



health / body / food / life / soul

[<< RETURN TO ARTICLE / PRINT](#)

Natural Ways to Fight Stress and Heart Disease

By Maryann Hammers, Special to Lifescrypt
Published September 09, 2011

Stress is everywhere in our lives and can be a factor in several serious health problems. Ever wish there was a button you could push to make it disappear? There is - inside your head. Our experts tell you how with these easy, natural remedies for stress. Plus, are you a stress case? Take our quiz and find out...

Our hearts *hate* stress.

That's because it raises heart rates, cholesterol levels and blood pressure. It can make us fat, particularly around the belly, and that increases the risk for metabolic conditions, like diabetes and heart disease.

Stress also means we're more likely to take up heart-harming habits like smoking cigarettes, drinking too much, skipping workouts or gorging on junk food.

But who *isn't* stressed these days? From rush-hour madness and mounting bills to blood-boiling bosses, stressors are everywhere.

But annoying people and events don't create stress and heart disease. *We* do.

"Stress isn't what happens, but how we respond to what happens," says psychotherapist Steven Alper, former director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine in San Diego.

That's because when our brain senses threat, a primitive part of the nervous system triggers a physiological "fight-or-flight" response, Alper explains.

The evolutionary mechanism was handy for our cavewoman ancestors during a saber-toothed tiger attack. The problem is, thousands of years later, the nervous system still turns on the stress response when you're arguing with your spouse, stuck in traffic or the boss says "boo."

That's where harm is done: The stress response triggers changes such as high blood pressure, palpitations and elevated blood sugars – "all of which put strain on our heart and body and increase cardiovascular risk in the immediate and long term," says internal medicine physician Steve Tan, M.D., director of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Program at the California Health and Longevity Institute.

Still, you don't have to stay trapped in a world of tension. To change your response, try these fun natural remedies for stress. **1. Meditation**

Meditating can lower blood pressure as effectively as medication and better than stress-management training or health-education classes, according to a 2007 study funded by the National Institutes of

Health (NIH).

It also improved the severity of congestive heart failure in 23 African-American men and women with heart disease, the University of Pennsylvania found.

That's because "meditation calms the stress response and boosts our relaxation response," Tan explains.

Try it: New meditators may find it tough to stop their minds from wandering, so focusing on a tangible object may help. Here's how:

1. Choose a quiet, interruption-free spot.
2. Sit comfortably in a chair or cushion on the floor with good posture, hands on your thighs or clasped in your lap.
3. Light a candle and focus on it, watching the flame move, grow, flicker and change colors.
4. When your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the flame.
5. Start with meditation sessions of 5-10 minutes and gradually build to longer periods. Aim for 20 minutes, the Mayo Clinic suggests.

2. Art Therapy

Art therapy may sound like child's play, but it's a powerful ally against stress and heart disease. Creative pursuits – like journal writing, music, dance, painting, sculpting, sketching, collage, even quilt-making – can decrease anxiety, stress and mood disturbances, according to a 2010 review of studies published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

In fact, hospitals often incorporate creativity techniques into their healing programs: Cleveland Clinic offers it to its Heart & Vascular Institute patients. Veterans' hospitals use art therapy to relieve depression and anxiety, especially for post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Art therapy is a wonderful way to empty your mind and reconnect to the present – similar to meditation," says board-certified art therapist Joan Stanford, who leads art "playshops" at the Mendocino Center for Wellbeing in California. "With stress, you feel boxed in, overwhelmed, tightly wound. By 'playing' with materials, words or ideas, you unwind, release pressure and enjoy the process."

Try it: Don't worry, you don't have to be "artsy." Here are Stanford's tips for stirring creative juices:

1. Set the stage for a meditative environment with candles and soothing sounds. Classical music, for example, lowers heart and breathing rates, according to a 2001 Australian study.
2. Breathe slowly, close your eyes and savor the moment.
3. Write for 15 minutes, choosing a specific topic, such as something that worries you, or whatever comes to mind. Need inspiration? Fill a sack with random items, Stanford suggests. Then reach in, pull out an object and write about it for 5 minutes. "Let the object speak to you," she says.
4. Not a word person? Then just doodle on a sheet of unlined paper. "Using one pen, let your hand move around the page in all directions," Stanford says. "Allow overlapping and looping."
5. If you're right-handed, try doodling with your left hand or vice-versa. Or close your eyes.
6. With different-colored markers, pens, chalk, pastels, pencils or watercolors, outline any shapes

suggested by your scribbles. “For example, a circle may resemble a head, balloon or sun,” Stanford says. “Add eyes, strings, rays or whatever the shape seems to ask for.” Rotate the page in different directions to see more options.

7. When the page feels “finished,” give it a title. Or keep an “art journal” with your drawings.

3. Deep breathing

Breath is a powerful indicator of stress levels.

