

# Stress Management

by Vicki R. Pierson  
*Certified  
Personal  
Trainer*

There's not an easy solution to deal with the problem of stress. Stress is encountered in almost every aspect of our lives. Like successful weight management, in order to achieve stress reduction we must weave the solution into the fabric of our lives. Through regular practice of stress reduction techniques, symptoms of stress decrease and become more manageable.

For the most part, stress is largely under your control. You may not be able to control the situation, however, your reaction in any given situation is entirely under your control. One way to monitor and understand stress in your life is to record your feelings in a diary. Once you gain better awareness of the things that cause you stress, you can then build an action plan to positively manage it by creating some positive goals to help reduce the amount of stress in your daily life.

## Relaxation: Stress Management Techniques

For the next few moments... stop doing... just sit. Become aware of your breath. Focus on the subtle ebb and flow as you breath in, and breath out, and breath in, and breath out, and breath in, and breath out...

You have just experienced a relaxing, albeit brief, time-out. When practiced throughout the day, this breathing exercise can reduce your stress level significantly! There are a variety of stress management techniques that will help decrease the amount of anxiety you experience in your life. My list is not all inclusive, but it's a good start. I suggest you experiment with a wide variety of techniques to find the ones that work best for you. Once you find some effective techniques, practice them regularly to weave them into the fabric of your daily life.

● **Deep breathing.** The exercise like the one explained above can give you some immediate relief from a stressful situation. Focus on slowing your heart rate down by breathing in deeply and slowly, then exhaling slowly and completely. Repeat the inhale/exhale cycle at least five times and you should notice a decrease in your heart rate and anxiety level.

● **Quiet time.** Taking some quiet time for yourself can often reduce stress. Find a place at home and at work where you can get away from everyone and take a few minutes for yourself. You can practice any relaxation technique or simply spend the

time thinking through a problematic situation. Use the time to do whatever will help you to relax.

● **Relaxation media.** There is a variety of relaxation media on the market in the form of cassettes, CD's, videos and even computer software. These products can provide you with multiple forms of stress management techniques, step-by-step instruction, soothing music and more.

● **Visualization.** Mental visualization is a powerful technique. While it can be implemented in almost any situation, visualization has gained notoriety in it's successful practice by competitive athletes. The basic technique of visualization is to put yourself in a relaxed position, breathe deeply and rhythmically and close your eyes. Then, in detail, imagine in your mind's eye a peaceful place or any surroundings that are pleasant and claming to you. While imagining this place, focus on breathing deeply and releasing tension from your entire body.

Visualization can also be used to play out a situation from the beginning to its positive end. This is one of the variations used by competitive athletes. In your mind's eye, you imagine in detail, the chain of events and the actions you will perform to attain a positive end result. During this process, focus on breathing deeply, releasing tension from your body and approaching every action in a calm and confident manner.

● **Yoga.** The word yoga comes from Sanskrit language meaning union and is believed to be at least 6000 years old, originating in India. Yoga combines dynamic physical exercise with a lifestyle philosophy. There are many forms of yoga but the goal is always the same, perfect self knowledge. More specifically, the ultimate goal of yoga philosophy is complete detachment from reality, as we understand it, and complete self knowledge. By separating our "self" from the environment we are able to come to terms with our individual personality and start putting our mind and emotions in order. If you would like to experiment with yoga as a stress management tool, check out some books at the library to learn more or rent a beginner's yoga video tape. There are alot of good exercise video's available on yoga that would be worth experimenting with.

● **Meditation.** Meditation is meant to bring about awareness,

nothing else. It's a time to connect to your inner "source" and let go of the issues, responsibilities and situations that bind your life. The benefits of mediation are uniquely individual, but both physiological and psychological balancing is common. To get you started, here is an explanation of how to practice classic and simple meditation:

*The Mantra:* A mantra is a sound, word, or phrase that is repeated to yourself out loud or silently. The purpose of the mantra is to discard your normal thoughts and focus your awareness inward. You can select anything as your mantra from a single word to religious scripture, anything that is meditative for you. For this exercise, we will use a natural mantra "hamsa," being the natural sound one makes when breathing... "ham" (h-ah-m) on inhalation and "sa" (s-ah) on exhalation.

*The Hamsa Meditation:*

- Sit comfortably;, back straight, shoulders relaxed with your arms by your side or resting in your lap. Select a quiet place if possible, but it's not required.
- Close your eyes and breath naturally. Sit for a minute before you begin thinking the mantra to allow your heart and breathing to slow.
- Gently focus your attention on your breath and begin thinking the mantra, slowly and rhythmically, matching the mantra with your breath... (h-ah-m) on inhalation and (s-ah) on exhalation. Allow yourself to become absorbed in it.
- Let your thoughts and feelings come and go without concern. Don't try to control them in any way, simply note them. When you realize you're not repeating the mantra, re-focus your attention on your breath and begin thinking the mantra again. Don't try to force yourself to think the mantra to the exclusion of all other thoughts.
- Meditate for at least 10 minutes, preferably 20 minutes. When done, take about a minute to slowly return to normal awareness. (It's okay to glance at a clock to time

your meditation, however, I suggest you don't use any kind of alarm timer.)

