a light scent in the air.
- **Creating a sanctuary.** If clutter is upsetting, spend 10 minutes each day to tidy and organize. Paint the walls with a fresh coat of your favourite calming colour. Display photos and images that make you feel happy. Throw open the curtains and let in natural light whenever possible.

### Quick stress relief at work

- **Meetings.** During stressful sessions, stay connected to your breath. Massage the tips of your fingers. Wiggle your toes. Sip coffee.
- **On the phone.** Inhale something energizing, like lemon, ginger, peppermint or coffee beans. While talking, stand up or pace back and forth to burn off excess energy. Conduct phone business outside when possible.
- **On the computer.** Work standing up. Do knee-bends in 10-minute intervals. Wrap a soft scarf around your neck. Suck on a peppermint.
- **Lunch breaks.** Take a walk around the building or in the car park. Listen to soothing music while eating. Have a quick chat with someone you love.
- **Your workspace.** Place family photos on your desk and display images and mementos that remind you of your life outside the office.