

Outsmarting Stress

You're familiar with the symptoms of stress -- a pounding heart, increased perspiration, tight neck and shoulder muscles, anxiety and fear. But you may not know how to prevent or relieve these symptoms.

Stress can be triggered by events, ideas, memories, emotions or failed expectations. The following actions can help you counteract the negative effects of stress, according to wellness experts at the Canyon Ranch Health Resort in Tucson, Ariz.

Exercise

A regular workout can release pent-up frustrations. Experts recommend getting 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week. Choose any aerobic activity: walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, stair climbing or step aerobics.

If life is too hectic for such a commitment, you can also find relief through brief periods of exercise: Get up from your desk and take a walk around the building for 15 minutes, or go up and down a few flights of stairs.

Keep communicating

One of the best ways to fight stress is to discuss your problems with a friend or relative. Our immune systems get a boost when our feelings are released, experts say. Talking to other people shows us we're not alone and helps us put our stress in perspective. Besides relieving the pressure, talking things out may lead to a solution to your problem.

If you can't find someone to talk to or have difficulty talking about what's bothering you, writing about the situation in a journal can be equally effective.

Pay attention to your diet and habits

A diet of wholesome, healthful foods can help stabilize your moods. Consuming caffeine, sugar, alcohol, nicotine and prescription or illegal drugs can increase your stress, making coping more difficult.

Make time for laughter and fun

Surround yourself with happy people who like to laugh. Let the child in you come out, and you'll find laughter is one of the best stress remedies.

Immerse yourself in a favorite activity or hobby

Participating in an activity will give you a block of time when you're focusing on a task instead of on the problems in your life. Gardening, carpentry, sewing, working with clay, painting and drawing are good choices, but there are many good choices depending on where you live and the time of year .

Use a variety of relaxation techniques

Deep-breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, visualization, creative imagery, yoga, meditation or listening to relaxation tapes can help. If you don't know how to get started, take a class. Relaxation techniques are skills that can be learned and practiced. Once you become fluent in one or two techniques, you can use them to manage your stress.

Live in the present

Take a moment to think about the causes of your stress. Many of them may come from thinking about the past or worrying about the future. If you can plant yourself firmly in the present, you can leave many worries behind and focus more clearly on solutions to current problems.