

Reducing stress doesn't have to be complicated. Just 60 seconds—one minute—out of your day can be enough to help you get a grip on stress.

### **Escape ... in Your Mind**

Sit in a quiet place for a moment and imagine yourself lying on a beach. Feel the sunlight on your body, hear the sounds of the ocean waves, smell the surf.

“Research has found that the same parts of the brain are activated when people are imagining something as when they're actually experiencing it,” says Brent Bauer, M.D., director of the Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program at the Mayo Clinic, and medical editor of the *Mayo Clinic Book of Alternative Medicine*. “When someone imagines a serene image, the optic cortex is activated in the same way as when the person is actually seeing the beautiful vista.”

### **Take a Slow, Deep Breath**

Stress typically causes quick, shallow breathing, which contributes to a rapid heart rate and sweating, which causes more stress. “Get control of your breathing, and the spiraling effects of stress will automatically become less intense,” Bauer says. Try this technique when you're in the throes of a trauma, or anytime, to feel more relaxed overall:

Inhale as slowly and deeply as you can to the count of six.

Keep your mouth closed, shoulders relaxed.

As you breathe in, push your stomach out.

Hold and slowly count to four.

Exhale through your mouth as you slowly count to six.

Repeat three to five times.

### **Listen to Beethoven or Bach**

One study found that people who listened to classical music after a stressful task had significantly lower blood pressure than those who heard no music.

### **Make a “Thank-You” List**

Write down five things that you're grateful for at that moment. “It could be the window in your office, air-conditioning on a hot day, or your pet,” says Larina Kase, a Philadelphia psychologist. When under stress, everything can seem overwhelming, and it's easy to forget about things you appreciate. “Writing down a grateful list helps people realize there can be stressful things and wonderful things at the same time,” she says.

### **Eat an Orange**

In one study, subjects who got 1,000 milligrams of vitamin C two weeks before performing a task that combined public speaking with math problems had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and lower blood pressure than those who didn't get the vitamin.

### **Look Forward to Fun**

Take a one-minute time-out and think about something fun you're looking forward

to later that day. “It can be anything from planning to watch the *Dancing with the Stars* finale to going to your granddaughter’s dance recital,” Kase says. “Thinking about something enjoyable you’ll do later helps keep things in perspective. You may be stressed now, but you’ll know it will soon pass, and you’ll be doing something relaxing.”

### **Pet your Pet**

Researchers looked at a group of stockbrokers who were being treated with an ACE inhibitor. Half of the subjects had a dog or cat, while half didn’t have a pet. Although their blood pressure stayed consistent in day-to-day situations, during times of stress, the pet owners had lower blood pressure and heart rates than those without pets.

### **Perform a Random Act of Kindness**

“Pick a bouquet of flowers from your garden and give it to a neighbor, or let someone pull ahead of you on the expressway,” Kase says. “Kindness is a natural stress buster.”

### **Chew Gum**

Studies show that chewing the stuff can actually change brain waves, improving alertness and concentration and reducing stress.

### **Mix Your Breakfast**

Have a breakfast of oatmeal and bananas with a dash of half-and-half, says Shawn M. Talbott, Ph.D., research director at SupplementWatch.com, a health education company. A meal that contains protein and complex grains will help you think more clearly. “The little dollop of fat will further slow the absorption of carbs and lessen the sugar spike,” Talbott says. The more clearly you think, the less anxious you’ll get during the day.

### **Read Your Fan Mail**

Print out nice e-mails and look at them when you’re feeling anxious. “Just as negative events elicit the fight-or-flight response, positive events can help elicit the relaxation response,” Bauer says. Keep notes, letters, and cards in a special box you can get to easily. Or play back nice phone messages.

### **Hug and Kiss Someone**

Touch can help reduce stress-hormone levels and boost the immune system.

### **Eat Yogurt**

A study found that people suffering from exhaustion and stress improved after taking a probiotic supplement for six months. Probiotics contain the good bacteria found in yogurt.

### **Play with a Favorite Toy**

Keep wind-up toys, Nerf balls, Koosh balls, etc., in your desk. “I keep a clown

nose, an Elvis driver's license, and light-up thumbs with me at all times," says Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D., an adjunct professor in psychology at Pepperdine University. "Humor adds perspective, making the stressors of life less potent."

### **Make a (Short) Priority List**

Prioritize what you need to accomplish during the day, then check off each item as you finish it. Time management is a key step in keeping tabs on stress levels, and checking off tasks lets you see the progress you've made, which gives you a sense of accomplishment.

### **Drink a Huge Glass of Water**

Dehydration can exacerbate stress and cause fatigue. "Any activity that causes you to stop for a few moments can be helpful," Bauer says.

### **Find a Quiet Place to Meditate**

Meditation actually changes brain waves—not just while you "ohm," but often for the rest of the day as well. Close your eyes and focus on a word or phrase in rhythm with your breath.

*By Leslie Pepper*