HOLISTIC STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR NURSES
**Disclaimer:** The information, facts and opinions provided here are not intended to be a substitute for professional advice. Always consult your primary healthcare provider for any medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment and before undertaking a new diet or exercise plan.

Copyright 2017 by American Holistic Nurses Association

American Holistic Nurses Association
2900 S.W. Plass Court
Topeka, KS 66611-1980
(800) 278-2462
Table of Contents

Feeling Burned Out? ................................................................................................................................................. 4
Holistic Stress Management ..................................................................................................................................... 5
  Causes of Stress .................................................................................................................................................. 5
  Psychological Effects of Stress ............................................................................................................................ 6
  Physical Effects of Stress .................................................................................................................................... 7
Holistic Stress Management Is Based on Self-Reflection and Self-Care ............................................................... 7
  Self-Reflection .................................................................................................................................................... 8
Tools for Managing Stress ....................................................................................................................................... 8
  The Stop Technique .......................................................................................................................................... 9
  Diaphragmatic Breathing ................................................................................................................................... 9
Progressive Muscle Relaxation ................................................................................................................................. 10
  Muscle Groups .................................................................................................................................................. 11
  Tension-Relaxation Procedure ............................................................................................................................ 11
  The Full PMR Schedule ................................................................................................................................... 12
  The Shortened PMR Schedule ............................................................................................................................ 12
  Cue-Controlled Relaxation ................................................................................................................................. 13
  Summary ............................................................................................................................................................ 13
Deep Muscle Relaxation ......................................................................................................................................... 13
  Autogenic Training .......................................................................................................................................... 14
  Mindfulness Meditation .................................................................................................................................... 15
  Visualization ...................................................................................................................................................... 16
Guided Imagery ....................................................................................................................................................... 17
  Beach Imagery .................................................................................................................................................. 17
  Forest Imagery .................................................................................................................................................. 18
Drink Plenty of Fresh Pure Water ............................................................................................................................ 19
Eat Mindfully .......................................................................................................................................................... 19
Eat Natural Foods ................................................................................................................................................... 20
Movement & Exercise .......................................................................................................................................... 20
Nurture Your Spirit .................................................................................................................................................. 21
Journaling ............................................................................................................................................................... 21
Affirmations ............................................................................................................................................................ 21
References ................................................................................................................................................................. 23
HOLISTIC STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR NURSES

Feeling Burned Out?

Nursing is a profession with substantial pressure.

Two of the greatest challenges in our profession are to advocate for nurse and patient safety and to help prevent nurse burnout. Burnout is a major issue caused by unresolved stress. It can lead to:

- Bitterness and anger
- Depression and physical illness
- Low morale and internalizing
- Feelings of incompetence and hopelessness
- Difficulties in one’s home life
- Absenteeism and staff turnover
- Substance abuse

Nurses are becoming more aware of the critical need for holistic practice in the workplace. Nurses are requesting a tranquility room or meditation areas in the workplace (Gonzalez, Pizzi, Thomas, Cooper and Clyne, 2013) and are teaching themselves how to set goals, modify their jobs and delegate, as well as learning how work-life balance helps reduce stress and anxiety. Likewise, learning to value and practice holistic healing modalities helps nurses manage their own stress, which in turn improves their outlook and empowerment (Cuneo et al., 2011).

Balevre, Cassells and Buzaianu (2012) reported a significant correlation between maladaptive thinking patterns and nurses’ burnout thoughts and behaviors. Highlights of this quantitative replication study include the following:

- Nurses with specialty certification are less likely to have thoughts focused on failure and feelings of inadequacy, which may help protect them from burnout
- Nurses who work during the day can exhibit the maladaptive thinking of the self-sacrificing pattern that leads to burnout
- Regular stress management programs can provide nurses with the tools they need to diminish irrational beliefs that lead to burnout
Organopoulou, Tsironi, Malliarou, Alikari and Zyga (2014) found that a low level of education seems to have a positive correlation with the phenomenon of burnout along with high levels of anxiety. Highlights of this survey study include:

- A correlation between gender and anxiety; women have more anxiety than men
- Higher levels of anxiety and greater burnout among nurses than physicians
- Lower levels of depersonalization among physicians than nurses

AHNA was created in response to nurses' need to heal and care for themselves.

Holistic Stress Management

Holistic nursing views everything as inseparable and interrelated – our mental, emotional, physical and social/relational aspects are intertwined and interconnected. The wonderful thing about this is that when we create health in one area of our life the positive effects spill into all other areas of life!