- Gently open your eyes and slowly move to your feet. Be careful not to get up too quickly after meditating, you may experience some dizziness after a deep state of rest.
- You may or may not experience a deep state of relaxation and rest your first time meditating. As with many relaxation techniques, meditation takes practice to reap all the benefits. Don't get discouraged, just stay with it.

● **Exercise.** Exercise is an excellent means of releasing tension from your body and inducing a relaxation response. You've been practicing this technique for many weeks now. Among the other benefits physical activity brings, have you experienced a reduction in stress?

● **Stretching.** Stress makes your muscles tense up and can cause headaches, a stiff neck, sore shoulders and a knotted back. Full body stretching will help your muscles relax and help you to breath deeper. Always remember to hold stretches for a minimum of ten seconds and concentrate on elongating the muscle slowly and rhythmically. Don't bounce! When you don't have the time to stretch your entire body, try these simple upper body stretching exercises to release tension. They can be easily done in a chair anywhere; at home, at the office, traveling in a car, bus or on plane:

- *Neck.* Sit comfortably with your back straight and your shoulders relaxed. Tilt your head to the left as though you are trying to touch your left ear to your shoulder. Feel the stretch on the right side of your neck. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds. Be sure not to let your shoulders raise up, keep them down and relaxed. Now, slowly move your head to the right, repeating the exercise to stretch the left side of your neck. Last, slowly roll your head down, bowing your head and try to touch your chin to your chest. Feel the stretch down the back of your neck. Hold this position for 10 seconds. A word of caution: Do not tilt your head back in an attempt to stretch the front of your neck, this position hyperextends the neck and can cause physical harm.

- *Shoulders.* Sit comfortably with your back straight, your shoulders relaxed and your arms at your sides. Slowly begin rolling your shoulders in a circular, backward motion. Keep the movement isolated to your shoulders and keep your arms relaxed and limp. Roll your shoulders back ten times then begin rolling them forward ten times. Make the largest circles you can and feel the full range of motion as your shoulders move.

Next, shrug your shoulders up as though you were trying to touch them to your ears, then bring them down as though you were pressing them to the ground. Repeat this up and down shrugging ten times.

- *Back.* Sit comfortably with your back straight, your shoulders relaxed and your arms at your sides. Slowly rotate your torso and head as though you were looking over your left shoulder. Rotate as far around as you comfortably can and hold the stretch for ten seconds. Slowly bring your torso and head back to center position and rotate to your right side. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds.

Next, sit comfortably with your back straight, your shoulders relaxed and cross your arms in front of your chest. Now bring your crossed arms up to a 90 degree angle, perpendicular to your body and hold them there. Slowly begin rounding your back, making your chest concave. Stretch your arms away from your back as though a string was tied around your arms pulling them forward and another string attached to your back was pulling it backwards. Hold the stretch for ten seconds.

Lastly, sit comfortably with your back straight, your shoulders relaxed and your arms at your side. Slowly begin leaning forward until you are resting your chest in your lap. Allow your arms to relax and gently fall to the floor and bow your head over your knees. Feel the stretch across your back as you let your body go limp. Hold this stretch for ten seconds.

● **Give yourself reminders.** Part of the problem with some of

these techniques is simply remembering to practice them. At home, at work, or in the car you may want to put up little reminders to practice a technique. For example, purchase some labels that are small round colored dots. Put them in various places in your home, car or work area. Whenever you see one of these colored dots, practice deep breathing. Or, remind yourself with sticky notes, an on-screen computer message that pops up at various intervals during the day, schedule it in your daily appointment book, etc. Just be inventive in finding things that will remind you to take some time to de-stress.

● **“Is this worth the stress?”** Often we become involved in situations that simply aren’t worth the stress that they cause. Ask yourself this question occasionally, and if the answer is “No,” move on.

● **Be aware of situations you can’t control.** Have the wisdom to realize when you’re in a situation you can’t control, then accept it. Don’t waste your time trying to change it. Instead, focus on reacting to the situation in a stress-free manner.

● **Don’t bottle up your feelings.** Often stress occurs out of frustration and lack of communication. Learn positive ways to express your feelings and desires to people who may be causing you stress. If talking to a person isn’t the answer, then put your feelings on paper in a journal. Many times the simple act of 'getting it off your chest' in an appropriate manner will reduce your stress level.

● **Are chemicals the culprit?** Surprisingly, much of the stress you experience daily could be due to what you are putting into your body in the form of chemicals. Be sure to eat a balanced, healthy diet to assure you’re giving your body the nutrients it needs to operate and maximum efficiency.

- Caffeine is a stimulant. If you drink more than a couple cups a day, try decaf. You may find that switching to a good decaffeinated coffee will reduce a significant amount of stress.
- Alcohol in small doses may help you relax. However, in larger amounts it may increase stress as it disrupts sleep and causes hangovers. Large amounts over an extended

period will start damaging your body.

- Nicotine in the very short-term may appear to relax your body, but it doesn't. Nicotine's toxic effect raises the heart rate and stresses the body and lungs. Consider quitting! There are a number of stop-smoking aids available on the market today.
- Sugar can raise energy in the short term. Unfortunately, your body has to counteract the high dose of sugar in your blood by raising your insulin level. Once your blood-sugar level is normalized, the insulin will continue acting and you will experience a decrease in energy lower than before you ate the sugar. Try not to overtax your body by feeding it high dosages of sugar.

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