

# stressed?

# 30

## expert tips on how to cope

Stress, tension and anxiety are among the most prevalent and serious health risks of our time. Jo Lennox looks at 30 great ways to beat the stress monster.

**S**tress is a modern-day buzzword, although a precise definition remains contentious. It's characterised by an overload of stressors ranging from relationships, money and work pressures to global concerns like pollution and crime. The stress reaction dates to the fight or flight mode of cave dwellers, and although our fears may not be caused by a physical threat, the body still reacts in similar ways to emotional, physical and intellectual attacks. Psychologists and medical practitioners distinguish between good, stimulating stress and destructive stress, but the dividing line is fine.

**This guide will help you to function better and put more pleasure into your life.**

**1 recognise the symptoms.** Too much stress leads to burn-out. "The symptoms include headaches, migraines, ulcers, skin infections and diarrhoea," says psychologist and stress management expert Linda Kantor. According to Kantor, stress can affect our immunity and make us prone to infection. How we choose to handle our reactions determines how we cope.

**2 be kind to yourself.** Learn to diagnose your negative stress with the help of books, friends or therapy. Cultivate a positive self-image. "Accept yourself," says medical doctor and stress management consultant, Dr Arien van der Merwe. "Look at yourself in the mirror in the morning and say: 'Hi you gorgeous thing, I love you!' Stop tormenting yourself with guilt, regrets and things that might happen in the future."

**3 change your attitude.** Any bad experience can be grieved over and learnt from. It's over and can't be changed; your attitude is the only thing that can change. Looking for the positive in everything is easier than plaguing yourself with negative thoughts. Use tapes by experts like Louise Hay and Marianne Williamson.

**4 stay away from negative people.** Avoid negative personalities or help them become positive. Don't allow people to upset you; staying calm is your choice.

■ Read *Health & Happiness: Your Birthright* by Arien van der Merwe (Tafelberg, 1999).

**5 focus on pleasant things.** Don't dwell on negative experiences. At the same time, don't

deny or suppress your feelings. Observe them and turn your attention to enjoyable activities. A simple and extremely powerful exercise is to say thank you every day for at least five good things.

**6 manage your time wisely.** To avoid feeling overwhelmed by work and personal commitments, get organised and prioritise. Make a to-do list from most to least important and just start! It's amazing how stress levels drop if you stop thinking about what you have to do and just do it.

■ Look out for *Overcoming Stress* by Patsy Westcott (Salamander Books Ltd, 1997). For counselling and stress-management, contact The Vision Lodge on (011) 786 8814/6730.

**7 be tolerant.** "Go with the flow" and "don't push the river" became clichés because they're true. Notice when you are rigid and disapproving. Remind yourself not to judge, but to accept others as people travelling on their own paths in life — this is also a step to accepting yourself, and you'll get rid of an immense amount of frustration, negativity and worry.

**8 exercise.** Stress, in whatever form, is accumulative and requires release — exercise is an

excellent way to do this. Southern African Registered Professional Trainers (SARPT) managing director, Tanya Wyatt, says exercise is highly individual. "Some enjoy spinning, aerobics or weight training, others prefer dancing or walking. It's only important that you enjoy and feel comfortable with whatever you choose."

■ Contact your local gym, community centre or Tanya Wyatt at SARPT on (021) 422 1481 or [www.sarpt.co.za](http://www.sarpt.co.za) for more information.

**9 yoga.** Described 2 000 years ago as "the science of the mind", yoga, which means "union" is an excellent mental and physical de-stressor. The yoga postures, called asanas, relax and tone muscles, massage your inner organs and help you concentrate and still the mind.

■ Contact the Iyenger Yoga Institute of SA on (021) 762 2810, or, for a teacher in your area, contact Magda Inglethorpe at the Yoga Teachers Fellowship on (011) 973 4070.

**10 tai chi.** Based on the same principles as acupuncture, Tai Chi aims to balance your life energy, Chi. A Chinese martial art, its gentle exercises unite body and mind, relaxing you and helping you focus on breathing.

■ The International Tai Chi Society: Cape Town: (021) 58 8632; Gauteng: (011) 648 5527 or Durban: (031) 81 1406.

