

HOW TO DEAL WITH
STRESS
BEFORE IT DEALS WITH
YOU



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Deal with Stress

Before it Deals with You!

The **stress** response, also known as the fight-or-flight response, is the body's way of dealing with thoughts that we have about what is happening in our world. Any time we sense a threat of any kind, be it physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual, our body only knows one way to deal with it: the **stress** response.

Unfortunately, the majority of the threats that we perceive today are not ones that involve the need to run or fight. Studying for an upcoming test, having to speak in front of a group of people, getting a bad grade, or asking someone out on a date for the first time are all events that we might perceive as being **stressful**. They don't, however, require that we run from or fight someone or something in order to handle them. But our body isn't able to understand that distinction. It only hears our thoughts that something is threatening. As a result, the **stress** response turns on whether we need it to turn on or not. And most of the time, we don't.

Having the **stress** response turned on makes things worse for us rather than better. It is only designed to last a few minutes, but our thoughts focus on the threat all day long. This results in long-term activation of the **stress** response (a very bad thing) and leads to a whole bunch of imbalances in the body. If you have ever had a tension headache, aching muscles, difficulty eating or sleeping, or you catch colds a lot, you are probably dealing with too much **stress**.



Fortunately, the effects stress can be eliminated with regular **stress** reduction activities. If you turn off the **stress**, the health problem will fix itself.

Understanding and managing stress is key to leading a healthy, productive life in our hectic world. So many people say that they are **stressed out without really understanding what that means**. When you say that you are stressed out, what is it that you are really saying about yourself? Can we really be stressed beyond our limits or, by learning and utilizing specific strategies, can we in fact turn stress around so that it is a motivating force in our lives?

Stress is a person's **response to a demand for change**. We experience such demands on a higher or lower level every day of our lives. Faced with these demands, we may try to resist change while also trying to manage the stress associated with it. Not all change, however, is a bad thing just as not all stress is bad for us. Some stress is very useful to us and is even essential in certain circumstances such as **learning**. Research has shown that learning takes place under conditions of **moderate stress**. Your aim, therefore, is

not to eliminate all the stress you experience but to understand and to manage it so that it remains at an acceptable level.

The best strategies for managing stress are those that are not destructive but which are **healthy ways** to prevent stress from increasing or to reduce the tension when stress builds beyond a moderate level.

Destructive strategies for managing stress include smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol to excess, taking illegal drugs or misusing prescribed medication. While these strategies bring short-term relief this is at high cost to both mind and body. **One of the worst strategies of all is to do nothing about a problem and hope it will go away.** It hardly ever does and the stress of not dealing with it is far greater than that of following a constructive course of action.

Healthy, constructive strategies for managing stress include **exercise, nutrition, employing relaxation techniques and exploring talking therapies.** Simply sharing a problem or stressful situation with a friend or family member has been proven to markedly reduce stress. Other people may prefer to seek professional help or counseling and this, too, has high success rates. Regular exercise when carried out in conjunction with a healthy diet is enormously beneficial when it comes to managing stress and is far more effective than any pharmaceutical solution.

Another excellent idea is to **journal on a daily basis or to write out specific problems** and possible solutions as they occur. Seeing a problem or a worry on the page helps us both to define and to prioritize it. What may seem urgent or overwhelming to our minds can appear far less threatening on paper. Setting out a plan of action helps us to understand the problem and to manage the stress associated with it. Giving ourselves clearly defined steps to follow automatically empowers us to bring about positive change. With stress, as with so many situations in life, common sense coupled with a proactive, positive strategy produces optimal results.



Which of the following is the best method for dealing with stress?

- Improving Time Management Skills
- Proper Diet
- Good Sound Sleep
- Relaxation Skills
- Regular Exercise
- Meditation
- Aroma Therapy
- Visualization & Guided Imagery
- Hypnosis
- Spirituality

You guessed it - All of the above are excellent for dealing with stress. But limiting yourself to one or two approaches is not very effective.

For example, improving your skill at managing time so you can squeeze more into your already over-burdened schedule is like taking out a credit card every time a payment is due - sooner or later you have to pay the bill - emotional, spiritual, and physical bankruptcy - aka BURNOUT! The best thing to do is combine all of the above methods for a powerful, synergistic effect.

What are the benefits of managing stress?

- **Improved Physical Health**
 - Higher Energy Levels
 - Naturally More Active
 - Improved Metabolism
 - Easier Weight Management
 - More "Spring" in Your Step
 - Improved Relaxation Response
- **Improved Emotional Health**
 - Decreased Emotional Reactivity
 - Increased Emotional Regulation
 - Generally Happier
 - Able to Enjoy the Simple Things in Life
 - Experiences of Inner Peace & Serenity
- **Improved Mental Health**
 - Improved Concentration
 - Better Memory
 - Increased Motivation
 - Decreased Negative Self-Talk
 - Increased Optimism
- **Improved Spiritual Health**
 - Able to Focus on Values
 - More Time for Prayer
 - Increase in Spiritual Nourishment
- **Improved Social Health**
 - More "Present" In Relationships
 - Able to listen and Validate Others
 - Optimism Feels Good to Others

Brain Plasticity and Adaptation

The brain is now believed to have a lot of plasticity - In other words, its highly adaptable - It adapts to any environment we subject it to over a period of time.

An "environment" can be external to the body as well as internal. This adaptation creates a familiar balance or "Steady-State" in the brain.

Here are some examples of INTERNAL environments:

Negative Internal Environments:

- Negative self-talk - cynicism, pessimism
- Constant worry and fear
- Alcohol or drug abuse

- Poor Health
- Chronic depression
- Chronic Anxiety
- Chronic Stress
- Low-self esteem

Positive Internal Environments:

- Positive self-talk
- Optimistic outlook
- Proper nutrition
- Good Health
- Peace of mind - serenity
- Good self-image
- Feeling loved and lovable
- Being in good shape



Here are some examples of EXTERNAL environments:

Negative External Environments:

- Chaotic lifestyle
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Abuse and Neglect
- Financial problems
- Over-work
- Poor self-care
- Stormy Relationships

Positive External Environments:

- Good support network
- Balanced living - proper rest, exercise, recreation

- Harmonious relationships
- Happy family - time, attention, affection, direction
- Success oriented - achieving goals
- Fulfilling Career
- Fun & Recreation
- Time off!

