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7 ways science can help you manage stress

Well-being has many facets. Physical well-being—eating right and exercising the body—is a given, but mental well-being is also crucial to our overall health. However, our mental well-being is commonly undermined by anxiety as one in 14 worldwide are affected at any given time.

While stress, as we all know, is also a ubiquitous part of our busy lives. In response to both anxiety and stress, the brain activates several neural peptide systems leading to the release of adrenal hormones. Those hormones unleash a flight or fight response, which then feeds back to the brain potentiating the response. This urgent response is appropriate if we are, perhaps, fleeing a tiger or fighting off a bear, but not if we are just stressed.

So how can we modify this response? Here are seven steps that, according to research, can help:

1. Take control

The act of confronting the problem is in itself empowering. Passive thinking like “I can’t do anything” will only make your stress worse. If you are stressed, the first step to feeling better is to identify the cause and begin to think of solutions.

2. Be active

There is good evidence that exercise has a link to greater self-esteem and well-being through chemical changes in the brain, like giving off endorphins and providing better sleep. We don’t need to spend hours in the gym either. Less than two hours of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week (such as fast walking or cycling) can do the trick.

3. Connect

Reach out to people around you—family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. This allows us to share feelings and also support others. Have lunch with a colleague, volunteer at a local school or hospital, or take a class.

4. Keep learning

Gaining new skills can give us a sense of achievement and confidence. Try signing up for a cooking course, learning a new musical instrument, visiting a gallery or museum, or go dancing. Instead of focusing on gaining qualifications, use the experience as mental stimulation. Setting targets and hitting them can create positive feelings of achievement. Challenge yourself, whether at work or in your personal life.

5. Give to others

The more you give, the happier you may feel. Even the smallest act can count, like a smile or a “thank you;” or larger ones such as volunteering in the local community. Helping and supporting others and working toward a common goal is good. If you don’t have time to volunteer, try doing someone a favor every day, such as going on a coffee run for your coworkers. Doing something kind stimulates the reward area of the brain, creating positive feelings.

6. Work smarter


Rather than working harder, prioritize your activities and leave the least important task for last. You may need to accept that your inbox will never read “zero” at the end of the day. Also, schedule in some personal time each day, even if it’s just a few minutes.

7. Be mindful

Be aware of your thoughts and feelings, and when your thoughts take over the present moment. Remember these are simply mental events that do not need to control us. Be aware, even as we go about our daily routine by appreciating the journey to work or taking a lunchtime walk.

During meditation, increased activity has been shown to occur in brain areas that are involved in the processing of emotions (such as happiness or sadness or fear). This processing is necessary for an appropriate reaction to the situations generating those emotions. The increased activity during meditation can be thought of as exercising these areas of the brain, allowing them to then work more effectively at regulating our emotional responses. Brain composition or morphology also changes with just eight weeks of meditation, with a reduction in stress correlating positively with decreases in grey matter density in the amygdala.

The evidence that mindfulness exercises matter keeps growing. A meta-analysis from the Netherlands of 15 mindful exercise studies showed that meditation had a beneficial impact on depression, stress, anxiety, and well-being. These studies show the potential for online mindfulness exercises to really contribute to improvements in overall mental health. Another example that



provides evidence for the value of increased mindfulness comes from a 2016 Australian study of Human Services professionals. For these psychologists, social workers, counselors, and foster care workers, employment-related stressors commonly lead to traumatic stress. This study found that the lowest levels of psychological distress and burnout were found in those with the highest level of mindfulness.

As behavioral scientist and social psychologist Simon Young, Ph.D., said: "It is a tribute to the accumulated wisdom of humankind that a traditional Buddhist meditation practice going back 2,500 years which was originally designed in part to deal with human suffering, has been successfully adopted to reduce stress and anxiety in healthy people."

So, the take-home message? We can influence our levels of stress and anxiety, with simple well-tried social techniques, and with a purposeful application of mindfulness.