

Employee Wellness Strategies

10 Ideas to De-Stress

Includes tips on self-massage, stretching and deep breathing

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Many people experience stress at work at some point during their life. A high level of stress can affect your ability to carry out your work, sleep well, engage with others, or even enjoy your hobbies. To keep your stress level in check, try out some quick tips to give yourself a break during the workday, then create a routine when you find options that work for you!

1. **De-stress your work environment:** A quick and simple way to help relieve stress is to alter your environment in small ways. Add photos of loved ones or bring in a small plant to enjoy.
2. **Stress Relieving Activity Accessories:** Play soundscapes, keep a stress ball, or small desk puzzle at your desk to give yourself a specific release when you need a break.
3. **Walk it Off:** Walking requires no investment, just head down to the parking lot on your break and take a stroll, invite co-workers with you for support.
4. **Find a “Chill” Room:** Is there a spare office, or private eating area in your workplace? Getting up from your desk and moving to a new environment for a short time can be very helpful for shifting your mindset.
5. **Self-Massage:** It’s no secret that massage is a great technique to relieve stress. Try out some of self-massage techniques (listed at the end) for different ailments including headaches, hand stiffness, and back pain.
6. **Essential Oil Therapy:** Using the natural effects of essential oils has a long tradition and is becoming more popular than ever. Chamomile, Geranium, Lavender,

Bergamot, Jasmine, Orange, and many more are good options for stress-relief. Blend your own personal favorites to create a roll-on oil, or lotion.

7. **Relaxation Breathing:** Stress can be physical, slow down by focusing on your breathing.

Practice Deep Breathing Meditation

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can, contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so your lower abdomen rises and falls.
- Count slowly as you exhale.

8. **Tea over Coffee:** We've come to associate coffee with energy, but teas can have a more positive effect on the mood and overall health. Try jasmine, lavender or chamomile teas for calming effects; if you suffer from a nervous stomach when you're stressed try a ginger tea.

9. **Stretching out Physical Stress:** Try these "at your desk" **stretches** for quick relief in minutes during the workday.

All of these stretches can be performed seated at your desk, but you must maintain a proper, ergonomic (or aligned) form. This means your neck and spine should be in a neutral position, shoulders and torso relaxed, knees bent at 90 degrees with both feet flat on the floor. We recommend doing these stretches at least 3-4 times per week, repeating the cycle twice each session. Hold all stretches for 15 to 30 seconds.

Right Ear to Shoulder Neck Stretch

How to do it: Tilt your head, bringing your right ear to your right shoulder until you feel a stretch. Using your left hand, apply slight pressure. You will feel the stretch along the left side of your neck.

Ear to Shoulder Neck Stretch 2

How to do it: Tilt your head, bringing your left ear to your left shoulder until you feel a stretch. Using your right hand, apply slight pressure. You will feel the stretch along the right side of your neck.

Rotation Right Stretch

How to do it: With your spine in a neutral, relaxed position, rotate your head to the right, gazing over your right shoulder.

Rotation Left Stretch

How to do it: With your spine in a neutral, relaxed position, rotate your head to the left, gazing over your left shoulder.

Right Shoulder Stretch

How to do it: Keep your shoulders relaxed and cross your right arm over your chest. Cradle it with your left hand and apply slight pressure.

10. **Take Notes & Slow Down:** Research has shown there are tremendous benefits to journal writing both physically and mentally. Writing relieves stress and improves your mood by providing a platform for your voice. Journaling can bring awareness to causes of stress and help you sort out your thoughts and feelings in a no-risk space.

If you feel overwhelmed by stress at work, ask for help! Talk to your primary care physician for recommendations.

Self-Massage Techniques

Massage Therapy to Relieve Tired Eyes

"This one is great for tired eyes from staring at the computer -- it brings circulation to the area and relieves sinus pressure, eye strain, and headaches," says Dale Grust, President of the New York Chapter of the American Massage

Therapy Association and a licensed massage therapist in New Paltz, N.Y., for 23 years.

