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Stress is a common factor in developing an addiction, and it's a major trigger for relapse.¹ Whether it comes from everyday worries, finances, family dysfunction or the demands of work or school, effectively coping with stress is crucial for successful recovery.

An important focus of any high-quality treatment program is helping clients learn how to manage stress and develop the necessary skills for coping with stressful, high-risk situations. Reducing stress not only helps prevent relapse, but it can also dramatically improve your overall quality of life.



Half of all Americans experience moderate stress, and 25 percent report having high levels of stress, according to Harvard Medical School.²

When you experience a stressful event, the brain's hypothalamus communicates with your body through the autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary body functions like heartbeat, breathing and blood pressure.

The autonomic nervous system is made up of the sympathetic nervous system, which gives the body energy to respond to perceived danger, and the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the body down once the threat has passed.

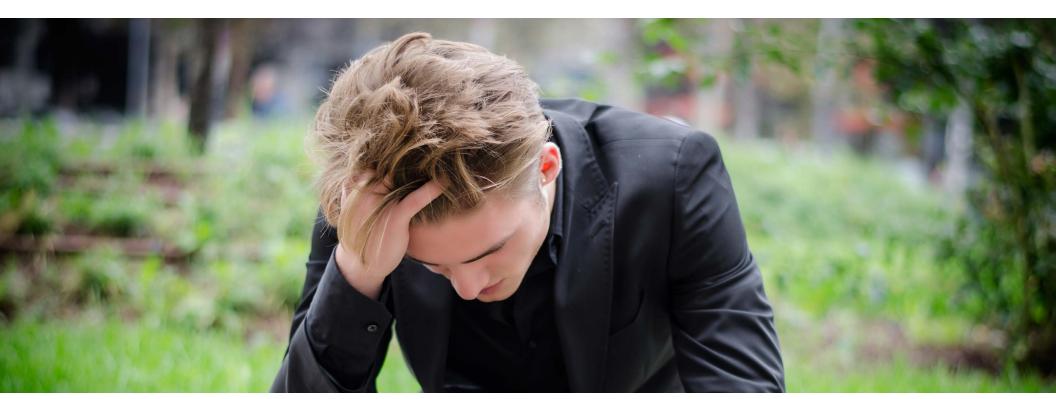
When you're under stress, the sympathetic nervous system triggers the release of adrenaline into the blood stream, causing an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and muscle tension. This is the body's stress response.

Once the first wave of adrenaline subsides, the body releases cortisol, another stress hormone that keeps the body alert and revved up. When the threat passes, the parasympathetic nervous system dampens the stress response. Cortisol levels fall, breathing and heart rate return to normal and muscles relax.



Acute stress is short-lived, and in some cases, it's beneficial because it increases motivation and helps sharpen your focus so that you can act to resolve the stressful situation. Examples of acute stress include an impending deadline or an event like a car accident. Once the deadline is met or the danger of injury has passed, the stress response ends.

Chronic stress is long-term stress that may result from an unresolved problem, such as childhood trauma, or an ongoing situation, such as financial difficulties or a dysfunctional home life. Chronic stress leaves the body in a perpetual stress response mode and can lead to a number of health problems, including high blood pressure and heart disease.







Combatting both acute and chronic stress is surprisingly simple and can be achieved through a range of techniques and therapies that promote relaxation and reduce stress hormone levels, either over time or on the spot.

Here are 14 research-based ways to reduce your body's response to acute and chronic stress and improve your overall health.

1. Get Some Exercise

Physical exercise is a powerful tool for combatting stress. Exercise reduces stress hormone levels on the spot and stimulates the release of endorphins and natural painkillers to improve your mood and promote feelings of well-being. The National Institute on Drug Abuse points out that exercise not only reduces your body's stress response but also increases your overall tolerance for stress, improving the way your body responds to it for the long-term.³

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends getting 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise each week to improve physical and mental health. If you're feeling stressed, or if you're heading out into what's sure to be a stressful situation, go for a walk or hit the gym to reduce your stress hormone levels and promote calm relaxation.

