



Advice to  
help you live  
& work more  
productively.

# 5 S T R E S S

rules for reducing stress

**relax.  
managing  
stress  
shouldn't  
be stressful.**

In today's results-oriented business environment, many workers have no time to attend even a half-day seminar on developing stress-management skills. In fact, trying to schedule time to attend such seminars only causes more stress. And, while some people like to alleviate tension with a trip to a spa or a weekend in the country, you don't necessarily need to go to such great lengths. The basic concepts behind stress management are simple. In fact, many of the following short and long-term solutions we have detailed here are things you can implement in no time at all.



So, to help you reduce stress on the job and in your life away from work, take a moment out of your busy schedule to read these 30 practical tips you can use today to combat stress for the rest of your life.



**1**

## **laugh more.**

Humor is one of the best stress-busters around. A good laugh relaxes muscles, lowers blood pressure, and may reduce hormones that create stress and suppress immunity. Smiling helps, too. Research shows that facial expression — whether real or phony — can change a person's mood.

**2**

## **stop being a perfectionist.**

You don't have to accept shoddy work, but pick a couple of things you can let slide. Don't let your quest for perfection and fear of failure paralyze you with anxiety. People who strive to be all things to all people are prime candidates for this type of stress.

**3**

## **control your anger.**

People who are chronically angry have four to seven times the risk of dying of heart disease and cancer as those who are not anger-prone (Duke University).

And people who seethe silently are at even greater risk than those who are openly hostile. Contrary to the popular idea that so-called, "Type A" attributes (being time-pressured, overachieving, and impatient) are what pose the greatest risk, researchers now believe that hostility is the key personality trait for predicting heart disease. Hostile people get worked up over incidents that the rest of us don't think twice about.

Whenever you're angry, ask yourself three questions: "Is the issue important?", "Is my anger justified?" and, "Can I do anything to fix the situation?" If the answer to any of these is "no," the only appropriate action is to calm yourself down. If, on the other hand, you answer "yes" to the three questions, you need to turn your anger into assertive action.

## **4** slow down.

We've developed dysfunctional attitudes about time because we now view it in an open-ended fashion, as if a given hour has potentially infinite utility. In other words, we're substituting quicker activities for slower ones so we can stretch out every hour. We used to have lunch, then we had fast-food restaurants, now we have drive-through restaurants. All of this has the reverse effect from what we might expect: it makes us even more aware of time, even more stressed, and produces a culture in which efficiency is the most important value.

## **5** don't procrastinate.

When something important has to be done, tackle it immediately. This, of course, is easier said than done. But the fact is, you'll perform better if you avoid caffeine-charged, all-night super-sessions. If you're a procrastinator, think of your project as a stalled car that needs to be pushed — it takes work to get the car going, but when it develops momentum it's easy to keep it moving. Quit making excuses and just start pushing.

## **6** stop feeling guilty.

Guilt is the most wasteful of all human emotions. When someone throws you a ball of guilt, let it go by. Learn to say "no" more often — and stick to your decision. Don't wallow around in guilt until you give in. That, experts say, will only leave you feeling angry and resentful. Don't lay guilt on yourself either. If you used to run five days a week, but now just have time for three workouts, don't berate yourself. Focus on the good you are doing. As adults, we're responsible for our own happiness.

## **7** let go of grudges.

Research shows that when you relive a bad experience, you also relive the physiology that accompanied the stressful moment. One disaster can become 50 disasters. It's a horror show that replays in your head as if it were taking place right then and there. When something really aggravating happens — say, when a business deal falls through — discard the experience. Just throw it away and move on to something more productive. Otherwise, you run the risk of carrying this invisible load wherever you go.

## **8** follow your dreams.

Look at the big picture — your life priorities. Make sure that the things you do add up to who you really are or want to be. Don't take a job or join an organization because you feel it's what others want you to do or because it's something you wanted to do in the past. Put your energy into things that really matter to you now. Make a list of the things that make your life rewarding: goals or dreams you're working toward. Write no more than 12 items, then cut your list to six. Jot the six items on a small card, something you can carry with you during the day. Use your list as your moral compass and check it twice daily.

## **9** pick your battles carefully.

Concern yourself with the things that you can control — not the issues that are out of your hands. Rather than try to change your company's major policies, go for something smaller; like having a radio in your cubicle. If you're being dragged on an unwanted family vacation, don't attempt to solve three decades of family problems in one weekend. You're setting yourself up for frustration.

lack of activity  
destroys the good  
condition of every  
human being, while  
movement and  
methodical physical  
exercise save  
& preserve it

Plato



## **10** don't equate work with worth.

We've become walking resumes — we are what we do...no more, no less. With this mindset, a notion like leisure doesn't make sense. You're always compelled to be doing something; otherwise you're nobody.

We admire rushed people. We think that makes them important. We think anyone who is rushing around at lightning speed, with a cell phone attached to their ear, barking orders at everyone else, is a role model. What they really are is a model for a heart attack.