- Close your eyes. Place your thumbs under your eyebrows, starting at the inside corner of each eye socket. Press and gently move the thumbs in tiny circles, working slowly towards the outsides of your eyebrows and continuing this movement all around your eyes, ending back at the bridge of your nose.
- Repeat this several times, spending a little extra time at the indentation of the inner eye socket, where the bridge of the nose meets the ridge of the eyebrows - an especially tender point on many people.

Massage Therapy to Ease Headaches and Tension

- Start by placing your thumbs on your cheekbones close to your ears, and use your fingertips to gently apply pressure and rub the temples (the soft spot between the corner of your eye and your ear).
- Using very firm pressure and a tiny circular motion, gradually move your fingers up along your hairline until they meet in the middle of your forehead, massaging your entire forehead and scalp as you inch along.

Massage Therapy to Relax the Hands

Here are several moves that will relieve the strain from pounding the keyboard all day.

- Stretch your hands and fingers out. Rub each finger from the base to the tip, gently pulling and twisting each finger as you go.
- Next, rest your left hand, palm upward, on your lap. Squeeze the fleshy part of your palm between your right thumb and index finger, moving from your wrist to the base of your thumb.
- Now squeeze that web between your left index finger and thumb several times, looking for any tender points.
- Then rub the entire palm with your right thumb, applying firm pressure and using gliding strokes from the wrist to the base of each finger.
- Repeat this process on your right hand.

Massaging the hands is not only great for the hands but can help to relieve headaches as well. The hands, like the feet, contain reflexology points that correspond to the entire body, including the head, neck, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and sinuses.

Massage Therapy to Relieve Neck Tension

- While you are sitting at the computer, mold your hands over your shoulders. Exhale, letting your head drop back as you slowly squeeze your fingers towards your palms, gliding up the muscles of your back and shoulders towards your neck.
- Now, rest your elbows on your desk, allowing your head to drop forward slightly. Massage your neck from your shoulders to the base of your skull using your fingertips to make small deep circles into the muscles on either side of your spine.
- Place both hands on the back of your head, interlacing the fingers. Drop your head forward and allow the weight of your elbows to pull your head gently down, stretching the muscles of your neck and those that run down your back.

Massage Therapy to Loosen Tight Shoulders

You will need a tennis ball or solid rubber ball for this one.

- Stand 18 inches from the wall, with your feet hip distance apart. Go into a partial squat with your buttocks against the wall.
- Lean forward, placing the ball behind your back at the top of your shoulder.
- Slowly stand up -- an inch at a time -- pressing against the wall and letting the ball roll slowly down the muscles along the side of your spine, stopping when you find a tender point and waiting for the pain to subside.
- Reverse the process, slowing sitting down into a squat, and allowing the ball to move back up to the top of your shoulder muscle.
- Now switch sides, moving the ball to the other side of your body and repeat the same slow massage.

Not only will you be releasing the tension from your shoulders, but you will also be developing strong leg muscles at the same time.

Massage Therapy to Release the Lower Back

- Stand up and put your hands on your waist, with your thumbs behind you and fingers facing forward.
- Gently press your thumbs into the muscles at either side of the spine -- but be careful not to press on the spine itself.
- Keep your thumbs pressed in while you move in a very tiny motion -- up, down, and around in a tiny circle. Spend extra time where you find a tender point - making sure not to cause pain.

- Move your thumbs gradually, an inch at a time, up either side of the spine as far as your hands can comfortably reach. Then gradually move back down your back and press on the bony surface of the sacrum (the large heavy bone at the base of the spine).

Massage Therapy to Soothe Tired Feet

- Bring your left foot onto the seat of your chair so you can see your instep. Using your right thumb, apply very firm pressure along the side of your foot, working from the heel to the big toe. Walk your thumb across the ridge where the toes meet the ball of your foot. When you get to the small toe, use your thumb and index finger to squeeze and twist along the entire surface of the toe. Work each toe individually until you get back to the large toe. Take all of your toes in one hand and stretch them back and forth, bending and flexing.
- While supporting the top of your left foot with your left hand, use the knuckles of your right hand to apply deep pressure to the entire surface of the bottom of your foot, working from the heel to the toes and back down.
- Stretch your toes, flex and extend your feet, and do a few ankle rotations.

Repeat the entire process on the right foot

Keep in Mind Before You Start

With all of these exercises, remember, you never want to cause yourself pain - but you do want to reach the area that is tender, because that is where the tension is. Always stretch the muscle out after massaging the area.