2. Breathe Deeply

According to the American Institute of Stress, deep breathing exercises induce the body's relaxation response to lower heart rate and blood pressure and relax muscle tension.⁴ Deep breathing works on the spot to reduce the body's stress response and leave you feeling calmer.

Two deep breathing exercises are particularly beneficial for combatting stress:

• The Quieting Response

The Quieting Response is a deep breathing technique that was developed by a Yale stress management expert. It leads to calm relaxation in less than ten seconds.

First, smile big to trigger the release of endorphins. Then, imagine you have holes on the bottoms of your feet. As you slowly breathe in, imagine the warm breath entering your body through the holes, and feel it moving up your legs, through your abdomen and into your chest. Exhale slowly, imagining the air moving back down your body and out the holes in your feet. Repeat the exercise until you feel calm.

◆ 4-7-8 Breathing

Another excellent breathing exercise to reduce stress on the spot, 4–7–8 Breathing was developed by Dr. Andrew Weil, a renowned holistic physician.

Make a whooshing sound as you exhale all the air from your lungs. Then, close your mouth and inhale to the count of four through your nose. Hold the breath for a count of seven. Exhale for a count of eight, making the whooshing sound as the air leaves your body. Repeat the exercise three times or until you feel relaxed and calm.

3. Practice Yoga

Yoga combines deep, rhythmic breathing with body poses to promote strength, balance and flexibility of mind, body and spirit. Harvard Medical School reports that yoga is a powerful tool to combat stress, including post–traumatic stress disorder. It reduces the impact of the body's stress response, and regular practice helps condition the body to respond better to stress. Yoga is an increasingly popular and effective therapy used in treatment programs to help clients gain a higher level of self–awareness, greater spirituality and better overall health.

It's not hard to find a yoga class. Yoga studios are cropping up in communities across the country, and most health clubs offer a variety of yoga sessions. You can also do yoga at home with a video.





4. Practice Meditation

Meditation is becoming an increasingly mainstream practice to help people manage a wide range of diseases and conditions, including chronic pain and a variety of mental illnesses.⁶ Daily meditation improves self-awareness, and it facilitates mindful responses to stressors. It's an effective way to build stress management skills and reduce negative emotions for better mental health and a higher sense of well-being.

Meditation doesn't need to be complicated. Simply sit comfortably and quietly, and breathe slowly. Focus your attention on the breath entering and leaving your body. When your attention wanders, gently bring it back to your breath. The object is to focus entirely on the present moment without the interference of conscious thought, and with regular practice, this will get easier.

Soon, you'll notice the benefits: Your stress level will naturally decrease, and you'll become more mindful and self-aware. Start with five or ten minutes each day, and work up to a half hour or more.



5. Try Biofeedback

Biofeedback is a therapy that teaches you how to use brainwaves to control your body's response to stress, including muscle tension, body temperature and heart rate. Biofeedback helps to normalize brain frequencies and rhythms to improve physical, behavioral, cognitive and emotional health.⁷

During a biofeedback session, sensors monitor your body's stress response as a therapist guides you through various relaxation techniques. The monitor shows changes in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and other functions as you watch. Techniques used to lower the stress response include guided imagery, mindful meditation and progressive muscle relaxation.

6. Make Healthy Lifestyle Choices

Your lifestyle choices have a big impact on your mood, and making a few important changes can help reduce stress and give you the motivation and energy to cope with it and other triggers.

Get enough sleep.

Adequate, high-quality sleep is important during early recovery. Your body repairs itself while it sleeps, and getting enough shut-eye helps keep your mood stable and your stress levels down.

Maintain a bedtime routine so that you're going to bed and getting up around the same time each day. Avoid caffeine in the evenings and heavy snacks before bed. Keep your room dark and cool for the best possible sleep. If you suffer from insomnia, discuss your concerns with your doctor.

Eat a healthy diet.

A healthy diet promotes good mental health, and some foods—including dark chocolate, green tea and foods high in vitamin C—are particularly helpful for reducing stress hormones and improving alpha brain wave activity to promote feelings of relaxation. Eating a healthy diet means consuming mostly whole foods rather than packaged meals. Eat mostly fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins. Avoid excessive sugar and chemical additives.

Have fun.

