

Stress Slash Your Stress Level

Feeling stressed? Maybe you can't get to sleep, worry more than before, suffer from shoulder tension or feel overwhelmed? Although the best response to stress may be to juggle fewer activities, you can't always cut down on what you do. You can, however, trick your stress alarm system into thinking you are doing less. Use these tips from Janet Lapp, PhD, professional speaker, author of *Plant Your Feet Firmly in Mid-Air* and publisher of *The Change Letter*, to help alleviate stress.

1. Reduce Junk Input. The pressure to keep up with the sheer volume of information available may entice you to let in a steady stream of junk information just because "you don't want to miss anything." Don't let information invade you if it doesn't immediately relate to you, your family or your community. Turn off background TV or radio. Avoid regular viewing of short-segment, fast-paced TV. Get yourself off junk-mail lists. Ask yourself, "Do I really need to know this?"

Get rid of physical clutter, too, and don't stop with your desk. Clear out closets and drawers. If you dust or insure an item, consider letting it go. Throw out the old newspapers and magazines you haven't got around to reading, and declutter your filing cabinets. Clutter is registered on your retina as an enormous amount of overload information. By cutting it out, you can trick your brain into thinking you're in control. Besides, the Law of Clearing dictates that new and better information and materials will not enter until you release the old.

2. Give Yourself Quiet Time. In *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, Stephen Covey talks about "sharpening the saw," or balanced self-renewal. Do you spend your days sawing with a dull saw, when a short break to sharpen your saw would triple your productivity?

Whether or not you think you have time, schedule a half-hour of quiet time a day, and a half-day of quiet time each week, to let your mind absorb what it has taken in. Also schedule time for energizing activities such as exercise, education, spiritual practice and family pursuits. Although you will tell yourself that you "don't have time" for these activities, when your saw is sharper you will have twice as much time to accomplish what you need.

3. Learn to Say No. When you say yes to a request and don't have time for it, you often struggle through, doing a half-baked job, wearing yourself out, doing nothing else well and resenting the person who asked you. Saying no politely and firmly will decrease stress. When someone requests something, ask for time to consider it. After you have carefully lined up the request with your vision, goals and other demands, say yes if it is in line. If it is not, say no clearly. For example, respond by saying, "I would like to help you out. However, I'm not able to handle it well, given other demands on my time." When you say no, your nervous system will get the message that you have some control over what happens to you.

"Rubber-Band" Your Mind

Discipline worry and decrease your stress level with the following exercise, originally developed by Thomas Borkovec, PhD, of the University of Pennsylvania.

1. Notice when your worry comes. Don't try to forget it. That doesn't work.
2. Set aside an uninterrupted 20 minutes of dedicated worry time each day.
3. At that time, do nothing else. Think only about your worry. After a while, your mind will wander naturally. This natural process helps worry and resentment lose their grip.
4. Practice this exercise daily until your mental elastic keeps you focused on what's at hand.

This process tricks your stress alarm system into thinking you can handle whatever is happening now . . . which you always can!

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