However, many studies show that nurses are experiencing stress at higher rates, and are less healthy, than the average adults in their communities.

A synthesis of 187 international studies on nurse health conducted by Fronteira and Ferrinho (2011) found that nurses experience more musculoskeletal disorders, are at greater risk of acquiring tuberculosis and blood-borne pathogen infections and have more occupational allergies than the public.

In another study, hospital-employed bedside nurses were found to have a depression rate of 17% compared to the national rate of only 9% (Letvak, Ruhm & McCoy, 2012). Nurses’ shift work has also been found to increase health problems. For example, a longitudinal study of nurses found that night work and job stress were associated with sleep deficiency, lack of exercise, and increased cardio metabolic risk (Jacobsen, et al., 2014).

Causes of Stress

The stress response can be an asset for raising levels of performance during critical events such as a sports activity, an important meeting, or in situations of actual danger or crisis. However, if stress becomes persistent, all parts of the body’s stress management system (the brain, heart, lungs, vessels, adrenals and muscles) become chronically over-activated. Over time, this produces physical and/or psychological damage.
Many nurses “accept” health problems that come from the physical and emotional stress of caring for others by not giving equal care to themselves. This is not necessary when we practice holistic self-care.

Causes of stress are categorized as external or internal and acute or chronic:

- **External stressors** are adverse physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual conditions around you, such as high-pressure working conditions, noise or abuse.
- **Internal stressors** are adverse physical, mental, emotional or spiritual conditions when you, such as your attitudes, beliefs, and illnesses. Studies show that internal psychological stressors are rare or absent in most animals except humans.
- **Acute stress** is the reaction to an immediate threat commonly known as the "fight, flight or freeze" response. The threat can be any situation that is experienced as a threat or danger, even subconsciously or falsely. Common acute stressors include noise, crowding, isolation, hunger, infection, and imagining or recalling threatening events.
- **Chronic stress** happens when the acute stressors continue without resolution. The instinct to fight, flee or freeze becomes suppressed and/or exhausted.

**Psychological Effects of Stress**

Studies suggest that psychological effects of stress include:

- The onset of depression or anxiety
- Diminished quality of life
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Emotional instability
- Disruption of social and family life
- Increased use of cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs
- Poor attitude towards work
- Difficulties in communicating with patients
- Difficulty maintaining pleasant relations with coworkers
- Difficulty judging the seriousness of a potential emergency
Physical Effects of Stress

Studies suggest that the physical effects of stress include:

- Over-stimulation of the nervous system
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Susceptibility to infections
- Immune disorders
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Peptic ulcers
- Inflammatory Bowel Disease
- Weight gain
- Weight loss
- Eating disorders
- Diabetes
- Chronic pain
- Muscular and joint pain
- Headaches
- Sleep disturbances
- Sexual and reproductive dysfunction
- Premenstrual Syndrome
- Fertility issues
- Effects on pregnancy
- Memory concentration, and learning problems
- Allergies
- Skin disorders
- Unexplained hair loss (Alopecia Areata)
- Teeth and gums (an increased risk for periodontal disease)

Holistic Stress Management Is Based on Self-Reflection and Self-Care

Did you know that Holistic Nursing is one of the only nursing specialties with Self-Reflection and Self-Care at its theoretical foundation? Self-Reflection and Self-Care are core values in the scope of being a holistic nurse! (Also, see Holistic Self-Care for Nurses)

http://www.ahna.org/Membership/Member-Advantage/Whatisself-care
Self-Reflection

The *Holistic Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* defines self-reflection as:

“Self-reflection: Turning inward to examine one’s thoughts, values, beliefs, experiences, behaviors and inner wisdom. Self-reflection enhances self-awareness and understanding. The nurse’s self-reflection, self-assessment, self-care, healing and personal development are necessary for service to others, growth/change in the nurse’s own well-being and understanding of the nurse’s own personal journey. The nurse values herself/himself and her/his calling to holistic nursing as a life purpose.”

(Holistic Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 2nd edition (2013), page 8.)

*Holistic Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* goes on to say, “Self-reflection and self-care, as well as personal awareness of and continuous focus on being an instrument of healing, are significant requirements for holistic nurses. Self-reflection is both a self-care strategy and a professional practice integrating critical thinking of the mind and compassion of the heart. Holistic nurses reflect on action to become aware of values, beliefs, feelings, sensations, perceptions, and judgments that may affect their actions, and reflect on their experience to obtain insight for future practice. Self-reflection allows one to know oneself more fully in order to become more authentic and mindful.” (Holistic Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 2nd edition (2013), Core Value 5, page 20.)