Finding ways to enjoy yourself without drugs and alcohol is paramount for successful recovery, and hobbies help reduce stress by occupying your mind with an enjoyable activity and helping you relax. Knitting is a particularly helpful hobby, according to the American Institute of Stress, which cites a Harvard Medical School study that found knitting lowered participants' blood pressure and reduced heart rate by 11 beats per minute. But any healthy hobby will provide the desired benefits.





7. Engage in Talk Therapy

Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, is a cornerstone of treatment because it helps people delve into the issues that underlie an addiction, and these often include stress. Talking to a therapist helps you put things into perspective and develop a toolkit of strategies for coping with stress and addressing its source. You'll learn new, healthier ways of thinking and behaving to minimize the effects of stress, and you'll identify and address the source of your stress.

If a dysfunctional home life is a major source of stress, as it is for many, family therapy can help you develop healthier communication skills and improve the functioning of the family system.

8. Go to Massage Therapy

The Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami performed a number of studies that found massage therapy effective for reducing symptoms associated with stress, anxiety and other mental illnesses. Researchers believe massage reduces the stress hormone cortisol and increases levels of serotonin, which stabilizes your mood and promotes healthy sleep, and oxytocin, which promotes feelings of relaxation.

Massage therapies that are good for reducing stress include:

- Swedish massage, which eases muscle tension and promotes good circulation.
- Hot stone massage, which transmits heat deep into the muscles to soothe and relax.
- Shiatsu massage, which improves the flow of energy through the body.

9. Laugh

Laughing is a surefire stress reducer, and it promotes better immunity, a happier mood and a higher sense of overall satisfaction with life. Laughter releases feel-good brain chemicals, reduces stress hormones and stimulates heart and lung function. It relaxes the muscles in your body, and it reduces sensations of pain.

Make it a priority to laugh every day. Read the comics, visit with a funny friend or watch a comedy. If you don't feel like laughing, fake it. Even fake laughter produces beneficial effects, and it often leads to the real thing.

10. Listen to Music

Research shows that music has a profound effect on both physiology and emotions. Faster beats promote alertness and concentration, while slower music quiets the mind and relaxes the muscles. Music that clocks in around 60 beats per second has been shown to synchronize with the brain, resulting in the alpha brainwave activity that characterizes a relaxed state.

Make a playlist or mix CD of songs that you enjoy and that are soothing to your ears. If you don't particularly enjoy listening to music, or if it makes it difficult for you to concentrate on tasks at hand, choose a nature recording, such as a thunderstorm or babbling brook, to serve as a soothing soundtrack to your day.



11. Create Art

Making art is an effective way to relax and relieve stress, and it can also help you synthesize difficult emotions.¹⁰ That's why art therapy is increasingly utilized in high-quality, holistic treatment programs.

You don't have to be an artist to make art. Find a medium you like, whether it's painting, pottery, crafting or calligraphy, and do it for the enjoyment. The act of creating something will lower your body's stress response and promote alpha brainwave function for feelings of calm relaxation.

12. Keep a Journal

Studies show that keeping a journal helps reduce stress, and it can even alleviate anxiety and depression. Writing in a journal each day helps you keep things in perspective, and it helps you pinpoint the causes of stress and work through ways to mitigate them.

A journal doesn't have to be a detailed narrative of your every thought. When you're feeling stressed, make a list of things that are making you feel that way, and jot down some thoughts on easing the stress or coping with it. You can also use your journal to make lists of things you're grateful for. Gratitude helps you maintain a positive outlook, which can go a long way toward helping you cope with stress and stressful situations.