When Chronic Stress is a "Steady State"

The dendrite connections in our neural networks are not set in stone as once thought. **Every time we learn something new, dendrite connections are changed and new ones are made that didn't exist before.** So, the Internet of our mind is constantly changing - updating and adapting to the environment in which we place it. The purpose of this adaptation is to achieve and maintain a biological balance known as **homeostasis or "Steady-State"**. It appears that the brain likes predictability and consistency. Once we have acquired a certain steady-state our brain will act to maintain that state, even a state of chronic stress or depression!

The good news? - With discipline and repetition we can change our steady-state to a "new steady-state" - or neo-homeostasis.

For example, if one prefers regular cola a switch to diet cola would initially be difficult because of the aftertaste. However, when a switch to diet cola is made for three weeks or longer the taste buds - or more accurately the neural networks associated with them - adjust themselves for the diet cola. Now the person cannot drink regular cola without an aftertaste. Whenever we try to make a significant **change** in our neural networks the effort is initially met with **resistance**. But if we persist with discipline and repetition we can make the changes we want.

Some networks are so deeply ingrained that they do not go quietly. Consider the person who grew up in a dysfunctional, chaotic and alcoholic home - then later on fell prey to their own addiction. This person's accumulated neural networks of abandonment, shame, and contempt from childhood - coupled with the negative consequences of their own addiction network - is likely to cause their internal steady-state to be chronically painful.



By "chronic" I mean always present. Pain becomes their steady-state... something they are used to. They may never have known anything else. In cases like these, depression can become familiar and accepted as a way of life. In fact, any attempts to recover from chronic conditions like depression, codependency, or addiction are usually met with strong resistance in the form of self-sabotage as **the subconscious mind tries to regain and maintain it's normal steady-state.**

When someone says, **"that's just the way I am"** - its true. However, the unspoken implication is **"I cant change"** which is **NOT true**. If it were true there would be no recovery from addiction, no healing of depression, codependency or Adult/Child Syndrome.

While these networks have become deeply ingrained - part of a chronic steady-state, with awareness, dedication, and action, they can adapt to a "new steady-state" called **Recovery**. The proliferation of the twelve-step movement is testimony to that.

Neurogenesis and the Fight-or-Flight Response

Neurogenesis means brain growth - its the creation of new dendrite connections in the Internet of the Mind. In a recent article, William Horton, Ph.D. writes: Positive, enriching environments stimulate the brain to create more neural connections. While positive programming stimulates neurogenesis, negative programming halts neurogenesis. Regardless of the source, the effect of continued stress from negative programming is neurologically toxic. What this means is that when the brain is constantly exposed to worry and negativity, homeostasis (balance) becomes the priority and all other neural functioning suffers. In this situation, existing neurons are preoccupied with survival and the brain does not exert effort on creating new neurons.

In other words, if you live with a steady-state of chronic stress then all kinds of imbalances occur due to the neuro-toxicity - causing neurological, physical, emotional, and spiritual degeneration (breakdown), which leads to pain and more stress. Healthy-balanced living, on the other hand, leads to neurological, physical, emotional, and spiritual regeneration (growth), and ultimately health and happiness.

Stress plays an important role in our life - indeed in our very survival. There is **good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress)**.

Eustress is a short-term physiological reaction that helps us rise to meet a challenge. It is a function of the survival systems of the brain - also known as the fight-or-flight response.

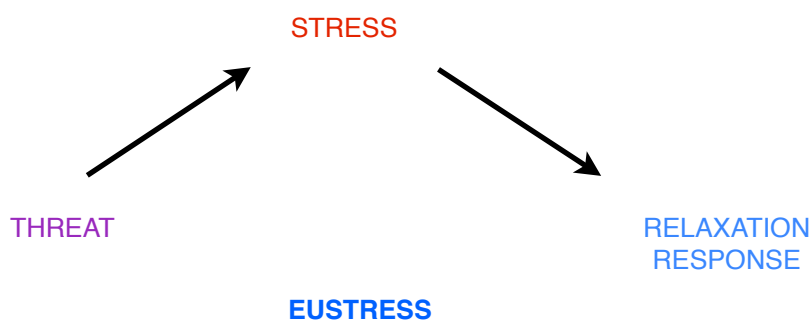
Lets use as an example of a primitive hunter being chased by T. Rex: The moment his unconscious mind perceives the threat; the hunter's brain became flooded with a stress hormone called CRF which heightens anxiety; this creates hyper-vigilance; it then sends instructions to the adrenal glands to release epinephrine (adrenaline) and cortisol, another stress hormone, to prepare him for action.

As a result the hunter becomes hyper-alert, all of his muscles tense up making him ready to act, his heart rate increases, and all his senses became sharper to the point he is able to automatically assess the situation in a fraction of an instant and respond without thinking - with subconscious perception.

This fight-or-flight stress response requires a lot of energy. Accordingly, the brain **shuts down unnecessary systems** - such as the digestive system - diverting the energy from those systems into reacting to the current situation.

Once he finds safety... the "Don't Get Eaten" switch is turned off and a **relaxation response** follows.

In other words, all of his energy is diverted back to its normal functions and homeostasis is regained. Because of this ability the Hunter was able to survive - **good stress**. (see diagram below).



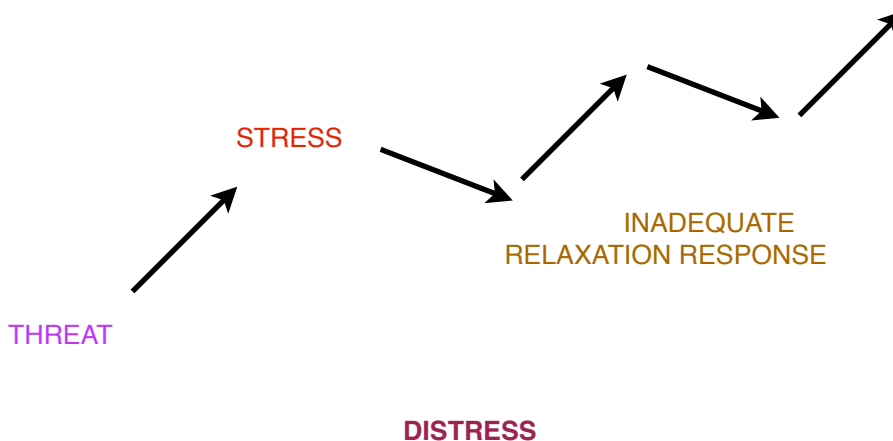
There really is no such thing as "bad stress". *Distress* is not actually caused by stress. It's brought about by the lack of an adequate relaxation response.