Tools for Managing Stress

As you know, our mental, emotional, physical and social/relational aspects are intertwined and interconnected, so what affects one aspect of yourself will influence all other aspects. For instance:

- The way you care for your body has a profound effect on your thoughts, your emotions and your relationships
- Your thoughts affect your emotions and your emotions affect every cell of your body
- Likewise, the types and nature of your relationships affect your physical health, emotional health, mental clarity and sense of well-being

The wonderful thing about this is that when you create health in one area of your life the positive effects spill into all other areas of your life!
**Note:** A very small proportion of people, when they first attempt to enter a state of deep relaxation, have a paradoxical reaction and feel extremely uneasy and anxious, and may have increased respiration and racing thoughts. If this happens to you, be assured that this is not abnormal! If the more “quiet” forms of relaxation leave you feeling anxious, begin your relaxation training with progressive muscle relaxation.

**Disclaimer:** The information, facts and opinions provided here are not intended to be a substitute for professional advice. Always consult your primary healthcare provider for any medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment and before undertaking a new diet or exercise plan.

**The Stop Technique**

The "Stop Technique" is useful in stopping negative reactions when you feel stress building from highly emotional communication, overwhelming situations, negative self-talk, etc., silently say, “stop” to yourself. Here are the steps:

- Visualize a “stop” sign in your mind
- Take a deep breath and focus your attention in and around the area of your heart, your “heart-space”
- Imagine that you are breath in and out of your heart-space
- Bring to mind a loving moment. e.g., imagine and feel the pleasure of holding an infant; cuddling with a favorite person or animal; being in love, etc.
- From your heart-space, do one of the following:
  - Ask yourself, “What would be a useful or wise response to this situation?” OR
  - Repeat an affirmation that is meaningful to you in this situation – such as:
    - I feel calm & peaceful inside.
    - I listen & respond with kindness & compassion.
    - I am quiet & centered inside.
    - I choose what is best right now.
  (Thornton & Gold, 2001p.C-15)

**Diaphragmatic Breathing**

One of the best ways to relax is to practice diaphragmatic breathing. A diaphragmatic breath is one that originates in the belly, which the draws the diaphragm downward into the abdominal cavity. This requires learning to take slow full breaths from your abdomen instead of short shallow breaths from your chest. The reason it is important to breathe from your abdomen is that you will be able to fill up your lungs more completely. This is a more effective way to breathe.

Diaphragmatic breathing expands the physiological capacity for the lungs to fill on the in breath, which one should feel after feeling the belly expand. The belly rises/chest rises on the inhale, and then the chest releases/belly releases on the exhale.

[Click here for an animation that leads you to breathe slowly and deeply.](#)
If you practice this for just 5 minutes each day, you can significantly reduce your overall level of anxiety and stress. In fact, if you practice this a couple of times each day for 2-3 weeks in a row, you will be able to "reset" your normal rate of breathing. You will be teaching your body to breathe from your abdomen on a regular basis.

It might be easier at first to practice while lying down. If this is not possible, do the exercise sitting in a chair with both feet on the floor. Place one hand on your stomach and one on your upper chest for a few breaths in an exaggerated way to help you get a feel for it.

The more you practice each day, the faster you will be able to "reset" the quality and pace of your breath. At first, you can practice anytime you have "down" time - like when you are waiting in line, watching TV, or reading. Some people like to remind themselves on the hour to check their breathing. Others practice it when they are in bed at night, etc. Choose what works for you. Soon you will be breathing much more effectively and you will notice how much more peaceful you feel.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One of the most simple and easily learned techniques for relaxation is Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), a widely used procedure today that was originally developed by Edmond Jacobson in 1939. It is recommended that you practice full PMR twice a day for about a week before moving on to the shortened form. Of course, the time needed to master the full PMR procedure varies from person to person. The information, facts, and opinions provided here are not intended to be a substitute for professional advice. Always consult your primary healthcare provider for any medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment and before undertaking a new diet or exercise plan. Here are some suggestions for practice:

- Always practice full PMR in a quiet place, alone, with no electronic distractions, not even background music.
- Remove your shoes and wear loose clothing.
- Avoid eating, smoking, or drinking. It is best to practice before meals rather than after, for the sake of your digestive processes.
- Never practice after using any intoxicants.
- Sit in a comfortable chair if possible. You may practice lying down, but this increases the likelihood of falling asleep.
- If you fall asleep, give yourself credit for the work you did up to the point of sleep.
- If you practice in bed at night, plan to fall asleep before you complete your cycle. Therefore, consider a practice session at night, in bed, to be in addition to your basic practice.
• When you finish a session, relax with your eyes closed for a few seconds, and then get up slowly. (Orthostatic hypotension can cause you to faint.)
• Some people like to count backwards from five to one, timed to slow, deep breathing, and then say, “Eyes open. Supremely calm. Fully alert.”