"If these moves do not ease your pain, contact your doctor to rule out any underlying medical problem," says massage therapist Dale Grust. "Never substitute self-massage for proper medical treatment."

More Relaxation Tips

Relaxation technique #1: Deep breathing

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple yet powerful relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the

cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements such as aromatherapy and music. While apps and audio downloads can guide you through the process, all you really need is a few minutes and a place to sit quietly or stretch out.

How to practice deep breathing

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying down. Put a small book on your stomach, and breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.

Why breathe from your belly?

Belly breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, which runs from the head down the neck, through the chest, and to the colon. This activates your relaxation response, reducing your heart rate and blood pressure and lowering stress levels.

Source: Harvard Men's Health Watch, May 2019

#2: Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. With regular practice, it gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of your body. This can help you react to the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind.

Progressive muscle relaxation can be combined with deep breathing for additional stress relief.

Practicing progressive muscle relaxation

Consult with your doctor first if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems, or other serious injuries that may be aggravated by tensing muscles.

Start at your feet and work your way up to your face, trying to only tense those muscles intended.

- Loosen clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to breathe in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and how your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- Shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the different muscle groups.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Progressive muscle relaxation sequence

1. Right foot, then left foot
2. Right calf, then left calf
3. Right thigh, then left thigh
4. Hips and buttocks
5. Stomach
6. Chest
7. Back
8. Right arm and hand, then left arm and hand
9. Neck and shoulders
10. Face

#3: Body scan meditation

This is a type of meditation that focuses your attention on various parts of your body. Like progressive muscle relaxation, you start with your feet and work your way up. But instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the way each part of your body feels, without labeling the sensations as either “good” or “bad”.

- Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing for about two minutes until you start to feel relaxed.
- Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for three to five seconds (or more).
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then slowly open your eyes and stretch, if necessary.

#4: Visualization

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety. Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether it's a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen.

You can practice visualization on your own or with an app or audio download to guide you through the imagery. You can also choose to do your visualization in silence or use listening aids, such as soothing music or a sound machine or a recording that matches your chosen setting: the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

Practicing visualization

Close your eyes and imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can: everything you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. Just “looking” at it in your mind’s eye like you would a photograph is not enough. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible. For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake:

- **See** the sun setting over the water
- **Hear** the birds singing
- **Smell** the pine trees
- **Feel** the cool water on your bare feet
- **Taste** the fresh, clean air

Enjoy the feeling of your worries drifting away as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present. Don’t worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a visualization session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of heaviness in your limbs, muscle twitches, or yawning. Again, these are normal responses.

#5: Self-massage

You’re probably already aware how much a professional massage at a spa or health club can help reduce stress, relieve pain, and ease muscle tension. What you may not be aware of is that you can experience some of the same benefits at home or work by practicing self-massage, or trading massages with a loved one.

Try taking a few minutes to massage yourself at your desk between tasks, on the couch at the end of a hectic day, or in bed to help you unwind before sleep. To enhance relaxation, you can use aromatic oil, scented lotion, or combine self-massage with mindfulness or deep breathing techniques.

A five-minute self-massage to relieve stress

A combination of strokes works well to relieve muscle tension. Try gentle chops with the edge of your hands or tapping with fingers or cupped palms. Put fingertip pressure on muscle knots. Knead across muscles, and try long, light, gliding strokes. You can apply these strokes to any part of the body that falls easily

within your reach. For a short session like this, try focusing on your neck and head:

- Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a loose fist and drum swiftly up and down the sides and back of your neck. Next, use your thumbs to work tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly massage the rest of your scalp with your fingertips. Then tap your fingers against your scalp, moving from the front to the back and then over the sides.
- Now massage your face. Make a series of tiny circles with your thumbs or fingertips. Pay particular attention to your temples, forehead, and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose and work outward over your eyebrows to your temples.
- Finally, close your eyes. Cup your hands loosely over your face and inhale and exhale easily for a short while.

#6: Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness has become extremely popular in recent years, garnering headlines and endorsements from celebrities, business leaders, and psychologists alike. So, what is mindfulness? Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, mindfulness switches your focus to what's happening right now, enabling you to be fully engaged in the present moment.

