

10 Quick Stress Busters



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Stress is like dark chocolate. A little of it won't kill you. In fact, small blocks here and there can be good for you, or at least give you a reason to get of bed in the morning.

But chronic and severe stress can damage your body and mind, blocking the fluid communication to and from most organs — especially in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and in the limbic system, the brain's emotional center. Believe me, you want these two systems—much like the House and Senate — running as smoothly as possible, with low levels of the delinquent stress hormones in your bloodstream.

Which is why I have handy some tress busters. I use an average of five a day. Today I'm using all ten. Here they are, and good luck!

1. Simplify.

Cut your to-do list in half. How? Ask yourself this question after every item: Will I die tomorrow if this doesn't get accomplished? I'm guessing you'll get a lot of no's. I'm sure Franklin Covey has a more efficient and elaborate system. But here's mine: Every morning I immediately jot down my to-do list. Once I experience the first heart palpitation, the list gets cut in half.

2. Prioritize.

Let's say you've got five huge work projects due next week, two Cub Scout commitments you promised your son, your mom's overdue taxes on your desk, your wife's 40th birthday celebration to plan, and your sister's computer to fix. What do you do? You record all the tasks on a sheet of paper or on your computer and you give each one a number between 1 and 10: 10 being the most important (life threatening) to one (stupid bloody thing I signed up for). Start with the 10s. If you never get beyond the 8s, that's okay!

3. Use pencil, not pen.

If you rely on your to-do list as much as I do, then you'll want to start using pencil instead of pen. Because one important stress buster is to try to stay as flexible as you can. Things change! And change is not our enemy, even though our brain categorizes it as such. You want to be able to erase a task or reminder at any time, because who the heck knows what your day will be like.

4. Give away your cape.

If you haven't already guessed by now, you are not a superpower and don't possess supernatural qualities and capabilities. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to join the race ... the human race. Which means surrendering to limitations and conditions—like the number of hours in a day (24) and the amount of time it takes to get from point A to point B. In your car. Not in your bat mobile.

5. Collaborate and cooperate.

There are lots of people out there with to-do lists that look very similar to yours. Why not let them do some of your tasks so that you all don't have to do them? The moms around me have mastered this concept, as they have set up a babysitting co-op: one mom volunteers to watch a neighbor's kid and by doing so earns babysitting points that she can redeem when a neighbor watches her kids. In the blogging world, I have begun to collaborate with some other mental-health writers so that we all don't have to scan the same media outlets for [depression](#)-related stories. If I catch something I send it to them, and vice versa. It's an effective system.

6. Laugh.

Just as chronic and severe stress can damage organic systems in our body, humor can heal. When people laugh, the autonomic nervous system mellows out and the heart is allowed to relax. Laughter can also boost the immune system, as it has been found to increase a person's ability to fight viruses and foreign cells, and reduce the levels of three stress hormones: cortisol, epinephrine, and dopamine. Plus it's just fun to laugh. And having fun is its own stress buster.

7. Exercise.

Exercise relieves stress in several ways. First, cardiovascular workouts stimulate brain chemicals that foster growth of nerve cells. Second, exercise increases the activity of serotonin and/or norepinephrine. Third, a raised heart rate releases endorphins and a hormone known as ANP, which reduces pain, induces euphoria, and helps control the brain's response to stress and [anxiety](#). You need not to run a marathon or complete an ironman. A quick stroll in the morning or in the evening might be just enough to tell the stress hormones in your blood to scatter.

8. Stop juggling.

I realize some multi-tasking is inevitable in our rushed culture. But do we really have to simultaneously cook dinner, talk to Mom, help with homework, and check e-mail? If you were an excellent waiter or waitress in your past or present, then skip this one. However, if you have trouble chewing gum and walking at the same time like I do, you might try your best to concentrate on one activity at a time.

9. Build boundaries.

Speaking of activities, get some boundaries, ASAP—meaning designate a place and time for certain things so that your brain doesn't have to wear so many hats at the same time. I thought this was impossible as a mom who works from home until I made myself abide by some rules: computer is off when I'm not working, and computer stays off in the evening and on weekends. My brain adjusted nicely and appreciated the notice of when and where each hat was required, and it actually started to relax a tad.

10. Think globally.

I don't say this to induce a guilt trip. No, no, no. Because guilt trips compound stress. What I mean here is a simple reminder that compared to other problems in our world today—abject poverty in Somalia or Cambodia—the things that we stress about are pretty minor. In other words, if I shift my perspective a little, I can see that there are far worse dilemmas than my poor royalty figures on a few books. Put another way: Don't sweat the small stuff, and most of it is small stuff.