An **inability to create an adequate relaxation response** can be due to several factors, many of which may spring from the woundedness of unmet childhood dependency needs.

Growing up in an abuse and/or neglectful home causes:

- Hyper-vigilance - a need to always be on guard
- Difficulty soothing oneself
- Extremely low self-esteem
- High levels of anxiety
- Chronic negativity - cynicism or pessimism
- Poor self-care - Poor diet and lack of exercise
- Sleep Disturbances - Insomnia, bad dreams
- A general lack of balance in one's life.
- Constant fears of abandonment
- Self-talk grounded in shame
- Contempt for one's self, other people, or the world in general

These things create patterns of chronic stress resembling the diagram below:



Stress and Physical Deterioration

When consistently excessive levels of stress become a steady-state it throws our whole system off.

Take, for example, that during challenging periods the energy it takes to respond to that challenge is diverted from other systems such as the digestive system. Since the digestive system is not operating at an optimal level it becomes more difficult to lose weight. There may also be a pattern of comfort eating - The extra weight combined with excess amounts of sugar and carbohydrates cause even more stress on the body.

Very little energy is left over for neurogenesis and healthy exercise causing even more stress on the body. To make matters worse, the excess amounts of cortisol and adrenaline coursing through the body cause it to run in overdrive on a daily basis. This is especially true when one lives in survival mode such as many adult-children of dysfunctional families.

This is why it does not surprise me that I see a lot of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia in my work with those who have long histories of codependency. Carrying the weight of the world on one's shoulders day after day is bound to take its toll sooner or later.

Stress and Addiction

The use of objects like chemicals and food, or events like gambling and compulsive spending for comfort and relief is a short-term fix at best - one that has very serious long-term consequences.

This kind of "solution" actually makes the problem worse by increasing stress at all levels:

- **Biologically** - We have system-wide breakdowns causing physical problems such as tension headaches, migraines, hypertension, ulcers, obesity, liver problems, heart problems, and even terminal illnesses such as cirrhosis and pancreatitis etc.
- **Psychologically** - We have to increasingly delete and distort reality so that we can consciously continue to use the addiction of choice, causing us to get locked into this destructive behavior. Our judgment in other matters also becomes seriously impaired due to the constant distortions that must be employed. Negative self-talk is one of the most effective ways to keep toxic levels of stress going. Talk about pollution of the mind!
- **Emotionally** - Because the unconscious mind cannot escape reality we develop emotional problems, such as angry outbursts, depression, and anxiety. These are signals from our unconscious mind that something is wrong and needs to be attended to. When these signals are ignored they get "turned up", but no avail because our denial prevents us from taking heed of the signals.
- **Socially** - The impairment in the areas already mentioned cause concerns from family members, employers, friends and others, broken promises, family conflict, marital problems, legal issues, financial difficulties, performance problems at work, absenteeism, lost opportunities, and lost relationships are typical in the late stages of addiction. Eventually, we become increasingly unable to carry out the responsibilities of our life roles - spouse, employee, parent, friend, brother/sister, son/daughter, etc.
- **Spiritually** - The distance between our value system and our actual behavior grows further and further apart. This causes feelings of guilt and shame, worsening the infection of toxic shame.



Why stress is negatively affecting your health?

Stress is not just a feeling. It is a natural reaction, a psychological response to a threat. When a person is stressed, his body reacts to shrink blood vessels, increase blood pressure and pulse rate, breathing intensifies, the concentration of hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) increases in the bloodstream. When stress becomes chronic, these physiological changes can lead to real health problems.

There are various stress management techniques, which will not only change a person's state of mind but will also have specific health benefits. For example, one study looked at the survivors after heart attacks found that the risk of heart attack decreases by 74% if stress is controlled. There is even some evidence that stress management increases the body's immunity.

However many people remain skeptical, in terms of stress control. Everyday life involves stress: people have jobs, family life, financial problems and limited time. Stress management may seem like a nice idea but completely impossible. It is true that not all things can change an individual's stressful life.



Top 9 health problems influenced by stress

Here are some of the diseases that can be triggered by stress:

1. **Cardiovascular disorders** - researchers have found that people who have a certain type of personality are prone more than others to hypertension and cardiovascular problems. Nobody knows the exact cause, but it seems that stress could have a direct effect on the heart and blood vessels. It is possible that stress, along with other issues such as smoking or obesity contribute to an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disorders. Sudden emotional stress can trigger serious heart problems, including heart attacks. People with cardiovascular disorders should avoid stress as much as they can.
2. **Obesity** - the existence of excess fat around the waist presents a greater risk to health than excess fat found on the legs or hips. It seems that people under stress gain weight faster. Stress raises levels of a hormone called cortisol, which contributes to fat deposition on the abdomen.
3. **Asthma** – many studies have shown that stress can aggravate asthma. Some studies have even found that some parents suffering from chronic asthma can give birth to children who suffer from the same disease. Also, the parent's stress increases the chances for some kids to be exposed to polluted air or smoke, because their mothers smoked during pregnancy or after.
4. **Diabetes mellitus** - stress can worsen diabetes. First it raises the risk of neglecting healthy eating habits and predisposes to excessive food consumption. Secondly, it can cause a raise in glucose levels in some patients with type 2 diabetes.
5. **Headaches** - stress is considered the main trigger of headaches (hypertension and migraines)
6. **Depression and anxiety** - it's no surprise that chronic stress as a result of periods of intense stress is related to depression and anxiety. Results of a recent survey confirmed that people who were stressed mainly because of work issues (such as demanding work and low reward), had a 80% higher risk of depression in the near future.
7. **Gastrointestinal disorders** - stress does not only cause ulcers, but it also aggravates them. Also, stress can give rise to various gastrointestinal disorders such as chronic heartburn (gastro-esophageal reflux disease) and irritable bowel syndrome.
8. **Alzheimer's disease** - an animal study found that stress could aggravate Alzheimer's disease, accelerating the formation of brain lesions. After some analysis, comparing the DNA of mothers who had experienced stressful situations (they took care of a chronically ill child), that of women who have not been in this situation, researchers have discovered that a certain portion of the stressed mothers' chromosomes, showed an accelerated aging, up to about 9-17 years.
9. **Premature death** - after some research, they examined the effects of stress on the health of older people who care about their partners, who are naturally under stress. They found that caregivers have a 63% higher risk of death than other persons who have not had such experiences.