Muscle Groups

You will be working with most of the major muscle groups in your body, but for convenience, you will make a systematic progression from your feet upwards. Here is the most popular recommended sequence:

Right foot
Right lower leg and foot
Entire right leg
Left foot
Left lower leg and foot
Entire left leg
Right hand
Right forearm and hand
Entire right arm
Left hand
Left forearm and hand
Entire left arm
Abdomen
Chest
Neck and shoulders
Face

Note: If you are left-handed, you might want to begin with your left foot, and so on.

Tension–Relaxation Procedure

Step One: Tension. The process of applying tension to a muscle is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are using. First, focus your mind on the muscle group; for example, your right hand. Then inhale and simply squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 8 seconds; in the example, this would involve making a tight fist with your hand.
• Note: Beginners usually make the mistake of allowing muscles other than the intended group to tense as well; in the example, this would be tensing muscles in your right arm and shoulder, not just in your right hand. With practice, you will learn to make very fine discriminations among muscles; for the moment just do the best, you can. It can be very frustrating for a beginner to try to experience a fine degree of muscle separation.
• Because neglect of the body is an almost universal cultural attitude, it is usually very difficult to begin learning how to take responsibility for body “mechanics.” So take heart and realize that learning fine muscle distinction is in itself a major part of the overall PMR learning process. PMR is not just about tension and relaxation—it is also about muscle discernment.
• But also relax a bit and realize that no part of the body is an isolated unit; the muscles of the hand, for example, do have connections in the forearm, so when you tense your hand there will always be some small tension occurring in the forearm. When PMR asks that the hand be tensed without tensing the arm, it is really speaking to the “clumsy” beginner who, out of total body ignorance, will unthinkingly tense everything in the whole arm.
• So if you accept the fact that you are simply in the beginner phase—rather than perceive yourself as somehow inept—then you can have the patience to discern the fine muscles with practice.
• It is important to really feel the tension. Done properly, the tension procedure will cause the muscles to start to shake, and you will feel some pain.
• Note: Be careful not to hurt yourself, as compared to feeling mild pain. Contracting the muscles in your feet and your back, especially, can cause serious problems if not done carefully; i.e., gently but deliberately.

**Step Two: Releasing the Tension.** This is the best part because it is actually pleasurable. After the 8 seconds, just quickly and suddenly let go. Let all the tightness and pain flow out of the muscles as you simultaneously exhale. In the example, this would be imagining tightness and pain flowing out of your hand through your fingertips as you exhale. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp, tension flowing away like water out of a faucet. Focus on and notice the difference between tension and relaxation.
• Note: The point here is to really focus on the change that occurs as the tension is let go. Do this very deliberately, because you are trying to learn to make some very subtle distinctions between muscular tension and muscular relaxation.
• Stay relaxed for about 15 seconds, and then repeat the tension-relaxation cycle. You will probably notice more sensations the second time.

**The Full PMR Schedule**

Once you understand the muscle groups and the tension-relaxation procedure, then you are ready to begin the full PMR training. Simply follow the list of muscle groups in the sequence given and work through your entire body. Practice twice a day for a week. Spend extra time, if necessary, until you can achieve a deep sense of physical relaxation; then you can move on to the Shortened PMR schedule.

**The Shortened PMR Schedule**

In the shortened form of PMR, you will (a) work with summary groups of muscles rather than individual muscle groups, and (b) begin to use cue-controlled relaxation.

The four summary muscle groups are:
- Lower Limbs
- Abdomen and Chest
- Arms, Shoulders and Neck
- Face
Instead of working with just one specific part of your body at a time, focus on the complete group. In Group 1, for example, focus on both legs and feet all at once.