13. Head Outdoors

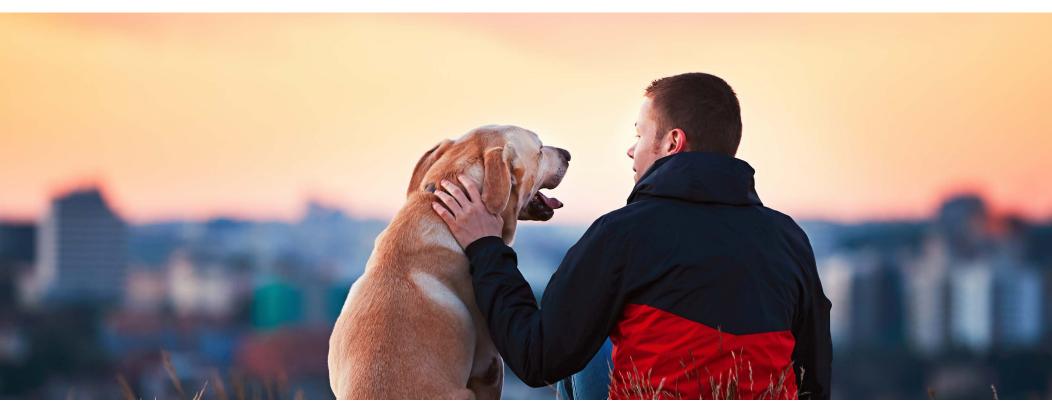
Research shows that being in nature—or even viewing scenes of nature—has a profound impact on the body and mind. It reduces fear, anger and stress and produces feelings of well-being. It lower blood pressure and reduces muscle tension and heart rate, and it slows the production of stress hormones. Heading out into nature can restore your vitality and improve your concentration, and it lifts your mood.

Head out for a hike in the wilderness, or if you live in an urban area, spend some time at a tree-filled park. Create a little back yard oasis to relax in, or line your deck with plants. Try to spend a half hour a day outside to reduce stress and restore your spirit.

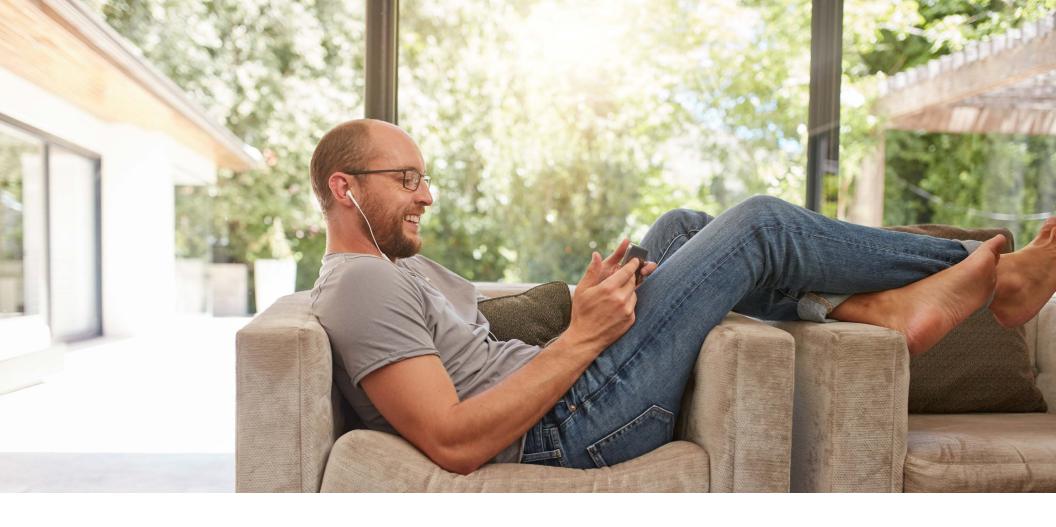
14. Get a Furry Friend

A range of studies have found that pets are potent stress relievers. Just five minutes of cuddling with Fido or a furry feline reduces your blood pressure on the spot and lowers cortisol levels in the body, and it elevates levels of feel-good brain chemicals like oxytocin and dopamine.

If owning a dog or cat feels like too much responsibility at this point, consider an aquatic pet. Even watching fish in an aquarium has been found to reduce blood pressure and combat feelings of stress and anxiety.







Keeping your stress levels in check will help you navigate early recovery with more energy and clarity. Lowering your stress is largely a matter of making small lifestyle changes that add up to big benefits for your body and mind. Maintaining mindful awareness of your mood and taking steps to mitigate stress when you feel anxious will help you stay focused on recovery, and it will improve your overall quality of life.

Choose the stress-relief techniques and strategies that work for you, and make a point to engage in them each day for the best benefits to help you achieve successful long-term sobriety.

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