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Find Instant Calm

by Erin O'Donnell

When life gets out of hand, bring yourself back to center fast with these easy-to-do techniques



You're cut off while driving. Your children erupt into a screaming fight. Or you're five minutes away from an interview for the job of your dreams, and your composure evaporates in a rush of anxiety. When life delivers adversity, stress is the common response.

Your body kicks into action, preparing for a fight. The adrenal glands pump out adrenaline and noradrenaline—hormones that increase the heart rate, quicken breathing, raise blood pressure, and tense muscles. You're ready to take on the perceived threat to your safety or well-being.

Of course, in reality we rarely run from foes or physically challenge them. As a result, we don't burn off these powerful hormones, leaving them to "course

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through our bloodstream,” explains Herbert Benson, M.D., the Mind/Body Medical Institute associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School in Boston and a pioneer in stress research. In the short term, a pounding heart and sweaty palms can exacerbate the stressful emotions you’re already feeling. Left unchecked, this chemical mix sets you up for an array of physical and emotional problems, says Benson, including anxiety, depression, and intensified PMS and menopause symptoms.

The next time you are facing a stressful situation, stop yourself from spiraling out of control and bring yourself back to center with one of these techniques from stress experts.

The Mini

More than 35 years ago Benson identified the relaxation response, or the physical process that counteracts stress. His research proved that you can

actually slow down your heart rate and breathing when confronted with a challenge. This, in turn, helps your blood pressure drop and your muscles relax. The process involves two steps. First, you must repeat a word, sound, prayer, or movement; second, if thoughts or feelings distract you, “passively disregard them and return to the repetition,” Benson says. This exercise breaks “the train of everyday thought, including the fretting.”

A simple way to call up the relaxation response in a hurry, says Benson, is with a breathing technique called “the mini.” Take a deep breath in through your nose and hold it for three counts. Exhale fully through your nose or mouth, and then pause for three counts. Repeat three times. If your mind wanders, redirect your attention back to your breath.

Benson recommends practicing the mini in nonstressful situations first.

He adds that it works faster and better if you develop daily habits that encourage the relaxation response, such as 10 minutes of meditation.

Acupressure

A healing art based in Traditional Chinese Medicine, acupressure involves pressing specific points on your body to release muscle tension and stimulate circulation and the flow of *qi*, or life energy. Two points on the back of your neck known as the “gates of the mind” can ease stress and clear your mind, says Michael Reed Gach, Ph.D., founder of the Acupressure Institute in Berkeley, California, and producer of the guided self-care DVD *Acupressure for Stress Relief*. As an added bonus, he adds, pressing these points can stop headaches from developing.

Tilt your head back and place your thumbs at the top of your neck, just below the base of your skull, about 3

inches apart. Press these spots firmly but gently. "You don't want to press on the skull, but just underneath it," Gach explains. "If your thumbs are weak or arthritic, use your knuckles instead." As you press, take three to five slow, deep breaths. Finish by letting your hands float into your lap and your chin drop to your chest. Take an additional deep breath, and briefly scan your body to see how you feel.

Thought-Stopping

In the midst of a stressful event, your thoughts can intensify the storm inside of you. For example, say you're about to give an important presentation to a large audience. You might find yourself worrying that you'll get the facts wrong. This kind of worst-case-scenario thinking can increase the rush of stress hormones, worsening your pre-speech jitters.

A technique known as "thought-stopping" can help you halt these negative, obsessive thoughts, says Kenneth Ruggiero, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. The first step, he says, is to literally call a halt to this train of thought. If you're alone, say the word "Stop!" out loud. If you're around others, think it to yourself. Some people even find it useful to pinch themselves to disrupt those stressful thoughts, says Ruggiero. "This gives you a moment of distraction," he says, "and an opportunity to change your focus."

Next, choose a positive thought on which you'll focus instead, such as "I've given presentations before, and they went well," or "I know this material better than anyone in the audience." In doing so, says Ruggiero, you swap a negative, stress-inducing thought for a positive one. +

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