**Cue-Controlled Relaxation**

Use the same tension-relaxation procedure as full PMR, but work with the summary groups of muscles. In addition, focus on your breathing during both tension and relaxation. Inhale slowly as you apply and hold the tension. Then, when you let the tension go and exhale, say a cue word to yourself (below). This will help you to associate the cue word with a state of relaxation, so that eventually the cue word alone will produce a relaxed state. Many people find that cue-controlled relaxation does not have to depend on only one word; it may actually be more helpful in some situations to use a particular phrase. Some suggestions for cue words/phrases are:

- Relax
- Let it go
- It’s OK
- Stay calm
- All things are passing
- Trust in God

**Summary**

Initially, you should practice the shortened form of PMR under the same conditions as you practiced full PMR. After about a week of twice-daily practice, you will then have enough proficiency to practice it under other conditions and with distractions. Alternatively, you might want to move on to the final process of Deep Muscle Relaxation.

The information, facts, and opinions provided here are not intended to be a substitute for professional advice. Always consult your primary healthcare provider for any medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment and before undertaking a new diet or exercise plan.

**Deep Muscle Relaxation**

Once you have learned the Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) technique and are familiar with the feeling of it, you can then induce relaxation without even using the tension-relaxation process. All you need to do is use your imagination to think of and then relax the various muscle groups using your cue word(s). Usually this is done by starting at the top of your head and then working down through your body, as if relaxation were being poured over your head and flowing down over all of your body. This process is called Deep Muscle Relaxation. Anywhere, anytime, you can simply perform a quick “body scan” to recognize where in your body you might be holding muscle tension and then, using imagery and your cue word/phrase, let it go.
Autogenic Training

Autogenic training develops a physiological response to a set of commands you give yourself. The following is a series of autogenic training exercises designed to help you reverse the physiological effects of stress and relax more fully. It is important not to “try” to make anything happen while thinking about these exercises; just maintain an attitude of passive concentration. Remain alert to your experience, but do not analyze it. Think about each statement for about 30 to 40 seconds. Practice the exercises while seated in a comfortable position or while lying down with pillows supporting your head and knees.

**Statement Number 1**
My arms are heavy. My left arm is heavy. My right arm is heavy. Both of my arms are heavy.

Repeat each part of this statement to yourself several times, slowly and rhythmically. It is helpful to visualize your arms as being heavy, to feel them sinking into your lap or against the chair or the floor.

**Statement Number 2**
My legs are heavy. My right leg is heavy. My left leg is heavy. Both of my legs are heavy.

Think about your legs being heavy and relaxed, with the muscles being loose and limp not tight or restricted. Feel the weight of your legs.

**Statement Number 3**
My arms are warm. My right arm is warm. My left arm is warm. Both arms are warm.

Visualize warmth taking over your arms. You may want to imagine your arms being suspended in warm water or being warmed by the sun.

**Statement Number 4**
My legs are warm. My right leg is warm. My left leg is warm. Both of my legs are warm.

Again, visualize your legs being warmed in the sun or suspended in a tub of warm water.

**Statement Number 5**
My heartbeat is calm and regular.

For some people, it is helpful to place your hand over your heart so that you can establish what the heart rate is and its regularity. Then, passively think about your heart rate being calm and regular.

**Statement Number 6**
My breathing is calm and regular.
You may want to think about your breathing being deep and easy so that you have full, deep breathing, producing a calming sensation. Passively think about this. Do not force changes in breathing patterns.

**Statement Number 7**  
My solar plexus is warm.

The solar plexus is located in the mid-section of your body, the area below the chest and just above the abdominal area. Visualize your body floating just below the surface of very pleasant warm water or being warmed by the sun shining on this region of your body. Think about this passively.

**Statement Number 8**  
My forehead is cool.

Here again, you want to use visualization. Picture a cool breeze blowing on your face, calming your forehead. Alternatively, you may want to picture a cool moist cloth being placed on your forehead.

**Review**

- My arms and legs are heavy.
- My arms and legs are warm.
- My heartbeat is calm and regular.
- My breathing is calm and regular.
- My solar plexus is warm.
- My forehead is cool.

When you are ready, take a deep, cleansing breath; let it out; gradually stretch your arms, legs, fingers, toes, neck; and focus on being alert and relaxed.

**Mindfulness Meditation**

**Mindfulness** is being aware of what is going on in the present moment without judgment. **Meditation** is the training of attention that cultivates mindfulness. There are many ways to meditate, and mindfulness meditation is one way.

Many people start by focusing on their breathing without trying to change anything about it... just noticing the sensations of the air moving into and out of their body. When ready, one may gently release that focus and simply observe one's moment-to-moment experience with full attention.

