

Stress Less for a Healthier Heart



Stress happens. You can't always prevent or avoid it. But you can change how you respond to it. Try these tips. You may feel better—and have a healthier heart, too!

Know How Stress Affects Your Body

Whether it's from everyday deadlines, the work-life balancing act, or financial struggles, stress shows up often. Your body reacts to it. Your heart rate increases, your blood vessels narrow—and especially over the long term that's not healthy! Research shows that stress can make us more likely to get heart disease and have a heart attack.

The origins of heart disease begin at a young age, so the earlier in life you learn how to de-stress, the happier you and your heart will be.

Ongoing stress acts on more than just your heart. It affects everything from your nervous system and hormones to your lungs and gut. You may not see the connection, and healthcare providers may not ask about your stress. So try to listen to your body while thinking about what's going on in your life.

Turn On Your Relaxation Response

Did you know your body also has a relaxation response? Your breathing slows and **blood pressure** and heart rate decrease. The good news is you can trigger that response.

Ways to do so often combine breathing deeply and focusing your attention on pleasing thoughts and images.

Here are a few relaxation response techniques to try. You can do these on your own or find a teacher or class to start. They may take some practice!

Progressive muscle relaxation

This approach calls for tightening individual muscles in your body and then releasing the tension. Start by tensing and relaxing your toes, then your calves, and on up to your face. Do one muscle group at a time.



Meditation

This is one of the most-studied approaches for handling stress. There are a variety of ways to do it, including through **mindfulness meditation**. Most meditation styles involve:

- Being in a quiet location with as few distractions as possible
- Being physically comfortable either sitting, lying, or walking
- Focusing your attention on a specific word or set of words, an object, or your breathing
- Having an open attitude and letting distractions, including thoughts, come and go without judgment



Guided imagery

This involves a series of steps that include relaxing and visualizing the details of a calm, peaceful setting, such as a garden. Learn more about stress and try a **guided imagery session**.



Deep breathing

This is something you can do anytime, anywhere. Take in a slow, deep breath, let your stomach or chest expand, then exhale slowly. Repeat a few times.



Find Your Way to Healthy Relaxing

There's no one way to control stress. You may want to try a stress management program, do yoga, talk to a professional counselor, take an art class, or join friends for a brisk walk. Being in nature is very soothing for some people.

If you're short on time, make a list of three-minute activities you love. Add one to each day of your calendar. Consider:

- Listening to a favorite tune during lunch
- Stretching after a warm shower
- Catching a few minutes of the sunrise or sunset



Finding healthy relaxation exercises is just one way to protect your heart. Combine de-stressing with other **heart-healthy habits**: eat nutritious foods, move your body more and exercise, get enough sleep, and develop a strong social support system.

Know When It's More Than Just Stress

If you're feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope, are using drugs or alcohol more frequently, or are having suicidal thoughts, **seek professional help right away**. Resources are available from the **National Institute of Mental Health**.