Learn to recognize stress

Recognizing stress is the first step in lessening its impact. Many of us spend so much time in a stressed state, we have forgotten what it feels like to be fully relaxed and alert. Being stressed out feels normal.

What does it feel like to be calm and stress-free? You can see that “just right” inner balance in the smile of a happy baby - a face so full of joy it reminds adults of the balanced emotional state that most of us have misplaced. In adulthood, being balanced means maintaining a calm state of energy, alertness, and focus. Calmness is more than just feeling relaxed; being alert is an equally important aspect of finding the balance needed to withstand stress.

If you don't feel calm, alert, productive, and focused most of the time in your daily life, then too much stress may be a problem for you.

Tips for recognizing when you're stressed

Hush the voice that's telling you, 'Oh, I'm fine.' Notice how you're breathing has changed. Are your muscles tense? Awareness of your physical response to stress will help regulate the tension when it occurs.

When you're tired, your eyes feel heavy and you might rest your head on your hand. When you're happy, you laugh easily. And when you are stressed, your body lets you know that too. Try to get in the habit of paying attention to your body's clues.

- **Observe your muscles and insides.** Are your muscles tight/sore? Is your stomach tight or sore? Are your hands clenched?
- **Observe your breath.** Is your breath shallow? Place one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Watch your hands rise and fall with each breath. Notice when you breathe fully or when you "forget" to breathe.



Identify your body's stress response

Internally, we all respond to stress the same: our blood pressure rises, our heart pumps faster, and our muscles constrict. When stressed, our bodies work hard and drain our immune system. Externally, however, people tend to respond to stress in three different ways: some become **angry and agitated**, others **space out or withdraw**, and still others **freeze up**.

The best way to quickly relieve stress may relate to your specific stress response. Read on to find out where you fit in.

How do you act when stressed?

When it comes to managing and reducing stress quickly in the middle of a heated situation, it's important to be familiar with your specific stress response.

- **Overexcited stress response** – If you tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that quiet you down.
- **Under excited stress response** – If you tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system.
- **Frozen stress response (both overexcited and under excited)** – If you tend to freeze: speeding up in some ways while slowing down in others, your challenge is to identify stress relief activities that provide both safety and stimulation to help you “reboot” your system.

There are a number of stress therapy techniques that work well, two of the better-known ones being **controlled breathing** and **progressive relaxation training**. Progressive relaxation training involves a number of exercises that train your mind and body to gradually become more relaxed. Although there is something of a learning curve to this therapeutic technique, with practice this is an extremely effective method of reducing stress.

Controlled breathing requires less initial effort and works well as a stress therapy for people who find it relatively easy to clear their minds and regulate their breathing which, in turn, relaxes the rest of the body. This is sometimes hard to do because **the majority of people who are stressed tend to breathe quickly and shallowly**. A good therapist will be able to decide which technique is most suitable as they have vast experience of determining how individuals respond to particular treatments.

Another stress therapy technique that works well is **cognitive restructuring**. This is particularly suitable in cases of accumulated stress and for people who have a tendency to over or under react to potentially difficult situations. During cognitive restructuring your therapist will help you to **examine situations so that you can see them for what they really are** rather than what you imagine them to be. Many of us, for example, **make assumptions or have unfounded worries** that are entirely inappropriate to a situation. A therapist can help identify those inappropriate thoughts and feelings and can point out how they actually contribute to stress.



By learning how to catch yourself when you are reacting in this way, you can also learn how to use logic to revise your reaction to an appropriate level. This method works well for people who are feeling stuck or who tend to get upset at the smallest things. As this method teaches you to **question how you think or feel** about things, it also helps people to feel more comfortable when standing up for themselves and therefore enables them to be more effective in their daily lives.

Assertiveness and communication skills training are sometimes used alongside the above stress therapy techniques or can be effective when used on their own. Both of these techniques teach you to **deal with problems in a fair and logical manner**, taking into consideration the rights and needs of all those involved.

Many people avoid dealing with stressful situations because they do not feel they have the right to ask for what they want or fear that they will make matters worse. Learning how to speak up for yourself in an effective way is an excellent therapeutic technique when it comes to reducing stress.

Whatever stress therapy technique you choose, remember that you should feel comfortable working with your therapist. Take your time to choose the therapist who is right for you and who endorses a technique with which you feel comfortable. Remember that you can **mix and match techniques** and that some work better than others for individual people. No two human beings are the same and it may take some time to find the stress therapy technique that works well for you.

Benefits of The Relaxation Response

As you can see from the chart below, some of the valuable changes that take place when your body is resting in the Relaxation Response are:

- Heartbeat and respiration are slowed.
- Oxygen consumption is markedly reduced.
- The expiration of carbon dioxide falls.
- Blood pressure becomes stable.
- Blood lactate levels (which many researchers believe are linked with panic attacks) decline steeply.

Relaxation Response	Stress Response
↓ Heart rate slows	↑ Heart rate increases
↓ Blood Pressure lowers	↑ Blood Pressure rises
↓ Blood Lactate Levels reduce	↑ Cholesterol Levels go up
↑ Immune System improves	↓ Immune System is less effective
↑ Sense of Well-being increases	↑ Anxiety increases
↑ Sleep improves	↑ Depression more prevalent
↑ Normal Libido	↑ Sleep Disorders increase
↓ Brain Wave Patterns slow	↓ Libido decreases
↑ Digestion improves	↑ Irritability increases
	↓ Digestion works less effectively

How to Promote Rest and Release

There are various **tested techniques which promote this state of profound rest and release**. I will describe some of the most valuable of these skills, and provide you with some practical instruction so that you can practice them:

1. Rhythmic, Deep, Diaphragmatic Breathing
2. Body Scan
3. Centering Meditation
4. The Practice of Mindfulness
5. Visualization or Guided Imagery
6. Walking Meditation
7. Meditation in Motion: Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga

1. Rhythmic, Deep, Diaphragmatic Breathing

The first and most important stress relief tool is "right beneath your nose" and as close as your breath. When you focus on slow, deep breathing, the **inhalation fills your lungs and causes your lower belly to expand as the diaphragm falls downward into the softness of your relaxed belly.**

Try it right now:

- **Relax your body** and release any noticeable tension. Let your tongue and jaws to relax, lower jaw releasing away from the upper jaw. Drop your shoulders away from your ears. Let your abdomen relax and become softer, releasing all tension from that part of your body.
- **Become aware of your breathing** just as it is. Inhale, taking a deep, full breath. Allow the breath to move all the way down into the lower belly. It is helpful to imagine that there is a small balloon in the belly. As you inhale, allow that balloon to quietly inflate. As you exhale, feel how the balloon gently deflates.
- **Take in several of these unhurried, soothing, deep breaths.**
- Then begin to **notice that there is a slight pause** that spontaneously takes place at the end of each exhalation. Give yourself permission to wait here without being in a hurry to take the next inhalation. Allow the next inhalation to surface as your body is ready to welcome it.
- **Take pleasure in the calming tranquility of the pause.** Float peacefully in the silence of this pause between exhalation and inhalation, allowing the breath to come about of its own accord. Let the breath breathe you!



If you are just learning diaphragmatic breathing, it can be useful to begin by lying on your back with your knees bent. In this posture, you can more easily feel "soft-belly" diaphragmatic breathing. Notice how the belly rises with inhalation and falls with exhalation. Let the breath create that movement. You can also lay your hands on your abdomen and let yourself breathe into their warmth. Feel how the weight of the hands rises with in-breath and drops with out-breath.

Another wonderful means to find deep belly breath is to lie face down on your belly. In this position, the only way you can breathe is diaphragmatically!

Lastly, it can sometimes be helpful to let yourself sigh out loud with the out-breath. Sounding is an excellent way to release stress and tension.

Deep, diaphragmatic, soft-belly breathing has a profound effect on the body. Just three minutes of soft-belly breathing can shift your body out of Stress Response mode into the Relaxation Response! And if you can remain in that Relaxation Response for just 20 minutes each day, you will go a long way toward counteracting the damaging effects of recurring stress on your body.

2. Body Scan / Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation, also known as a guided body scan is also a very useful stress relief technique. A guided body scan - which seeks to locate and release muscular tensions - encourages deep relaxation, as most of us carry needless tension in various muscles. The location of chronic muscle tension can differ from person to person.

In progressive muscle relaxation, you **move your attention into different parts of your body and release any felt sensations of tension or discomfort.** With practice, you can become more conscious of your tension and discover ways to release it. Letting go of physical tension promotes soothing and a calm, quiet mind.

Try a "mini-body scan" right now.

- Start with deep, restful breathing. Then when you are ready, move your attention sequentially through your body, starting at your head and slowly moving down until you end with your toes. Within each part of your body, pause a moment and scan for tightness, tension, or chronic soreness. Begin to allow yourself to release any discomfort or tension that you notice.
- You can also visualize sending the warmth of your in-breath into the discomfort or pain, and then, with the out-breath, release and dissolve the tension.



Physical relaxation - the release of muscular tension in the body - promotes the Relaxation Response. Your heart-rate, breathing and metabolism slow down and your blood pressure becomes lower. Your mind becomes tranquil and relaxed, free of worry - and is no longer sending out the signals that release the stress hormones to flood throughout your body.

As you become proficient in these methods, or if you desire a more structured practice it is often advantageous to work with a teacher or to use a guided meditation CD. This will help you to stay attentive to your breath and to pay attention to segments of your body which might otherwise be overlooked in the body scan.

3. Centering Meditation

Centering Meditation is a tested approach which encourages the condition of deep rest and relaxation. In this practice we **concentrate our awareness on a single word or phrase to improve the sense of relaxation at the same time as we are breathing deeply, slowly and evenly**. The words you choose can have profound personal significance, be neutral or just consist of welcome sounds.

One approach with this sort of structured meditation can be to silently speak one word or phrase to yourself as you breathe in and a different one as you breathe out. Following are some examples you might try now:

- With the inhale, mentally say to yourself: Be
- With the exhale, mentally say to yourself: Calm
- As you breathe in, saying: Let
- As you breathe out, saying: Go
- Breathing in: Deep
- Breathing out: Slow

Another way to make use of centering meditation is to repeat the word or phrase each time you breathe out. Here are a few examples of words or phrases you might choose to repeat to yourself in this manner:

- Rest
- Relax
- Calm
- One
- Wind
- Now



You can also practice centering meditation by counting breaths. To accomplish this, just count on each exhalation, You can count up to ten and when you reach ten, and start back over again at one. If you lose track of the count, start over again at one.

If thoughts, feelings or distractions appear, simply let them pass on by and kindly re-establish your awareness in the repetitive word, phrase, or counting.

4. The Practice of Mindfulness

The practice of Mindfulness, or mindfulness meditation, is a tested technique which encourages the bodily state of the Relaxation Response.

Mindfulness is finding what the essayist, Henry David Thoreau, referred to as the "bloom of the present moment." This practice affords an encounter of the Relaxation Response as you discover how **to be in the present moment with awareness that is moment-to-moment and without judgment**. It lets you become centered and wholly engaged in your life as it unfolds.

You can practice mindfulness formally or informally. In the **formal practice of Mindfulness (Mindfulness Practices)**, you start off with a focus of your attention on the physical sensations that accompany breathing. That is followed by an expanding of focus as you open yourself to sounds, sensations, thoughts, experiences or feelings. As you grow in awareness of what is inside you and around you, you can learn to consider and embrace what is present without judgment, without trying to modify it or move away from it.

The best approach to mindfulness practice is with **awareness of the breath**. As you breathe, you witness the thoughts or feelings that surface without reacting to them. Then, making use of the regularity of your breathing, just name and acknowledge what you observe, and go on with a focus on the breath. In this way, the breath becomes a continuing grounding to the current moment, and any interrupting thought or feeling diminishes from awareness.

This practice has been compared to sitting on the bank of a brook, focusing attention on the breath. As a leaf or a twig drifts by, it comes into conscious awareness. The leaf is witnessed, noted, and then it drifts on down the brook out of view. The observer goes back to the breath as focal point.