Distractions and thoughts are to be expected as part of the experience, but they will gradually become slower and more meaningful as one's mindfulness capacity increases.
Much of the emotional distress people experience is the result of thinking about upsetting things that have already happened or anticipating negative events that have yet to occur. Distressing emotions such as anger, anxiety, guilt, and sadness are much easier to bear when we only focus on one moment at a time.

Click here for a wonderful resource on Mindfulness Meditation, including recorded instructions and tips to download.

https://www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-meditate

Visualization

Visualization is a tool to help deal with any stress-producing situation by helping you imagine healthy outcomes to your challenges. The visualization process below will only take a few minutes. Remember--if you can see it, feel it, and believe it . . . you can achieve it! Here are the steps.
1. Define your goal, and then create affirmations to support that goal. Rather than engaging in worrisome thoughts, focus on the positive outcomes you want. Your goals/affirmations might be that: “I am efficient and focused or I work with ease and provide excellent care to my patients.”

2. Take a moment to relax. Take a deep breath and set aside other thoughts and concerns.

3. Now, imagine yourself reaching these goals. Imagine what it feels like to enjoy both the process and the goal you desire. Enjoy the confidence and the satisfaction of working, problem solving and resting at the end. Get in touch with as many senses and feelings as you can. “See” and “feel” yourself successfully reaching your goal. How does your body feel . . . lighter and more relaxed? Emotionally . . . are you feeling a sense of relief?

Practice positive visualization whenever you find yourself worrying or becoming scattered or inefficient.

**Guided Imagery**

Imagery is the most fundamental language we have. The mind processes everything we do through images. When we recall events from our past or childhood, we think of pictures, images, sounds, pain, etc. -- rarely words. Images are not necessarily limited to visual. They can also be sounds, tastes, smells or a combination of sensations. A certain smell, for example, may invoke either pleasant or bad memories. Similarly, going to a place where you had a bad accident may instantly invoke visions of the accident and initiate flight or fight response.

**Beach Imagery**

For a few moments, allow yourself to take several nice, long, deep breaths. Notice the cool air coming in, filling your lungs, and the soothing warm air going out. Just let all your thoughts float away as you bring your attention to your breathing... in and out. You might mentally scan your body and notice if you are holding any tension in your muscles. If you are, just gently let all that tension melt away with every out breath. Bring your attention to your breathing, in and out... in and out... let yourself feel more and more comfortable sitting where you are.

In your mind's eye, you see yourself descending a long, narrow, wooden stairway towards a beautiful, inviting beach. Your bare feet feel the rough weathered steps, and with each step, you feel more and more tension gently melting away from your body. As you continue down the stairway, you notice how the bright white sand stretches down the shoreline as far as you can see. The ocean is a deep shade of blue with the fine white crests of the waves sweeping towards the shore. You reach the end of the stairway and step down, sinking into the warm soothing sand. As you rub the sand lightly between your toes, a soothing sensation of relaxation gently melts through your entire body. The roaring sounds of the sea's surf, the waves crashing over each other, calm your mind and allow you to feel even more relaxed.
You begin walking slowly towards the edge of the water and notice the warm sun on your face and shoulders. The salty smell of the sea air invigorates you, and you take in a deep breath... breathe slowly out... and feel more relaxed and refreshed. Finally, you reach the water's edge and you gladly invite the waves to flow over your toes and ankles. You watch the waves glide smoothly towards you, gently sweeping around your feet, and the trails of seawater that flow slowly back out again. The cool water feels soft and comforting as you enjoy a few moments allowing yourself to gaze out on the far-reaching horizon. Overhead, you notice two seagulls gracefully soaring high above the ocean waters, and you can hear their soft cries becoming faint as they glide away. All of these sights, sounds, and sensations allow you to let go and relax more. After a moment, you begin strolling down the beach at the water's edge. You feel a cool gentle breeze pressing lightly against your back, and with every step, you feel yourself relaxing more and more. As you walk down the beach, you notice the details of sights and sounds around you, and soothing sensations of the sun, the breeze, and the sand below your feet. As you continue your leisurely walk down the beach, you notice a colorful beach chair resting in a nice peaceful spot where the powdery soft sand lies undisturbed. You approach this comfortable looking beach chair, and then you sit down, lie back, and settle in. You take in a long deep breath, breathe slowly out, and feel even more relaxed and comfortable resting in your chair. For a few moments more, let yourself enjoy the sights and sounds of this beautiful day on the beach. And, when you feel ready, you can gently bring your attention back to the present... still letting yourself feel nice and comfortable sitting where you are.

