
5 simple ways to reduce stress and boost productivity

Caring for patients is rewarding. But it's also stressful! While these two things can balance out, sometimes the stress gets out of control. The result: detrimental effects on your productivity and well-being. Thankfully there are simple ways to reduce stress that everyone can practice.

Stress isn't always bad. In the workplace, it can be useful in short intervals. Stress-induced adrenaline drives focus, allowing employees to get more done and even produce an ideal flow state where work seems effortless and time almost stands still.

More often, however, stress produces the hormone cortisol, which in high doses over time can take a toll physically and emotionally, resulting in high blood pressure, a reduced immune system, mental anxiety, and fatigue.

"The key is understanding what's causing the stress response and deploy the tools that shut that down and instead stimulate a relaxation response," says Chris Bertram, PhD, senior director of applied neuroscience at EXOS.

Ready to help your brain reset? Dr. Bertram recommends five approaches to reduce stress.

1. Reduce stress with breathing

The age-old guideline to take a deep breath when stressed still holds, but it's incomplete advice. Why? Because when it comes to reducing stress, the exhale is more important than the inhale.

"When you feel stressed, a longer exhale pushes back on the stress and stimulates the relaxation response," Dr. Bertram explains. When you exhale longer than you inhale, it jump-starts the parasympathetic nervous system that calms the body down after danger has passed, reducing heart rate and blood pressure.

Try five minutes of relaxed breathing between patients to reset. We recommend the 6-4-10 breathing tempo where you inhale for six seconds, hold for four seconds, and exhale for 10 seconds.

2. Visualize

Charting making you feel overwhelmed? It's not just because paperwork is a lot of work. Staring at a computer screen or smartphone often stimulates stress. Gazing at the ocean or night sky produces the opposite effect. That's no coincidence, since staring (focal vision) causes stress while gazing softly engages panoramic vision, which in turn stimulates relaxation. "When we look at the ocean, we feel relaxed," Dr. Bertram said. "You're also in panoramic vision when you close your eyes at night, which leads to sleep."

These are hardwired biological responses that happen automatically in our everyday lives. But we can also trigger them when we deploy our visual system intentionally. One way to do this: vision breaks. During these breaks, look away from the screen and soften your gaze. Need a midday vision break? Look out a window instead of right at your screen. Not only are you giving your eyes a rest, you're actually reducing stress throughout your entire body.

3. Sleep is key

Speaking of relaxing, sleep might be the most effective way to reduce stress. “When we get our normal healthy sleep, we’re able to recover both physically and emotionally and that, in turn, helps us manage stress better,” Dr. Bertram says. Research over the last decade has shown that a consistent amount and quality of sleep, produced by a nightly sleep “ritual” of powering down, pays dividends for productivity and long-term health.

The key to restoring your body and mind is a mix of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and non-REM sleep. Non-REM sleep helps with physical restoration, while REM helps you process the emotional load of stressful events during the day. REM sleep tends to happen towards the end of a night’s sleep, so if you aren’t getting enough sleep in general, this balance will be affected.

4. Hydrate to reduce stress

If you typically drink to unwind after a long day, it’s time to skip the nightcap. Alcohol can harm sleep and also hydration, which is another key to handling stress. Studies suggest that dehydration can hinder performance by 20 percent in the workplace and the playing field.

“You can still do your job when you’re mildly dehydrated, but the experience will be more stressful,” Dr. Bertram says. “The goal is to reduce chronic stress and staying hydrated is the low-hanging fruit of stress management.”

5. Move

Training and exercise release endorphins and dopamine and make a huge impact on short-term and long-term health. Something as simple as a 20-minute walk also can help reduce stress, since it enables the brain to go offline and disconnect from stress through a process called transient hypofrontality.

So fit in stretch breaks between patients, or get outside on your lunch break. It won’t have a positive effect if you’re scrolling on your phone at the same time though, so make sure you properly unplug.

“You start to feel liberated from your sense of self and ego and push toward that flow state,” Dr. Bertram said. “It’s a great daily practice of active recovery from stress to get out of your head for a while.”