## **11** exercise.

More than 150 studies confirm that exercise can be a potent antidote to stress. Whether a workout pumps stress-busting endorphins into the bloodstream or simply offers a relaxing time-out is anyone's guess. But research has shown that a bout of exercise increases the brain's alpha waves — patterns of electrical activity associated with relaxation. Not only can a single bout of exercise calm you down, but staying fit — exercising at least three days a week for 20 to 30 minutes per session — also makes you less prone to tension.

## **12** do less.

We're trying to cram too many activities into our leisure time, experts say. You don't need to belong to a book club and a bowling team and take golf lessons and see every new movie. Choose one or two activities and engross yourself in them. When you pick an activity, don't think about the 20 places you're not going or the 20 paintings you're not going to see. It's that sense of missing out that makes us feel life is frantic. Really, it's not.

## 13 turn off the TV.

Television seems relaxing — we spend 40 percent of our leisure time glued to it — yet studies show people feel less relaxed and satisfied after watching TV than they did before. Watching TV crowds our waking lives, keeping us from talking with friends, playing the guitar, even sleeping. Cut down on your tube time by choosing shows more carefully, recording programs and fast-forwarding through commercials. Better yet, shut the thing off and enjoy the real people and places around you.

## 14 share time with friends.

A recent Gallup poll found that nearly half of us say we'd rather be alone during stressful times. Yet research shows it's better to share our troubles with others. Studies show that when people undergo difficult medical procedures, those who go alone experience a greater increase in blood pressure than those whose hands are held by a trusted friend.

## 15 turn chores into games.

Thirty percent of our waking time is spent in maintenance routines like dressing, showering, yard work and shopping. For most people, 30 percent is a big cross to bear because they figure it's all wasted. However, if you can learn to make these activities fun, they'll be over before you know it. One strategy is to share chores with a friend or family member. You can turn these mindless routines that eat away at your time into something you don't even notice anymore, or something that you enjoy altogether.



## 16 go outside.

In nature, time is basically fixed — the sun rises, the sun sets. You can't manipulate it with lights, emails and computers. In the outdoors, we feel less rushed. Research suggests we don't even need to be in nature to benefit from its calming qualities. In a study of patients recovering from surgery, patients who had a view of trees spent less time in the hospital, took fewer pain medications and developed fewer complications than patients who looked out onto a brick wall. If you can't get to the real thing, hang a nature poster on your wall or buy a screen saver for your computer. Scenes with water, such as a gently flowing brook, seem to be particularly effective.

## 17 eat better.

Stress and poor nutrition: a vicious cycle. When people are under stress they tend to eat all the wrong foods, and that ends up fueling the stress rather than helping them cope. If you're under stress, make sure to eat a low sugar breakfast and limit your daily coffee intake to no more than three cups. Toss out your cookies and stuff your desk drawer with complex carbohydrate snacks such as fruit and crackers. Also consider a magnesium supplement; stress drains the body's cells of magnesium, and magnesium deficiency tends to increase stress-hormone levels.

## 18 put the "vacate" back into your vacations.

The time people spend for each vacation has shrunk more than a third over the last decade — to a paltry 4.6 nights away from home — and it no longer releases us from work. With wireless email, cell phones and laptops, it's as if we're on a long leash to the office. Although play is an antidote to stress, little of what we do on vacation actually qualifies. We see nature from a bus. We are served at the luau. We're led around the museum. But real play can't be done for you, psychologists say. It's spontaneous, unstructured, even chaotic. So leave behind your laptop and don't check your voice mail. Keep your trips simple and help shape the action. Remember: play isn't what you do, it's how you feel about what you do...you must be in control. It doesn't matter whether you choose hiking or boating or countless other activities. Companionship, laughter, reflection, freedom — these are the raw materials of the perfect vacation.

**19**

## **de-junk your home.**

People don't realize it, but an overload of "stuff" is a terrific source of stress. The average household accumulates 300 pages of paper a day and contains 25 percent more furniture and 75 percent more toys than it needs. And everything owned has to be tended to — you have to clean it, guard it, store it and repair it. All that attention eats up time and money. The solution isn't to organize all this stuff. It's to throw it out. Once something is eliminated, it can no longer clutter your life. If you don't use it, toss it. Every time you walk through the garage, snatch one piece of junk to throw away. Get in the habit of making on-the-spot decisions. Go through the mail as soon as it arrives and put everything in the trash or in a file. Prevention is nine-tenths of the clutter cure.

**20**

## **get a pet.**

They slobber, they shed and they mess up your carpet, but pets make up for it all in a big way — by buffering their owners against everyday stresses. People who acquire pets report fewer minor health problems such as colds, flu, backaches, etc. They tend to think less about their problems and be happier with their lives. Animals may even help ward off heart disease. Blood pressure drops sharply when people simply stroke a cat or dog, according to a University of Pennsylvania study. Heart attack victims are more likely to be alive one year later if they own animals. And seniors with pets make far fewer visits to the doctor than those without.