**11 stand up straight.** Poor posture can lead to stress as it intensifies muscular tension. We are often unaware of muscular tightening, and relieving this can create emotional and psychological suppleness as well. This lightness and ease is the hallmark of the Alexander Technique, in which "students" are made aware of their posture and taught to release stored tension. Standing correctly boosts confidence and a positive outlook.

■ For information, contact The South African Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (SASTAT) on (021) 447 9436.

**12 order a stress busta.** Melt away stress in the middle of your workday with a unique massage — the Stress Busta. A trained therapist visits your office and provides a seated massage for your neck, shoulders, arms, hands and back.

It involves no oils or disrobing and lasts as long as a tea-break. To book a Stress Busta, three colleagues must join in.

■ Contact Cindi at The Yantra Holistic Lifestyle Centre in Cape Town on (021) 419 5959.

**13 massage.** Massage therapy fulfils the need we all have for nurturing and touch, and it encourages the release of emotional blocks stored in our body tissue. The anti-stress benefits of massage include improved circulation and digestion, lower blood pressure and general relaxation.

To alleviate headaches and eye strain, give yourself a quick face massage. Rest your fingers on your temples, so that they take the weight off your neck. Using your two middle fingers, apply small circular fingertip pressure in a clockwise direction.

**14 body stress release.** Body stress is tension which has locked into physical structures as a result of stress overload. The stored tension affects the nervous and circulatory systems, causing pain, stiffness, numbness and postural distortions. In Body Stress Release, the practitioner gives a series of pressure tests while the recipient lies down, fully clothed. "Light, but definite pressure is applied to help release body stress," says therapist Janice Harrop-Allin. "The effects may be dramatic with instant relief from pain or improved posture. Body Stress Release does not treat disease, but enables the body to heal itself." Two to four half-hour sessions may be required.



Photograph: B. Andersson.

"Break out of mindsets which restrict your personal growth and create stress. Stop tormenting yourself with past regrets and start living in the present."

■ For more information, call the Body Stress Release Centre on (011) 803 1538, or the Body Stress Release Association on (021) 762 0317.

**15 ten minutes to change your life.** Cardiologist Dr Herbert Benson, chief of behavioural medicine at New England Deaconess Hospital, found that a quiet mind and peaceful heart leads to a healthy body, a sense of well-being and spiritual growth. His technique, known as the Relaxation Response, is highly recommended.

Choose a one-syllable word with a low tonality like love, sun, one. Sit comfortably in a quiet place. Close your eyes and take deep breaths. Breathe in to the slow count of four, pushing out your stomach muscles. Hold to the count of four and exhale forcefully. Repeat five times.

Relax your muscles, starting with your feet and moving to your ankles, calves, thighs, buttocks, stomach, back, chest, shoulders, arms, hands, neck and head. Feel tension in the muscles and concentrate on releasing it. Breathing in and out, say the word out loud or in your mind. Open your eyes gently. Do the exercise for 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day.

**16 use your brainpower.** "Balancing right and left brain activities is a great way to reduce stress levels," says Dr Arien van der Merwe. The more dominant left brain is responsible for our analytical, verbal, rational and logical abilities. The right brain is responsible for emotions, feelings, intuition, visualisation and creativity. We generally make use of our left brains, so make time to engage in creative activities — pottery classes, drawing, listening to music, writing — which engage the right brain hemisphere.

**17 get in tune.** "Music has the power to soothe the soul," says music therapy expert Sheila Woodward. "It can change your mood, enliven or calm the spirit. What is soothing to one may agitate another, so work out how different music affects you. Studies

show that work stress can be reduced with background music. It also increases productivity and learning capacity. Listen to calming music in traffic, in the office or when you feel stressed and tense."

■ Contact Yetta or Gerrie at The Music Therapy Society of SA: (021) 762 3523 or Liz at Association of Professional Music Therapists of SA: (021) 448 3549.

**18 colour therapy.** Every human cell is light-sensitive, and we take in colour through our eyes, skin and senses. Each organ in the human body vibrates at a particular frequency, as does each shade of every colour.

