

Staying Afloat: Stress management basics

During periods of prolonged or chronic stress, the body's stress response stays in overdrive. This means our body is flooded with stress hormones without the time we need to recover, which can lead to mental and physical exhaustion.

Fortunately, there are effective ways to build your resilience against stress by interrupting your body's default stress response and giving your body more time to recover.

3 ways to interrupt the stress response

1

Body

Promote relaxation

2

Attention

Be mindful

3

Behavior

Take productive action

1

Body: Relaxation techniques

Relaxation training is a set of behavioral strategies that activate your body's calming response. These strategies can lower your heart rate and your blood pressure, relieve headaches and muscle tension, and help you maintain calmer emotions.

Signal to your brain to relax with
Deep Breathing:

1. Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds
2. *Hold that breath for 7 seconds*
3. Exhale for 8 seconds
4. Repeat for 5–10 breath cycles

Signal to your body to relax with
Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

1. Take a deep breath while tightening a muscle group (e.g., shoulders)
2. *Hold for 10 seconds*
3. Exhale and slowly release tension into total relaxation
4. Repeat with a different muscle group
5. Repeat for 5–10 minutes

2 Attention: Be mindful

Use mindfulness to focus on the present moment. **Mindfulness** is awareness and acceptance of thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and environment in the here-and-now. Practice mindfulness using informal check-ins or trying a formal practice.

- To practice an informal check-in:

- bring your attention to the here and now
- notice your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and surroundings
- be curious, observe, and don't judge what you notice.

- Try a formal mindfulness practice.

Carve out time to turn inward and notice the sensations of the breath. Notice when your mind wanders away from the sensations – observe your thoughts and feelings. What are your thoughts focusing on right now? What emotions show up? No need to change your thoughts and feelings. Simply observe them as they are, without judging them as good or bad, resisting them or overthinking them. Gently return your attention to the sensations of the breath.

Use mindfulness in your day-to-day to be **intentional with your attention** – to notice and acknowledge your experiences so you can then take productive action.

3 Behavior: Take productive action

Once you've calmed your body and mind, it's time to take action. **Emotion Regulation** can help you dial down the intensity of negative emotions so you can take productive action. Remember taking "productive" action means acting in ways that move you closer to what you want or need instead of letting your emotions hijack your behavior in unhelpful ways.

When negative emotions overwhelm you, try **opposite action**. If a strong emotion tempts you to take one type of action, intentionally do the opposite.

Avoiding a problem because of anxiety? —————→ *Move in closer.*

Sadness pushing you to isolate yourself? —————→ *Try reaching out.*

Tempted to take anger out on a co-worker? —————→ *Seek empathy and investigate that person's perspective.*

Emotion regulation doesn't just mean avoiding negative feelings, but promoting positive ones too. Use your **ABCs** to cultivate positive emotions:

- **A**rrange for activities that you enjoy; watch a favorite movie, call a friend, etc.
- **B**uild mastery by doing something you enjoy that gives you a sense of accomplishment.
- **C**ope ahead of time by making a plan for which coping skills to use the next time emotions run high. It's a good practice to write down your plan and keep it handy for reference at difficult moments.

Promoting relaxation, practicing mindfulness, and taking productive action can all help clear the cobwebs of chronic stress from the brain.

What's one thing you could try?