Forest Imagery

To begin the visualization, sit or lie down in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Take several slow, deep abdominal breaths. As you begin relaxing, you may be aware of a variety of physical sensations or thoughts. Scan your body for any muscle tension. If you become aware of any tension, tense the muscles for a couple of seconds and relax them. Acknowledge any thoughts without trying to get rid of them. You may imagine thoughts or concerns as puffs of smoke that rise into the air and eventually disappear.

Now imagine that you are walking down a path into a lush forest. As you walk along the path, you completely take in the sights, sounds, smells, and feel of the place. All around you are trees, grasses, ground cover, and fragrant flowers. You hear the soothing sounds of birds chirping and the wind as it gently blows through the treetops. You smell the rich dampness of the forest floor, the smells of rotting vegetation and new growth. Through gaps in the treetops, you see the sun high in a cloudless, blue sky. The sun is dispersed through the canopy of the treetops and filters down onto the forest floor, creating intricate patterns of light and shadow. With each breath you take in this place, you feel a deep sense of peace and relaxation.

You soon come to a clearing. There are several flat rocks in the clearing surrounded by soft moss. A small stream runs among the rocks. You lie back on one of the rocks or on the cushiony moss and put your feet into the cool water. You feel the warm sun and a gentle, light breeze through your hair and across your skin. The sparkling clear water rushes around the multicolored
rooks, making little whirlpools and eddies. You put your hand into the water and lift a handful to your lips. The water is cool and refreshing. You close your eyes listen to the water trickling through the rock. You bath in the warm sun and feel as though you are floating... relaxing deeper and deeper.

You let yourself sink further into relaxation, while continuing to be aware of the sights, smells, sounds, and feel of the forest around you. You allow yourself to let go of any concerns or worries and to feel completely refreshed and rejuvenated in this place.

When you are ready, imagine that you slowly get up and leave the clearing. As you walk back down the path through the forest, fully take in this place and realize that you may return whenever you wish by the same path. Each time you enter this place you will feel relaxed and at peace.

Drink Plenty of Fresh Pure Water

Drinking water is always important, but even more so during times of stress. When the body becomes stressed, the same physiological processes occur that occur during dehydration. The same hormones: endorphins, cortisone release factor, prolactin, vasopressin and rennin-angiotensin are released in both states. Consequently, dehydration can cause or increase stress and stress will cause further dehydration (Batmanghelidj, F. p.57).

An easy, personalized guide for healthy water intake is to divide your body weight by 2, and that is the number of water ounces you should drink each day.

For instance, if you weigh 150 lbs. then you should consume 75 ounces of water each day (150 divided by 2 = 75). (Thornton, 2000. D-2)

Eat Mindfully

Stress often causes us to eat in a rushed and anxious manner while preoccupied with thoughts and worries. Eating in such a state predisposes us to digestive problems such as bloating, poor food absorption, indigestion, cramping, constipation, diarrhea and acid reflux.

Make a habit to “sit down and slow down” while eating. Turn off the TV, radio, put away the newspaper and focus on nourishing yourself.

Take a deep breath and pause to feel and express gratitude for the food and the people who participated in growing, harvesting, transporting, selling and preparing it for you. Chew slowly and really taste your food. When you do this, you will find that you eat less, enjoy it more and experience refreshed energy.
Eat Natural Foods

Careful attention to your diet during stressful times is crucially important. Since stress increases the production of free radicals in your cells, it is important to increase your intake of antioxidants, B vitamins and protein when you are under stress. Eating whole natural foods with an emphasis on fresh vegetables, fruits, whole-grains and legumes gives the body these nutrients.

In addition, since stress causes your metabolism to increase, it is better to eat 5 or 6 nutritious light meals during the day than 2 or 3 heavy ones. This will provide you with a steady source of energy and maximize your physical stamina.

Regardless of whether you are diabetic or not, it is important to eat foods that are low on the glycemic index, which measures the speed with which sugar from foods is released into the bloodstream. A slower release provides a steadier source of energy.

During times of stress, avoid or eliminate caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. Caffeine over-stimulates the adrenal glands and can further deplete your body of B-complex and C vitamins and induce symptoms of anxiety, such as nervousness, fear, heart palpitations, nausea, restlessness and tremors.