Colour therapist Lauren Snitcher explains that for healing, the appropriate colours must be applied to particular areas of the body. If you suffer from stress-related anger, balance an excess of red with its opposite colour — green — to restore harmony. Apply these colours to your life through your home or office decor, candles or your clothing:

*Red:* for grounding, strengthening, stimulating courage and boosting feelings of security.

*Orange:* as an antidepressant, for confidence, energy and a feeling of freedom.

*Yellow:* for mental clarity or as a nerve tonic.

*Green:* for balancing, relaxing, harmonising and as an antidote to stress.

*Blue:* for healing, calming and pain relief.

*Indigo:* for intuition and insight.

*Violet:* for relaxing, spiritual growth, direction and the reduction of violence.

■ To find out about colour therapy, contact Lauren Snitcher at (021) 434 3322.

**19 change your thoughts.** Neuro Linguistic Programming transforms emotions like grief, guilt and anxiety into positive states. One of NLP's fundamental principles, says expert Min McLoughlin, is that we respond to our internal experiences of the world, not to the world.

To experience NLP, apply this technique: think about something which makes you feel stressed, anxious or nervous. As you think

about it, notice a picture. Move the picture away from you, watching it shrink as it gets further away. If you leave it out there, you still have the information about it, but it won't bother you. To beat stress, become aware of how you represent experiences to yourself. Then change the sub-modalities until the picture no longer has power over you.

■ For more information, contact Min McLoughlin of Advanced Human Technologies and Sapphire Training Consultants on (021) 762 5732 or Peter Armstrong & Associates on (011) 784 3229.

**20 ayurveda.** The ancient art of Ayurveda seeks to ensure that everyone has a balance of the Ayurvedic bodily humours, Vata, Pitta, Kapha, or a combination of these. Says Ayurveda expert Bernie Rowen, the mind/body mechanism, with its psychoneuroimmunology, is important in Ayurvedic healing. Diet, marma therapy and lifestyle counselling achieve this.

■ Contact Bernie Rowen, (021) 96 5233, or Lisa at the Centre for Mind Body Training, (011) 958 1462.

**21 meditate.** Meditation is a safe, simple and powerful tool to bridge stress. "Meditation aligns us with the deep, inner part of our nature from where we understand that everything has meaning and purpose," explains meditation expert Natalia Baker. "It teaches us that we are loving, powerful beings, and we cannot judge anything or anyone. Meditation enables us to live from pure soul." A 20-minute daily meditation maintains relaxation. Try these techniques:

**visualisation** — Relax your body and close your eyes. Think of a place in nature where you would love to be. It can be imaginary or somewhere you know. Think of yourself there and experience it fully by inwardly engaging with your senses. See colours and shapes, feel textures like the ground under you and the breeze on your skin. Experience the atmosphere. Recharge yourself by absorbing the energy of this place.

**white light breathing** — breathe in slowly, drawing radiant white light into the base of your spine. As you exhale, let it radiate out of

your body, washing away stress, tension, negativity or fear. Continue until you feel relaxed and clear.

■ For an extensive meditation course or private consultation, contact Natalia on (021) 788 2900 or the Transcendental Meditation centre in your city.

**22 aromatherapy.** Aromatherapy is the art of massage and healing through essential oils. The oils can be relaxing, stimulating, detoxifying, balancing or uplifting. With a careful selection of oils, regular treatments can aid the healing process, and strengthen your immune system and circulation. Many essential oils can be used to deal with stress. Geranium, lavender, neroli, rose and ylang ylang help you to relax if you feel tense, irritable or angry. Basil, bergamot, cinnamon, orange, rosemary and lime are uplifting if you feel tired. Lavender is essential for every home and can be used in the bath, burner or for body massages.

■ For information, contact The Association of Aromatherapists SA: Cape Town: (021) 531 7314; Gauteng: (011) 672 9224; Kwazulu-Natal: (031) 86 3653.

**23 apply acupuncture.** This ancient Chinese technique is an effective and painless stress treatment. It involves inserting fine needles at specific points on the body, based on the theory that Chi, the body's essential life force, circulates throughout the body along specific pathways called meridians. If Chi becomes blocked by stress, the system is disrupted, and illness results. When Chi energy stagnates, tension often results. Acupuncture can balance the Chi, or target specific imbalances.