## **21** clean off your desk.

Most people waste the better part of an hour a day looking for things on their desk. Five seconds here, two minutes there — it's subtle, but it really adds up. Banish those piles. Go through each one and dump every unnecessary paper. Throw it out or pass it on. As for the papers you need to keep, make sure each one fits into an appropriate folder. Create new folders right away and file all related papers together. Make use of those file cabinets your company assigned to you.

## **22** make a master list.

After you've cleared the piles off your desk, you'll need something to remind you of what has to be done. Make a list of every pending project that will command your attention — both short-term and long-term — preferably on a letter-sized pad, or in your Outlook "Tasks." Keep the list on your desk or computer so you can refer to it throughout the day. Don't bother writing down your daily goals in an appointment book. If you don't get the task done that day, you'll have to copy the information over to the next day and it might slip through the cracks. Use a computer planner that automatically moves unfinished tasks to the next day.

## **23** take breaks.

Any break during a hectic day will help you calm down, but those that work best are the ones you do every day and for at least 20 minutes. It doesn't matter what you do with your time-out, as long as it changes the tempo of your day. You can meditate, play the piano, read poetry or take a walk.

## **24** avoid interruptions.

People popping into your office with questions, a phone that rings all day, even unnecessary email messages can be frustrating thieves of time and momentum. When you've got a project that requires lots of concentration, make an appointment with yourself just as you would for any other important meeting. Let your voice mail pick up your calls, close your office door, or hide out in the conference room where no one can find you. If your job requires you to spend a lot of time conferring with coworkers, establish regular "office hours" in which to do it. The same goes for returning phone calls.

## **25** go home on time.

Sometime around the 1920s, historians say, work became the new religion. It still is. Working long hours is considered a virtue; at the same time going home is thought of as a weakness and an indulgence. Families and friends are for slackers. It's amazing how many people stay late at work when they don't have to because a senior executive of the company may show up and notice. Often, however, employees boost their careers when they stop working so hard. When people make up their minds and say enough is enough — "I'm not going to buck for that promotion, I'm just going to do my job well and have a good life on the side" — that's when people often get promoted. The boss starts saying, "How come this guy's so relaxed? He's doing his job well but he's not anxious. He would be a good manager. He would make other people feel comfortable." If you appear willing to stay late all the time, you're sending signals that you're willing to have extra work dumped on you.

## 26 work less.

The typical family puts in a thousand more work-hours a year today than they did 25 years ago. In our work habits, we have deviated from much of the industrialized world. Yes, Japan does outwork us, but we put in more hours than any country in Europe. Corporate America hasn't caught on to the concept that there's more to life than work; talk of a shorter work week is almost nonexistent. Still, a minority of workers have taken matters into their own hands. Some have negotiated a four day, 32-hour work week in exchange for a 20 percent pay cut. Some couples have given up one income, realizing that most of it is going to child care, higher taxes, a tiring commute and takeout dinners — rather than contributing to a better life.

go confidently  
in the direction  
of your dreams  
live the life you  
have imagined

Thoreau



## **27** ask questions.

It's easy to get stressed out if you don't know how to tackle a particular task, yet people are often afraid to ask questions. The fear is that it will undermine your credibility. However, if you nail down your obligations right from the start, you'll not only save time but you'll feel more in control.

## 28 make your job fun.

Studies show that people enjoy their work most when they're experiencing "flow" — a complete absorption in the activity at hand, a deep sense of exhilaration and clarity, and a feeling that there's nothing else you would rather be doing. That's probably not how most of us describe our work, but anyone can develop a knack for creating "flow" experiences at our jobs. The key is to approach work more as a game than a job. Invent tricks to make it more interesting. Transform stress into an opportunity to learn.

## 29 delegate.

We often say, "If you want it done right, do it yourself." But, the fact is, we just don't have the time to do everything ourselves. Decide which things you absolutely must do yourself, which tasks deserve your all-out effort, and let somebody else do the others. If you give everything the same priority, you won't be able to do anything well. By delegating, you'll not only save time and produce better work, you might also boost morale around the office by showing others that you trust them to take over some of your tasks.

## 30 get more involved.

Not all of us can be our own boss, but we can gain more control over workday stresses. One way is to take on more responsibility (without working longer hours). Get more engaged in how work gets done. Come to meetings prepared and contribute ideas, rather than doodle on your notepad. If you aren't inspired by a new assignment, propose a better one. The less control people have over their work, studies show, the more likely they are to suffer stress-related illnesses, from frequent stomachaches to high blood pressure to heart disease.

## about Ajilon

Ajilon is a global leader in managed services and professional staffing with nearly 500 offices operating in 17 territories in North America, Europe and Asia Pacific.

Worldwide, Ajilon has divisions in information technology, engineering, finance and accounting, legal, high-end office support, communications, and sales & marketing.

In North America, **Ajilon Office** offers clients specialized administrative and management professionals on a temporary and direct-hire basis.

**Ajilon Finance** specializes in the temporary and direct-hire placement of premier accounting, finance and bookkeeping professionals.

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To learn more about how Ajilon Office can deliver top talent to your organization, contact your local representative. And don't forget to ask about our other guidebooks, *Rules for Hiring Great Employees* and *Rules for Retaining Key Employees*.

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