It may be of use to attune your focus by **vocalizing internally what you are experiencing**. This helps you to remain anchored in the present moment.

You might say things to yourself like:

- Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.
- Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.
- Breathing in, I am sad (or happy, worried, afraid, etc.)
- Breathing out, I still feel sad, etc.

With this approach, there is no investigation into or reflecting about what has prompted the feeling. You just name your experience and let it go with your breath.

An approach to Mindfulness that is **less formal (Mindful Living) involves bringing your total awareness to some task in which you are engaged, or to any moment that is taking place in the course of your day.** Whether you are having a meal, walking, driving, or getting dressed, you can proceed with the task or pleasure at hand, being totally engrossed in it while retaining the awareness of your breathing. You can connect with your senses fully and savor sensations that you take notice of.

- Breathing in, I know that I am taking a shower.
- Breathing out, I hear the sounds of flowing water.
- Breathing in, I feel the sensation of the warm water on my body.
- Breathing out, I see the swirling patterns of steam.

With this informal approach you are inviting mindful awareness to what is happening in the present moment, and you release the stress-inducing habit of multi-tasking. Right away you may let yourself be fully engaged in what is at hand. Only then can you be fully alive and fully present!

Remember that twenty minutes of being in the Relaxation Response per day can undo the effects of recurring stress.

Try some Mindfulness today!

5. Visualization or Guided Imagery/Meditation

Meditation is an effective, innovative and engaging approach to calm yourself and shift into a place of deep rest and relaxation. It is a powerful tool for changing your life. Through visualization you intentionally **make use of your imagination to alter your behavior, help your mind and body to heal, and change the way you feel.**



In her book, *Staying Well With Guided Imagery*, Belleruth Naparstek says that Guided Imagery is "a kind of **directed, deliberate daydreaming**, a safe and effective method of utilizing your sensory imagination." Guided Imagery helps you relax so that your mind and body may relax and recuperate from the plunder of chronic stress. Guided Imagery works because your body doesn't fully differentiate between evocative, sensory images and real events. Thus, when one is resting in a state of deep relaxation, the images we choose to focus on are persuasive and factual to the body.

An excellent way to begin the practice of visualization is to make use of a **Guided Meditation CD**, either one that is professionally produced or a chosen meditation script that you have recorded in your own voice. In addition, you can practice on your own by bringing to mind an image that you find relaxing - a soothing image of a favorite place or a blissful experience. Breathe slowly and deeply as you employ all of your imaginal senses to create and delight in your chosen image.

Visualization and Guided Imagery are valuable techniques to help you allow your body to relax and experience the Relaxation Response.

Make a little time today to **visualize a safe, tranquil and comforting scene in which you have everything you need**. You are completely relaxed and contented as you drink in the beauty of the setting that you have fashioned. Breathe with awareness as you experience, in your imagination, perfect pleasure and satisfaction. If you want something, you have only to bring it to your imagination and voila! you have added it to the scene you are creating. Let yourself stay in this imagined scene for a short while. When you are ready, come back to the so-called "real world." Pay attention to any sensations in your body.

6. Walking Meditation

Walking meditation is an excellent stress relief technique, especially if you feel fidgety while carrying out other mindfulness techniques.

A slow, mindful walk helps to center and relax you. Walking Meditation involves **practicing mindfulness and meditation while walking -- a type of stillness in motion**. A superb book on walking meditation is *The Long Road Turns to Joy*, Thich Nhat Hanh.



Here are a few tips for walking meditation:

- **Walk more slowly than your usual pace.** While you are walking, focus on your breath. See if you can find pleasure in each one of your steps -- you are walking to walk rather than walking to arrive at some destination.
- **Enjoy the nourishment of each incoming breath;** with each outgoing breath, let go of tension in your shoulders, as you also let go of burdensome worry.
- **Be awake to each and every one of the sensations in your body.** Notice the feel of your feet as they make contact with the earth. Become aware of the sensation as the heel of one foot comes into contact with the ground and the toes of the other foot begin to lift off.

- **Observe the interconnected movements in the action of walking:** transferring the center of gravity forward as you lean into the next step; pushing off with the toes of the rear foot as you swing the foot forward; contacting the earth with your heel. Be aware of how the weight of your body is focused on various areas of the load-bearing foot, repositioning from heel to ball of the foot to the toes.
- As you walk, **give your focused consideration to all the sensations** in your feet, your legs and your carriage. As humans, we've spent a lot of evolutionary time in learning to walk upright. It is a multifaceted and remarkable phenomenon -- allow yourself to marvel at it!
- **Combine consciousness** of your breath, your body's movement and the tranquility and loveliness of the present moment. See if you can be fully present with each step, each breath. If you can do it for one step, one cycle of breath, you can do it for the next and the next and the next.
- As you inhale, take a step and **say to yourself** "Here." As you breathe out, take another step and say "Now."
- You can also step to the words "present moment, only moment." Using words and phrases such as these will help you to stay centered and present in the now.

The habitual practice of walking meditation can become enjoyable, restful, and deeply relaxing. You will experience the Relaxation Response as you sink into the mindful awareness of the process of walking and your breathing.

Twenty minutes spent in the Relaxation Response each day can undo the effects of chronic stress. Can you reserve twenty minutes to give yourself this gift of health?



7. Meditation in Motion: Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga

The ancient disciplines of Tai Chi, Qigong and Yoga make excellent methods for heightening bodily awareness available, focusing on the breath, and living in the present moment - all are pathways to the Relaxation Response. Some have named these practices "meditation in motion." These may be particularly useful practices if you feel restless with less active approaches to relaxation.

When you practice any of these movement meditations you profit from motion paired with the awareness of the breath. Breath is the key to mindful movement and the bridge between the body and the mind.

Tai Chi

Tai Chi is a traditional Chinese mind-body practice composed of a series of graceful, fluid movements and coordinated breathing. It makes a multitude of health benefits available to the practitioner. Some of these

are: increased balance and muscle strength, improved aerobic capacity, greater coordination, reduction of stress, a sturdier immune system, and a sense of well-being. When you engage in a practice of Tai Chi, you are adding to the flow of internal "chi" or crucial life energy, and this provides significant health and wellness benefits.

