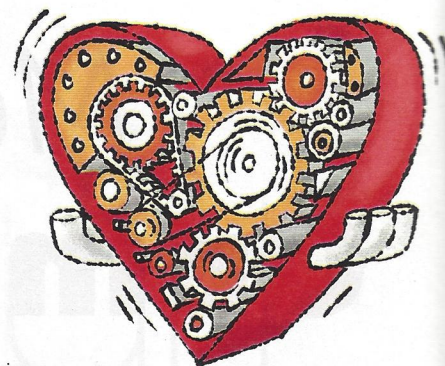


STRESS MANAGEMENT

Four experts give lots of realistic ways to cope with life's pressures so you can safeguard your heart and your overall health.



the mind-body guru

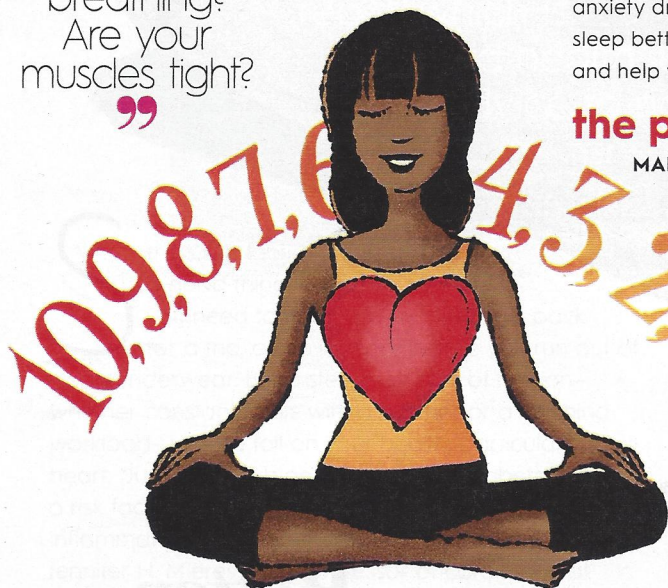
AGGIE CASEY, R.N., M.S.N.; co-author of *Mind Your Heart*; nurse manager, cardiac rehabilitation, Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital

We're so used to being stressed that we often don't recognize the warning signs (headaches, tight neck and shoulders, grinding your teeth) that stress is taking a toll. Stop and check in with yourself at least once a day. How's your breathing? Are your muscles tight? Take a few deep breaths to let go of the tension. Simply being more aware of your reaction to stress, and taking a few minutes to breathe, can help tame your body's reaction.

You can also try these simple breathing

exercises: Count very slowly from 10 down to one, saying the number on each out-breath. For example: Breathe in, and as you exhale, say "10." Inhale, then as you exhale, say "nine," slowly working your way to

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zero. Another option is square breathing:

Visualize a square. As you breathe in, visualize a vertical line and then a horizontal line. As you breathe out, picture another vertical and horizontal line to complete the square.

It's also especially important in today's virtual world to aim for at least one meaningful conversation a day with friends or family. There's a comforting connection that happens when you hear another person's voice, which you don't always get via e-mail or text.

the nutritionist

KERI GLASSMAN, M.S., R.D.; founder and president, *Nutritious Life*; author of four books on healthy eating for weight loss

Eating healthy, whole foods consistently throughout the day helps keep your blood sugar balanced. Hunger and low blood sugar make it difficult to react well to stress. I always carry a small bag of almonds, cashews, or walnuts in my bag for times I'm stuck in traffic or waiting for a meeting and starting to stress out. If it's been an especially tense day, have a cup of chamomile tea. You'll just feel your anxiety dropping as you sip. And you might sleep better, a proven way to lower anxiety and help your body recover from it.

the psychologist

MARY ALVORD, Ph.D.; adjunct associate professor of psychiatry and behavior sciences, The George Washington University School of Medicine

I recently started making jewelry, and I find that working with my hands puts my brain in a focused but relaxed space. It's a moving meditation for me. Knitting and crocheting can have the same effect. Another strategy that you can apply if you're

HOW YOUR HEART REACTS TO STRESS

1 Your brain senses danger. In ancient times, it might have been a saber-toothed tiger. Today, it could be a 24-hour deadline.

2 Your brain sends a signal to the hypothalamus gland, which sets in motion a physical reaction known as "fight or flight." Your adrenal glands pump out stress hormones including adrenaline and cortisol.

3 Your heart beats faster, your blood pressure goes up, and you breathe more rapidly. Your body also releases glucose (sugar) and fats from storage to give your muscles fuel (once needed to escape that tiger).

4 The crisis passes and your systems return to normal. But if you're under constant stress, your systems can stay revved up and lead to trouble. Persistently high levels of stress hormones increase inflammation within blood vessels and might contribute to damage and narrowing of the arteries, which can lead to heart attacks and stroke.



the fitness pro

MARIA GUERRA: *certified personal trainer; group fitness instructor; national spokesperson, American Heart Association's Go Red for Women*

Exercising is key to conditioning your heart to protect it against the negative effects of stress.

Walking is great, but I like to think of it as a gateway exercise.

Start there, but if you really want to strengthen your heart and lungs, you need to do

aerobic exercise that

breaks a sweat. The one way to know if you're getting where you need to be is to wear a heart rate monitor. Use the traditional formula: Subtract your age from 220, and your heart rate during exercise should be 80 percent of that. So if you're 35, your target heart rate is 80 percent of 185 (220 minus 35), or 148. Also mix in some bursts of high-intensity exercise. Your heart gets a better workout when it's climbing than when it's steady, even if it's holding at a rapid pace. The other thing you'll find is that once you're really exercising, you'll just naturally eat better. Twenty years ago, I weighed well over 200 pounds. Then I joined a soccer team and found that even on diet cheat days, I no longer wanted french fries. And today? I weigh 120 pounds.

CAUTION: WOMEN AT WORK

On-the-job pressure is the riskiest, with research showing that women whose work is very stressful (demanding and with little control) have a 40 percent higher risk of heart disease. "While you don't have control of everything," says Mary Alvord, Ph.D., "you do have control of many things." For starters:

CREATE AN UPBEAT ENVIRONMENT

Surround yourself with details that make you relax or smile. Alvord's screen saver is a photo of her favorite beach.

RELAX REGULARLY

Put a blue dot sticker on your computer as a reminder to do a short breathing destressor a few times each day.

REACH OUT

Stress can make you pull inward—the opposite of what you need at work. Connect with colleagues daily. You'll have a network when pressure hits.

EAT TO YOUR HEART'S CONTENT

Hands down, research shows the Mediterranean diet—which emphasizes lean protein like fish, vegetables, fruits, and dairy, plus extra-virgin olive oil and nuts—is the eating plan that best protects your heart. Happily, many foods on the diet are two-fers. They're heart-healthy and have calming effects. Some of the top picks, according to nutritionist Keri Glassman:

■ Oranges and other citrus fruits like clementines and tangerines, which are high in stress-soothing vitamin C.

■ Salmon, tuna, and sardines—all rich in

omega-3 fatty acids, which have been linked to happier moods as well as lower blood pressure.

■ Flaxseed and chia seeds—also omega-3 winners (without the fishy aspect).

■ Cashews, oysters, and other foods with zinc, which plays an important role in the health of your nervous system and boosts immunity. ■