■ For information, contact oriental medicine doctor and naturopathy expert Dr Arthur Seltzer on (021) 797 8145, Dr Trevor Huntley on (011) 472 1860, or Dr Frederic Motz on (011) 784 0391/2.

**24 eat right.** Certain foods and eating patterns drain energy and create stress. Avoid refined carbohydrates like crisps and biscuits which provide a quick-fix by releasing glucose into the bloodstream; in the long-term, however, they cause sugar levels to plummet, leaving you tired. Fresh fruit, vegetables and herbal teas do more good in the short- and long-term. Pasta, potatoes and milk also induce serenity.

Resist coffee and chocolate. Caffeine doesn't help relieve stress, but a banana can, so grab a

couple of bananas instead. Their concentration of potassium, which helps to lower blood pressure, is excellent for stressed bodies. Carob and halva, available from health shops, are also good alternatives to chocolate.

**25 vitamins and minerals.** Vitamin B complex is essential for digestion, the nervous system and for coping with stress. It boosts energy levels and relieves fatigue, irritability and confusion. Magnesium, also known as the anti-stress mineral, helps fight depression and keeps the circulatory system healthy. Zinc is needed for 80 enzyme activities, and it directs and maintains the flow of body processes and cell maintenance.

**26 use herbs.** Safe and effective, herbal medicines are revolutionising the treatment of mild to moderate anxiety, depression and insomnia. Available without a prescription, they are free of the side-effects and addiction often associated with synthetic drugs. Consult a specialist regarding dosage and strength.

*Kava* has a calming effect and improves mental functioning and mood.

*Hypericum (St John's Wort)* is a natural antidepressant which can relieve anxiety, sleep disturbances and worry.

*Valerian (nature's Valium)* is a widely-used sedative for nervousness and insomnia. Valerian has a long history of safety and limited side-effects.

■ Find out more from the book *Healing Anxiety with Herbs* by Dr Harold Bloomfield (Thorsons, 1998). For a practitioner in your area, contact the South African Association of Herbalism Practitioners in Cape Town: (021) 96 5200.

**27 water wonders.** Reducing external stimuli in a safe, soothing environment can lead to serenity. "That's why flotation tanks, with their womb-like environment of peace, weightlessness and harmony, are so good," says flotation therapist Graham Gauntlett. A flotation session frees up to 90 percent of the energy in the central nervous system, which leads to relaxation and meditation. It reduces blood pressure, increases circulation and removes toxins. It can also increase productivity and awareness.

■ For information on flotation tanks, contact The StillPoint Holistic Centre on (021) 448 3353 or Flotation Tank (011) 706 2729.

**28 get enough sleep.** The human body needs eight hours' sleep every night to be completely rested. Few of us get this, and we also often sleep on artificial fibre, meaning that the body needs to adjust accordingly. Sleep researcher Maria Jensen recommends sleeping on and under natural cotton materials to keep the body at the right temperature for a restful night's sleep. "Natural fibres keep you as warm as you need to be, while excess heat is allowed to escape through the sheets," she explains. She also recommends eating the main meal of the day no later than three o'clock in the afternoon. "The digestive system shouldn't need to work at night."

For optimum rest, get enough fresh air and drink sage or chamomile tea before going to bed.

■ For more information, contact Jensen Japan on (021) 24 0406.

**29 laugh, laugh, laugh.** When we laugh, our diaphragm moves up and down and our metabolic oxygenation levels increase dramatically. Our brain also releases endorphins — feel-good chemicals which automatically lighten up the whole system, says sound therapist and *Natural Health Directory* co-editor Ineke Van der Wal. She recommends watching your favourite comedy, going out with good friends and inducing smiles by watching baby humans or animals.

■ To learn to use your voice for healing on all levels, contact Ineke on (021) 439 0675.

**30 take a break.** Restore your emotional and mental energy levels by getting enough physical recuperation. Take time out on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis to regenerate after stressful periods. Build time into your daily schedule for rest, use weekends wisely and make sure that you change your environment regularly for relaxed getaways.

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