Qigong

Qigong is an ancient Chinese healing art and is also a form of alternative Chinese medicine. It brings together breathing, meditation, and gentle, slow, rhythmic movement. When practiced frequently, it brings forth all of the components of the relaxation response while improving balance and flexibility. As with Tai Chi, Qigong facilitates the easy and efficient flow of "chi" all through the meridian pathways of the body.

Qigong helps you improve your stamina, blood circulation, immunity, flexibility, relaxation and quality of life in general through the combined grouping of movement, meditation and awareness of the breath. This encourages and accelerates the natural curative processes of your body as you experience the Relaxation Response.

In China, there are approximately 200 million people engaged in the practice of Qigong every day. Because the healthy as well as the severely ill can take advantage of the benefits of Qigong, it is one of the most broadly applicable systems of self-care in the world.

Yoga

Yoga is a very old practice of movement and philosophy based on instruction that originated in India over 5,000 years ago. The majority of people in the West are more familiar with the physical form of yoga, a system of physical poses designed to produce proper, healthy alignment in your body.

The physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation practices of yoga have been shown to lessen stress, bring blood pressure down, regulate heart rate, and even retard the aging process. Yoga practice boosts flexibility and coordination, releases muscle tension, and enhances tranquility. It is an excellent approach to developing body awareness and eliciting the Relaxation Response.



Try it!

You can experiment with movement meditation at present as you are seated in your chair! Little by little stretch through your upper body by extending up through the spine as you are reading these words.

Let your shoulders release from your neck. Experience the grace and strength in your sitting position. Relax through your eyes and let your tongue drop onto the floor of the mouth. Become softer in your jaw. Slowly raise your arms from your sides and stretch them over your head as you inhale. Then, slowly lower your arms as you breathe out. Duplicate that motion three times with awareness of your breathing. After the movement comes to a close, what do you notice?

These ancient movement meditations are wonderful techniques for stress relief. The cure for the Stress Response is to engage the Relaxation Response, which negates the harmful effects of the body being chronically "revved-up", as if to fight or flee from danger.

Take Twenty

We unwittingly elicit the Stress Response in our bodies through holding chronic muscle tension; through anxiety, worry, and catastrophic thinking; through lack of exercise and proper sleep; through a hectic, fast-paced stressful lifestyle. The Stress Response leads to a compromised immune system, greater vulnerability to disease, and to more rapid aging.

The antidote to the Stress Response is - the Relaxation Response, which undoes the harmful effects that result from the body being chronically "revved-up", as if to fight or flee from danger.

Twenty minutes of the Relaxation Response per day can reverse the effects of chronic stress. Start today!



Quick Stress Relief

FAST AND EFFECTIVE WAYS TO RAPIDLY REDUCE STRESS

Ever wish a stress superhero could save you from traffic jams, chaotic meetings, or a toddler's tantrums?

Guess what? You can be your own stress-busting superhero. Everybody has the power to reduce the impact of stress as it's happening in that moment. With practice, you can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds.

Learning quick stress relief won't happen overnight. Like any skill, it takes time, self-exploration and above all, practice. But think of it as an education with a huge payoff.

The basics of quick stress relief

There are countless techniques for preventing stress. Yoga and meditation work wonders for improving our coping skills. But who can take a moment to chant or meditate during a job interview or a disagreement with your spouse? For these situations, you need something more immediate and accessible. That's when quick stress relief comes to the rescue.

The speediest way to stamp out stress is by **engaging one or more of your senses**—your sense of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, or movement—to rapidly calm and energize yourself.

The key to practicing quick stress relief is learning what kind of sensory input helps your particular nervous system find calm and focus quickly. Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so an awareness of your preferences is essential for reducing stress.

Talking to someone who listens: a rapid stress reducer

Want to know a quick social stress reliever? Talk to someone! It's true, talking about your stress with a calm and balanced listener will make you feel better instantly. Although it's not always realistic to have a pal close by to lean on, building and maintaining a friendship network is ultimately good for your mental health. Between quick stress relief techniques and good listeners, you'll have all your bases covered.

Bring your senses to the rescue

Here comes the fun part. Remember exploring your senses in elementary school? Grownups can take a tip from grade school lessons by revisiting the senses and learning how they can help us prevent stress overload. Use the following exercises to identify the types of stress-busting sensory experiences that work quickly and effectively for you.

As you experiment, be as precise as possible. What is the most perfect image, the specific kind of sound, or type of movement that affects you the most? For example, if you're a music lover, listen to many different artists and types of music until you find the song that instantly lifts and relaxes you.

The examples listed below are intended to be a jumping off point. It's up to you to hone in on them and come up with additional things to try.

Sights

If you're a visual person, try to manage and relieve stress by surrounding yourself with soothing and uplifting images. You can also try closing your eyes and imagining the soothing images. Here are a few visually-based activities that may work as quick stress relievers:

- Look at a cherished photo or a favorite memento.
- Bring the outside indoors; buy a plant or some flowers to enliven your space.
- Enjoy the beauty of nature—a garden, the beach, a park, or your own backyard.
- Surround yourself with colors that lift your spirits.
- Close your eyes and picture a situation or place that feels peaceful and rejuvenating.



Sound

Are you sensitive to sounds and noises? Are you a music lover? If so, stress-relieving exercises that focus on your auditory sense may work particularly well. Experiment with the following sounds, noting how quickly your stress levels drop as you listen.

- Sing or hum a favorite tune. Listen to uplifting music.
- Tune in to the soundtrack of nature - crashing waves, the wind rustling the trees, birds singing.
- Buy a small fountain, so you can enjoy the soothing sound of running water in your home or office.
- Hang wind chimes near an open window.

Smell & Scents

If you tend to zone out or freeze when stressed, surround yourself with smells that are energizing and invigorating. If you tend to become overly agitated under stress, look for scents that are comforting and calming.

- Light a scented candle or burn some incense.
- Lie down in sheets scented with lavender.
- Smell the roses - or another type of flower.
- Enjoy the clean, fresh air in the great outdoors.
- Spritz on your favorite perfume or cologne.

Touch

Experiment with your sense of touch, playing with different tactile sensations. Focus on things you can feel that are relaxing and renewing. Use the following suggestions as a jumping off point:

- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket.
- Pet a dog or cat.
- Hold a comforting object (a stuffed animal, a favorite memento).
- Soak in a hot bath.
- Give yourself a hand or neck massage.
- Wear clothing that feels soft against your skin.