“When we’re stressed, breath shortens and quickens,” says psychotherapist Leslie Davenport, who specializes in stress management at the Institute for Health & Healing at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco.

Deep breaths also calm you – lowering blood pressure, reducing anxiety, slowing heart and respiration rates and easing tension, the Mayo Clinic reports. Deep breathing is “a stress-relief kit we carry within us,” Davenport says.

You can do it anytime, anywhere – your living room, office chair, a park bench – for an immediate relaxing, recharging experience.

Try it: Davenport recommends this deep-breathing technique:

1. Think of two calming words – for example, “relax,” “joy,” “peace,” “ease,” “calm,” “clarity.” Fully inhale and silently say one of the words; then fully exhale and silently say the other word. “Words have power to influence moods,” Davenport explains. “Language is generated by the brain’s left hemisphere, and breathing and images activate the right hemisphere. By using words with breathing, both sides of the brain simultaneously move toward relaxation.”
2. Feel your ribcage and belly expand as you inhale and contract as you exhale. Feel the air traveling through your nostrils, down your throat and into the lungs in an easy, comfortable rhythm.
3. Now focus on how your breathing reflects nature’s rhythms – “the ebb and flow of the tides, waxing and waning of the moon, the turning of the seasons,” Davenport says. “Soothing and beautiful images of nature expand our world beyond our desk, worries, list of to do’s.”
4. Continue for three minutes.

4. Think positively

“The brain has a ‘negativity bias’ – it’s wired to scan for things that can go wrong, which trigger the stress response,” explains Portland, Ore., psychotherapist Don Altman, author of *The Mindfulness Code: Keys to Overcoming Stress, Anxiety, Fear and Unhappiness* (New World Library).

But positive thinking counteracts the effects of stress and heart disease.

In fact, it can cut your risk of heart disease in half, according to a landmark 2001 Johns Hopkins study that followed 600 adults with a family history of heart disease for 5-12 years. Optimistic folks also were half as likely to have a heart attack, chest pain or sudden cardiac death, regardless of age, race or sex.

“Positive thinking counters negative thoughts, helping you calm down,” he says. “Eventually, it changes how you feel and behave, and what you believe.” Still, being positive doesn’t mean pretending everything is great when it isn’t. But by focusing on happy moments even on the darkest days, you’ll learn to better manage adversity, buffer stress and build resiliency against life’s curveballs, according to a 2009 study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Try it: These three exercises may promote a more positive outlook about life and yourself:

Give yourself pep talks: You wouldn't tell a good friend, "You're a big, fat loser." So why say that to yourself? Instead be your own good buddy and talk up your fine skills and characteristics. Altman has these tips:

1. Write down a frequent negative thought. Then write the emotion (such as hopeless, angry, scared) that accompanies it. For example, one of Altman's clients who lost her job at age 50 wrote: *I'm too old to find a new job* and *I don't have computer skills*. Her emotion? Terrified.

2. "Find a positive, alternate view to your negative script," Altman advises. His client wrote: *I know people over 50 who found new jobs. I like learning and can take a computer class*. "Phrase the thought as an 'I' statement to really own the new, more positive view."

3. Rehearse the positive statement before a mirror. "Practice saying it in front of a mirror to help you picture yourself in a new way," Altman says. "Notice your more positive facial expressions and confident posture."

Cultivate a gratitude attitude: Keep a journal of good things and events in your life, advises dermatologist Amy Weschler, M.D., author of *The Mind-Beauty Connection: 9 Days to Less Stress, Gorgeous Skin and a Whole New You* (Free Press). Here's how:

1. Every night, write down three positive, joyous events, experiences or people, no matter how insignificant (for example: a great cup of coffee in the morning, your purring cat nestled on your lap, hearing a good joke). Also make lists of things for which you're grateful.

2. Even on bad days, "try to turn a negative into a positive by reshaping your attitude," Weschler advises. For example, *My boss yelled at me today for a mistake I made* can be recast as *I learned from my mistake, and I am much smarter*. Or: *Tomorrow is a new day, and I'm excited to tackle new challenges*. **Don't judge yourself:** The word "should" expresses disapproval and turns you into a victim. These steps counteract that:

1. Every time the words "should" or "shouldn't" enter your mind, write the thought on a piece of paper. For example: *I shouldn't have eaten that second piece of cake*. Or, *I should exercise more*.

2. Restate the thought with a confident, positive spin: *I choose to have fresh fruit for dessert tomorrow*. Or, *I want to exercise because I'll feel better and be healthier*. Such thoughts aren't judgmental, don't dwell on mistakes and put you back in control.

For more information, visit our [Heart Health Center](#).

Are You A Stress Case?

Jobs, bosses, colleagues, family, money, and time... stress creeps into life from all angles. Do you ever wonder if you're a stress case? Do you know the symptoms of stress? Take this [stress quiz](#) to find out.