

Practical, Healthy Tips to Cope with Stress

With our economy in such a volatile state, it's no wonder our collective stress levels are through the roof. Anxiety is running rampant—and with good reason. You can't open the newspaper, or turn on the TV, without hearing bad news.

While we can't control the stock market, we can limit the impact stress and anxiety have on our health and well-being. Following these steps can help you relax, unwind, and feel better than you have in years.

Move Your Stress Out: Exercise is an extremely powerful stress reducer. Physical activity works tension out of your muscles, stimulates the creation of mood-boosting endorphins, and helps you sleep better at night. One of the best stress busters is a brisk walk. Even if it's cold outside, bundle up and hit the pavement—the fresh air and sunshine will do your mood a world of good. I've never finished a walk and thought, "I wish I hadn't done that." Neither will you.

Tap Into the Anxiety-Relieving Power of GABA: Gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) is an amino acid produced naturally in your brain. In addition to functioning as a neurotransmitter, fostering communication between nerve cells, GABA reduces stress by toning down "excitatory" stimuli in the brain. Plus, it boosts dopamine and serotonin levels, which helps create an overall sense of calm.

Drink Green Tea: Green tea contains abundant amounts of L-theanine, an amino acid known for its relaxing properties. Theanine increases alpha waves in the brain, which produce a state of calm alertness—plus it enhances your body's natural levels of GABA. So the next time you're feeling stressed out, put on the kettle and brew a cup of green tea.

Smile: The very act of smiling registers in the hypothalamus of your brain, where endorphins are produced. When you smile you immediately feel better. So, the next time you're feeling stressed, bring back a happy memory—and put a smile on your face.

Get Enough Sleep: We all do a better job of coping with stress and anxiety after a sound night's sleep—but stress and a racing mind can keep you awake. For a better sleep, turn off the TV and your computer at least an hour before bedtime, and take a warm shower or bath. Dimming the lights also helps by stimulating your body's natural production of melatonin, the hormone that induces sleep. And drinking warm milk or a cup of chamomile tea can also help you drift off into a relaxing slumber.

Have Fun: Finally, tap into the healing power of good old-fashioned fun! One of the best stress relievers around is to get out and do things you enjoy. It doesn't have to cost money. Get together at someone's home to play cards, have a potluck dinner, or start a book club. Check out free events at your local library, or start a mall-walking group. The more you get out, socialize, and enjoy yourself—the better you'll feel.

So there you have it, six simple steps for relieving anxiety and stress. I hope these recommendations bring you some much-needed relaxation.

To your health,

Julian Whitaker, MD