Meditations that cultivate mindfulness have long been used to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions. Some of these practices bring you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing or a few repeated words. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations. Mindfulness can also be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, or eating.

Using mindfulness to stay focused on the present might seem straightforward, but it takes practice to reap all the benefits. When you first start practicing, you'll likely find that your focus keeps wandering back to your worries or regrets. But don't get disheartened. Each time you draw your focus back to the present, you're strengthening a new mental habit that can help you break free of fretting about the past or stressing about the future. Using an app or audio download can also help focus your attention, especially when you're starting out.

[A basic mindfulness meditation:](#)

1. Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted or distracted.
2. Sit on a comfortable chair with your back straight.
3. Close your eyes and find a point of focus, such as your breathing—the sensation of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth or your belly rising and falling—or a meaningful word that you repeat throughout the meditation.
4. Don't worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you're doing. If thoughts intrude your relaxation session, don't fight them, just gently turn your attention back to your point of focus, without judgment.

#7: Rhythmic movement and mindful exercise

The idea of exercising may not sound particularly soothing, but rhythmic exercise that gets you into a flow of repetitive movement can produce the relaxation response. Examples include:

- Running
- Walking
- Swimming
- Dancing
- Rowing
- Climbing

For maximum stress relief, add mindfulness to your workout

While simply engaging in rhythmic exercise will help you relieve stress, adding a mindfulness component can benefit you even more.

As with meditation, mindful exercise requires being fully engaged in the present moment, paying attention to how your body feels right now, rather than your daily worries or concerns. Instead of zoning out or staring at a TV as you exercise, focus on the sensations in your limbs and how your breathing complements your movement.

If you're walking or running, for example, focus on the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath, and the feeling of the wind against your face. If you're resistance training, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you

raise and lower the weights. And when your mind wanders to other thoughts, gently return your focus to your breathing and movement.

#8: Yoga and tai chi



Yoga involves a series of both moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. As well as reducing anxiety and stress, yoga can also improve flexibility, strength, balance, and stamina. Since injuries can happen when yoga is practiced incorrectly, it's best to learn by attending group classes, hiring a private teacher, or at least following video instructions. Once you've learned the basics, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your practice as you see fit.

What type of yoga is best for stress?

Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement, deep breathing, and gentle stretching are best for stress relief.

- **Satyananda** is a traditional form of yoga. It features gentle poses, deep relaxation, and meditation, making it suitable for beginners as well as anyone aiming primarily for stress reduction.
- **Hatha yoga** is also a reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners. Alternately, look for labels like *gentle*, *for stress relief*, or *for beginners* when selecting a yoga class.
- **Power yoga**, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

If you're unsure whether a specific yoga class is appropriate for stress relief, call the studio or ask the teacher.

Tai chi

If you've seen a group of people in the park slowly moving in synch, you've likely witnessed tai chi. Tai chi is a self-paced series of slow, flowing body movements. By focusing your mind on the movements and your breathing, you keep your attention on the present, which clears the mind and leads to a relaxed state.

Tai chi is a safe, low-impact option for people of all ages and fitness levels, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. As with yoga, it's best learned in a class or from a private instructor. Once you've learned the basics, you can practice alone or with others.

Tips for starting a relaxation practice

Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques isn't difficult, but it takes regular practice to truly harness their stress-relieving power. Try setting aside at least 10 to 20 minutes a day for your relaxation practice.

Set aside time in your daily schedule. If possible, schedule a set time once or twice a day for your practice. If your schedule is already packed, try meditating while commuting on the bus or train, taking a yoga or tai chi break at lunchtime, or practicing mindful walking while exercising your dog.

Make use of smartphone apps and other aids. Many people find that smartphone apps or audio downloads can be useful in guiding them through different relaxation practices, establishing a regular routine, and keeping track of progress.

Expect ups and downs. Sometimes it can take time and practice to start reaping the full rewards of relaxation techniques such as meditation. The more you stick with it, the sooner the results will come. If you skip a few days or even a few weeks, don't get discouraged. Just get started again and slowly build up to your old momentum.