



Feel like things are rushing towards you? Here's your chance to relax at last. **Jane Alexander** investigates the **best anti-stress techniques at home or at work**

Sure-fire STRESSBUSTERS

three out of four of us suffer from stress. It's the 21st-century complaint that contributes to heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes and other illnesses, and compromises the immune system, leaving us more susceptible to colds and flu. The good news is that most stressbusting techniques can easily be incorporated into everyday life.

Whether you're at work, at home, on a bus or walking down the street, there are anti-stress tactics you can try to bring calm back into your life. And if you want to be cosseted in your quest to regain that sense of inner harmony, there are plenty of pampering anti-stress treats to pick you up instantly.

Try to make at least one of them part of your daily routine – you'll notice a difference within days.

PRIVATE MOMENTS

Take advantage of a few quiet moments alone to try the following stressbusting methods:

1 Meditation Long proven to reduce stress, it's not difficult to meditate. Basically, you have to stop, sit still and

follow one of these breathing techniques:

- Focus on your breathing, paying attention to the inhalation and exhalation. Imagine that you are breathing out stress and negativity, and breathing in relaxation and calm.
- Sit and watch a candle burn. Allow your eyes to focus softly on the flame. Every time your attention wavers, gently bring it back.
- Sit quietly, close your eyes and count slowly from one to ten, focusing on each number as you count. If your attention wavers, return to one.

Muscle clench Focus on each part of your body, from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, tensing, clenching and gritting every part. Hold yourself tightly clenched for five seconds, then relax, allowing everything to flop; repeat.

Ujayi This yogic breathing technique works instantly, reducing stress levels within minutes. Breathe in deeply through your nose, contracting the muscles around the top of your windpipe. You should hear a gentle hissing sound. Now breathe out as slowly as possible, closing off the muscles around the epiglottis.

Your breath will sound rasping, rather like Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. Breathe in and out in this way six times. Now relax and breathe normally. Repeat this cycle (six ujayi breaths, then six normal breaths) for four cycles.

Make a noise Making certain sounds can decrease your heartbeat and pulse rate, calm respiration and relax brain waves. Try the following:

- Sit and hum gently. Notice where you feel the hum in your body. Does it change if you alter the note?
- Try deep sighing and groaning – both release accumulated stress.
- Sing along to cheerful music. If you feel irritable, listen to music with a strong beat, rather than soft, soothing sounds which will make you more feel tetchy!

SOMETHING TO SHARE

You can try out these suggestions with other people:

Bubble trouble Keep a piece of bubblewrap in your pocket. American psychologist Dr Kathleen Dillon found that popping bubblewrap reduces stress >>

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levels by releasing muscular tension. It may be rather stressful for others to have to listen to, though, so make sure it's a group thing!

No is the word Assertiveness is a great antidote to stress. Psychiatrist Dr George F Solomon, a pioneer in psychoneuroimmunology (the study of how our minds affect our bodies) reveals, "When we allow ourselves to be dragged into a role or activity to please others, we inevitably become extremely stressed."

Start small. Practise being assertive with people you don't know – in queues, on the bus, in shops. The Nice Factor is a course designed to help you say no. For details, call Impact Factory on (020) 7226 1877.

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TREAT YOURSELF

Some anti-stress treatments are an excuse to totally pamper yourself. Try the following:

Float away Flotation tanks are a proven stressbuster. Even one session can activate the "relaxation response", in which the parasympathetic nervous system takes over, decreasing muscular tension and filling the body with a sense of relaxation and wellbeing. You can also stressbust in your own bath. Add 450g (1lb) Epsom salts to the bath water, which should be at body temperature. Spend at least half an hour soaking. (But if you have heart trouble or are diabetic, consult your GP first.)

Soothing sounds Carefully select the music you listen to. Tests have shown that half an hour of harmonious classical music can be as effective as a dose of Valium. Tibetan chanting may be even more powerful. "On a purely physiological level, Tibetan chanting helps reduce stress," says UK sound therapist Susan Lever. "Our heart rate, respiration and brain waves all slow down. It also charges the cortex of the brain, making the listener feel energised,"

she says. *Sacred Tibet* by the Tibetan Gyume Monks and *Chakra Chants* by Jonathan Goldman are good introductions. For mail-order details, call Susan Lever on 01287-636350.

Aromatherapy Some essential oils can soothe stress and strain. Put a few drops of lavender or camomile oil on a tissue and sniff throughout the day.

INSTANT PICK-ME-UPS

Need to de-stress in a hurry? Try these.

Move it About of vigorous exercise increases the brain's alpha waves, the patterns of electrical activity associated with relaxation. It also decreases muscle tension while increasing your heart rate, so you feel very relaxed, but also alert.

A one-off burst of activity will calm you down, but if you stay fit by exercising at least three days a week for 20 to 30 minutes per session, you'll become far less prone to chronic tension. A study of women who began a regime of walking or jogging felt less anxious and more relaxed after six weeks.

Shiatsu A highly effective Eastern remedy for stress dating back thousands of years. Tap all over your head with your fingertips. Gently tug your hair and then release. Pinch all around your jawline with your fingertips. Clench your jaw, open your mouth wide and say, "Aaaah". Sit at a table or desk and cup your palms gently

over your eyes. Relax your shoulders and sink into the soothing darkness for as long as you can.

Ayurveda Spend at least five minute softly massaging the area of your "third eye" (just above your nose in the centre of your forehead) with your index finger lubricated with a little sesame oil. This ayurvedic practice is incredibly soothing and is said to nourish the brain.

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

You are what you eat Stress-proof your body with food. Orange juice provides stress-relieving vitamin C. Bananas are high in vitamin B6, which protects the body from stress. Fibre (from wholemeal bread or cereal, vegetables and fruit) and live yogurt protect your digestive system. Soups are soothing, and add cornbread, which is also relaxing and calming.

Avoid coffee, tea and fizzy drinks through the day – they are dehydrating which provides extra stress for the body. Drink fresh water (warm or cold) or herbal tea instead.

Your sanctuary Conjure up an image of your own "special place", real or imaginary, where you feel safe. It could be a beautiful desert island or a cosy room. Start practising when you aren't stressed and repeat until you can summon up "your" place at will. **W&H**

LATEST AMERICAN IMPORT...

Make a fresh start this year with "Mindfulness", a new technique that promises to put joy back into everyday life. It was pioneered by American stress expert Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, who spent years researching the most effective stressbusting techniques and adapted Buddhist and yogic practices for Western consumption. Mindfulness, he says, is just stopping every

so often to become aware of the moment, to "just breathe and let go". The results of this simple technique are impressive: anxiety and depression decreases while illnesses such as heart disease, colitis and psoriasis have shown improvement. Try the following several times a day and become aware of:

- Where your body touches the ground;

any aches and pains; any tension

- Your breathing – but don't try to change it
- Your thoughts – don't try to stifle any anxieties, just let them slide
- Eating – notice the taste, smell, texture and feel of the food
- Walking – be aware of your feet and the world around you
- In the bath – become aware of the feeling of the water on your skin