Taste

Slowly savoring a favorite treat can be very relaxing, but mindless stress eating will only add to your stress and your waistline. The key is to indulge your sense of taste mindfully and in moderation. Eat slowly, focusing on the feel of the food in your mouth and the taste on your tongue:

- Chew a piece of sugarless gum.
- Indulge in a small piece of dark chocolate.
- Sip a steaming cup of coffee or tea or a refreshing cold drink.
- Eat a perfectly ripe piece of fruit.
- Enjoy a healthy, crunchy snack (celery, carrots, or dried fruit mix).

Movement

If you tend to shut down when you're under stress, stress-relieving activities that get you moving may be particularly helpful. Anything that engages the muscles or gets you up and active can work. Here are a few suggestions:

- Run in place or jump up and down.
- Dance around.
- Stretch or roll your head in circles.
- Go for a short walk.
- Squeeze a rubbery stress ball.

The power of imagination

Sensory rich memories can also quickly reduce stress. After drawing upon your sensory toolbox becomes habit, another approach is to learn to simply *imagine* vivid sensations when stress strikes. Believe it or not, the sheer memory of your baby's face will have the same calming or energizing effects on your brain as seeing her photo. So if you can recall a strong sensation, you'll never be without access to your quick stress relief toolbox.

Tips for finding sensory inspiration

Inspiration is everywhere, from sights you see on your way to work to smells and objects around your home. Explore a variety of sensations so that no matter where you are you'll always have something you can do to relax yourself. Here a few ideas to get you started.



- **Memories.** Think back to what you did as a child to calm down. If you had a blanket or stuffed toy, you might benefit from tactile stimulation. Try tying a textured scarf around your neck before an appointment or keeping a piece of soft suede in your pocket.
- **Watch others.** Observing how others deal with stress can give you valuable insight. Baseball players often pop gum in their mouth before going up to bat. Singers often chat up the crowd before performing. Ask around about what people you know do to stay focused under pressure—it could work for you too.
- **Parents.** Think back to what your parents did to blow off steam. Did your mother feel more relaxed after a long walk? Did your father do yard work after a hard day? Try some of the things they did to unwind; they might work for you too.

Take a break from technology

Taking a short hiatus from the television, computer, cell phone, and iPod will give you insight on what your senses respond to best. Here are some “unplugging” tips:

- Try tuning into relaxing music instead of talk radio during your commute. Or try riding in silence for 10 minutes.
- Stuck in a long line at the grocery store? Instead of talking on your cell phone, take a moment to people watch. Pay attention to what you hear and see.
- Instead of checking e-mail while waiting for a meeting to begin, take a few deep breaths, look out the window, or sip some aromatic tea.
- While waiting for an appointment, resist the urge to text and give yourself a hand massage instead.

Make quick stress relief a habit

Let's get real. It's not easy to remember to use our senses in the middle of a mini - or not so mini - crisis. At first, it will feel easier to just give into pressure and tense up. The truth is, quick stress relief takes practice, practice, and more practice. But with time, calling upon your senses will become second nature. Here's how to make it habit.



Learning to use your senses to quickly manage stress is a little like learning to drive or to play golf. You don't master the skill in one lesson you have to practice until it becomes second nature. Once you have a variety of sensory tools you can depend on and use, you'll be able to handle even the toughest of situations.

- **Start small.** Instead of testing your quick stress relief tools on a source of major stress, start with a predictable low-level source of stress, like cooking dinner at the end of the day or sitting down to balance your checkbook.
- **Identify and target.** Think of just one low-level stressor that you know will occur several times a week, such as commuting. Vow to target that particular stressor with quick stress relief every time. After a few weeks, target a second stressor. After a few weeks more, target a third stressor and so on.
- **Test-drive sensory input.** Experiment with as much sensory input as possible. If you are practicing quick stress relief on your commute to work, bring a scented handkerchief with you one day, try music another day, and try a movement the next day.
- **Make “have fun” your motto.** If something doesn't work, don't force it. Move on until you find your best fit.
- **Talk about it.** Verbalizing your quick stress relief work will help integrate it into your life. It's bound to start a fascinating conversation - everyone relates to the topic of stress.

Quick acting stress-busting tips

The best part of quick stress relief is the awareness that you have control over your surroundings. Even if you share a work area, you can personalize your space to serve as a “stress prevention zone” or to put quick stress relief within arm's reach. We all have our stress hotspots. Where are yours?

Quick stress relief at home

- **Entertaining.** Prevent pre-party jitters by playing lively music. Light candles. The flicker and scent will stimulate your senses. Wear clothes that make you feel relaxed and confident instead of stiff and uncomfortable.
- **Kitchen.** Cool the kitchen commotion by breathing in the scent of every ingredient you use - even if you're just opening cans. Delight in the delicate texture of an eggshell. Appreciate the weight of an onion.
- **Children and relationships.** Prevent losing your cool during a spousal spat by breathing and squeezing the tips of your thumb and forefinger together. When your toddler tantrums, rub lotion into your hands then breathe in the scent.
- **Sleep.** Too stressed to snooze? Try using a white noise machine for background sound or a humidifier with a diffuser for a light scent in the air.
- **Creating a sanctuary.** If clutter is upsetting, spend 10 minutes each day to tidy and organize. Paint the walls with a fresh coat of your favorite calming color. Display photos and images that make you feel happy. Throw open the curtains and let in natural light whenever possible.

Quick stress relief at work

- **Meetings.** During stressful sessions, stay connected to your breath. Massage the tips of your fingers. Wiggle your toes. Sip coffee.
- **On the phone.** Inhale something energizing, like lemon, ginger, peppermint or coffee beans. While talking, stand up or pace back and forth to burn off excess energy. Conduct phone business outside when possible.
- **On the computer.** Work standing up. Do knee-bends in 10-minute intervals. Wrap a soft scarf around your neck. Suck on a peppermint.
- **Lunch breaks.** Take a walk around the block or in the parking lot. Listen to soothing music while eating. Have a quick chat with someone you love.
- **Your workspace.** Place family photos on your desk and display images and mementos that remind you of your life outside the office.





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