

10 ways to reduce stress & anxiety

In this busy day and age, anxiety and stress are commonplace. We all have our own methods for trying to reduce stress and anxiety but sometimes they are not healthy for us. Many times, I see clients reach for alcohol or end up inactive as a way to ease stress.



Small amounts of stress help to motivate us forward but these days, we tend to experience stress on a continual basis.

Intense and prolonged stress can lead to depression if left long enough. One in eight men will have severe or major depression in their lifetime (from the book, "Depression," by Sherry Rogers, MD). So what is the best way to combat mounting, frequent stresses that are a common side effect of our busy lifestyles?

1. Take a reality check

How well are you really managing your life? Are you watching too much TV, surfing the internet each night, eating on the run or not at all? Where does exercise fit into your day, if at all? Is your most popular phrase, "I'll start tomorrow?" Use your downtime to think about how you are spending your time and if you need to reassess key areas.

Look at what areas of your life are falling short and aim to improve one area a week. For your first week, you can aim to get active at lunchtime and go for a short walk.

Another week, you can start to cut back on TV and spend more time with your partner and kids or just spend that time reading or start working out.

2. Split your stressors into two lists

Sit down and write out your current and ongoing stressors. This can include things like: your regular Monday meeting, taking the kids to sport practice every Sunday morning or having to complete a work project. Then split each item into "can change" and "need to accept" categories.

Some stressors are just plain unavoidable but others are not and are in your control. Change the way you view your Monday meetings. Ask yourself what you can gain from these meetings. With your work project, can you start breaking the project into smaller tasks and deadlines, so you feel less overwhelmed?

Choose to do something about the things you can change so you regain a sense of power, and change your perspective on those things you cannot change so they are more manageable.

3. Make sleep a priority

Tune into your body and give it the sleep it needs. A good night's sleep can do wonders for your peace of mind, stress levels and overall happiness. Most men need about seven to eight hours of sleep each night to function at their best. It's a myth that you need less sleep as you get older. We all need the time to rejuvenate our bodies that only sleep offers.

Create a nightly routine to help prime yourself for bedtime. Read before bed for half an hour to unwind or go for a short walk in the early evening. Go to bed at the same time each night, as routine helps to shed off the busy day and get you primed for sleep. Unfortunately, anxiety and stress can contribute to insomnia so it is important to take time to relax before bed or you will continue the stress cycle.

4. Exercise

As busy as you are, make it a priority to exercise most days of the week. If you find you are busy in the evening, get up 45 minutes earlier and do your workout then. When you exercise, be that through cardio or using weights, your body releases the stress hormone, cortisol. Brisk exercise can do wonders in helping to disperse stress and keeps you in tip-top shape, which helps to reduce stress in the first place!

5. Eat right and limit alcohol

Consuming the right foods and eating regularly is essential in managing stress and anxiety. Make sure you are consuming complex carbohydrates (breads, pasta and rice) each day so you keep your happy hormone (serotonin) up, which can become depleted the more stressed you are.

Eat five small meals daily to keep your blood sugar stable and keep up your energy as you deal with your day-to-day stresses. Stock up on fruit, vegetables, nuts and sultanas to help keep hunger at bay. Experiment with various foods so you know what helps you during stressful times and stops you from having any anxiety cravings.

It is also important to limit alcohol. This will help to ease stress symptoms. Alcohol has been found to lower serotonin and norepinephrine levels, which are the hormones that contribute to our sense of wellbeing and happiness.

6. Create daily "to do" lists

There really is no such thing as time management, only self-management. We are in control of how we choose to use our time. Do you find yourself continually stressed out by having to work late to make a deadline or always running so late for appointments that your anxiety soars? You need to work on managing yourself better. Plan at the end of the day for the following day and chunk each task so you work in hour blocks and cover off many aspects of your on-going "to-do" list.

You will feel more organised and time efficient by working to a planner. As you become more organised, you will feel less stressed, more motivated and generally, function better in most situations.

7. Laugh each day

Learn to laugh at yourself and change your perspective on most situations. Try to look for the lighter side in any stressful situation. There is always something to learn from every experience. Make it an aim to have a good belly laugh each day. Watch comedies on TV or subscribe to a daily joke via email. Get together with a good mate and share some laughs. The more you do this, the more you will find that anything and everything stops being so stressful.

8. Schedule in fun activities

Too often we become caught up in the day-to-day running of our lives. Before we know it, months and years have passed without much change. Set aside some planning time to schedule fun activities you can do over the course of the year. Arrange a kayaking trip with mates or just catch up at a friend's house for dinner. Not all things need to cost money. Take a road trip with a partner or even head to the movies by yourself!

It is common to feel guilty for taking out much needed and deserved time for yourself. Men generally tend to equate relaxation with laziness, lack of drive or as unnecessary. Taking time out to chill is necessary and you will find that when you do work, you will work a lot more effectively and it will be less stressful.

If you cannot take a break now for yourself, when will you? Make yourself a priority, then stress and anxiety will become less dominant.

9. Get together with mates

Catch up with your mates each week or fortnight to unwind and relax. Try an activity such as rock-climbing or even take up a team sport. Get out and get social to help you de-stress. Balance this with your own downtime and you will start to feel more in control of your life and less anxious.

10. Know when to get help

Sometimes all the best stress releasing tips are just not enough to stop you from experiencing high levels of stress. If you frequently experience panic attacks, phobias or such high levels of stress that you feel helpless, it may be time to seek out professional help. Do not put up with it, as there are techniques and solutions out there to help you live better and make stress and anxiety manageable. Do not be ashamed or embarrassed if you need help. Men might find it hard to admit feeling these emotions but realise that by asking for help, your body and lifestyle will thank you for it. **■**

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