So replace that cup of Starbucks with a cup of hot water and a slice of lemon. The hot lemon water will awaken you without over-stimulation and without stressing your adrenal glands. It will also help with your digestion.

Eliminate foods high in simple sugars (high glycemic index) from your diet such as processed foods, sodas, breads and anything containing fructose, glucose, corn syrup, corn sweeteners, beet sugar and cane sugar.

Movement & Exercise

One of the best antidotes for stress is exercise. Stress challenges nearly every part of a person, and exercise strengthens nearly every part of the person that stress adversely affects.

Develop a daily 30-minute to 1-hour exercise/movement routine that works for you. It will help you immensely in coping with life’s stressors!

The best exercise program involves a combination of aerobic (jogging, walking briskly, swimming, biking, aerobics classes, dancing etc.), anaerobic (weight lifting, calisthenics etc.) and stretching (yoga), with 70-80% of your exercise being aerobic.

Remember to begin your exercise activity at a slow controlled pace for 5 minutes or longer until your body warms up. After completing your exercise, spend 5 to 10 minutes in cooling down with stretching exercises.

Choose exercises and movements that you enjoy and that fit into your schedule. Even doing twenty minutes of exercise, a day is better than none.
Weather permitting; take a walk outside during breaks and at lunchtime. Take the stairs instead of an elevator. Instead of parking your car closest to your point of work or school, park further away. When you get home from a stressful day, put on some lively music and dance to your heart’s content. Create practices that are fun, doable and nurture your heart as well as your body.

**Nurture Your Spirit**

The ability to nurture your spirit is perhaps the single most important and powerful practice available to you for stress management.

"The spiritual dimension is the essence of self and also transcends the self. It is our closest, most direct experience of the universal life force.” (Thornton, 2005)

Make it a habit to begin your day with whatever spiritual practice you choose and choose an intention to manifest during the day. When you engage in a spiritual practice, it sets the tone for the entire day and helps you move through your challenges with more grace and equanimity.

When you engage in practices that allow you to access your spiritual essence, you connect with an infinite reservoir of energy. Spiritual practices allow you to set aside your concerns and worries, quiet your mind and rest in the essence of your infinite Being.

Practices that are most useful and commonly used include meditation, contemplative prayer, reflection and communing with nature.

**Journaling**

Journaling is writing down one's thoughts and feelings surrounding the events of one's life. It also often includes reflections or explorations about those thoughts and feelings, too. Journaling allows people to clarify their thoughts and feelings, thereby gaining valuable self-knowledge and insight. It is also a good problem-solving tool; oftentimes, one can hash out a problem and come up with solutions more easily on paper than they can in their mind. The work of James W. Pennebaker, M.D. and Joshua Smyth, PhD show that journaling works although the reasons are not clear.

What is clear is that simply whining about our life is not effective. Findings in Pennebaker and Smyth's studies show participants who simply spent their time whining about their life received little or no health benefits from journaling. In contrast, those who used writing time to examine events and put them in perspective had the best results.

**Affirmations**

An affirmation is a positive statement that you repeat to yourself to shift negative thoughts and feelings to positive thoughts and feelings. Affirmations are one of the quickest ways to shift out of “stress mode”, into a more relaxed, and calm state of being.
The first step is to notice the negative self-talk that is going on inside your head. The second step is to gently replace that negative self-talk with positive affirmations instead.

The affirmations below are designed to reduce stress, increase personal empowerment and awaken your mind to possibilities for change, helping you live the life you feel you were meant to live. Choose an affirmation from the list below or create your own.

Challenges Help Me Grow
I Can See Stressful Situations as Challenges
Challenges Bring Opportunities
I Can Choose a Positive Frame of Mind
Today Has Limitless Possibilities
I Can Find Balance in My Life
I Can Find Love and Support
I Can Accomplish Anything
I Can Handle Whatever Comes
I Can Create Inner Peace
My Intention Is for Peace
I Am Strong
Peace Is Power
This Too Shall Pass
My Intentions Create My Reality
Stress Is Leaving My Body
Today I Choose Joy
I Can Make Healthy Choices
I Am Doing My Best
I Breathe in Peace
Today My Intention Is for Peace
I Am in Charge of My Life
I Have Many Options
I Can Create Positive Change
I Am Wise
My Happiness Comes from Within
I Can Start Healthy Habits
Each Moment Brings Choice
I Can Stay Calm Under Pressure
I Choose Happiness
I Choose Healthy Relationships
I Can Find My Happy Place
References


