

Tips for managing stress and being more productive



Sure, it's normal to feel stress at times, but this pressure-packed time of year can throw even the most relaxed and well-adjusted person over the equilibrium edge, dampening your mood, energy level and performance.

From the anticipation of beginning a new year to adjusting to what are often colder, darker and shorter days, to whatever else the post-holiday season throws at you, this time of year can be an especially stressful time for many people.

So, how about giving yourself a gift of nurtured calm and resilience this year? Here are seven ways to guard yourself against and alleviate potential stressors all year round.

1. Be realistic — and optimistic

You are one person with 24 hours in a day. Don't set yourself up to fail by putting pressure on yourself to be perfect. Instead, make the goal about doing the best you can.

Also, look for reasons to be positive. It can be easy to get sucked into negative thinking, especially if you surround yourself with naysayers and "Debbie Downers." But inviting yourself to take pride in your personal and professional accomplishments, however small, can go a long way in helping you feel energized and motivated.

2. Set boundaries

Resist the pressure or urge to make yourself available at all hours. Being "on" nonstop and trying to fit too much into one day can make you less effective and eventually lead to burnout. Do what you can to organize your time and tasks, so you're focusing on the highest priorities first and most. For example, divide errands into "must-dos," "should-dos" and "no-need-to-dos" where possible. Also, consider delegating what you can — and often should — to colleagues at work and loved ones in your personal life.

3. Take time for yourself

Make sure to take time for yourself — even if it's just a few minutes or an hour or two. For example, during normal work cycles, if you are in a role that does not require being officially on call, give yourself permission to turn off email notifications, and decline to take meetings and calls during scheduled time off. Also, give yourself permission to say “no, thank you” to requests for extra shifts or invites for get-togethers with family and friends. Giving yourself downtime to recharge can ultimately help you be more upbeat and productive overall.

4. Limit distractions

People who believe they get more done by multitasking usually are less productive than those who focus on a given task. So, aim to limit distractions. Instead of answering one-off emails as they hit your inbox, schedule regular times throughout your workday to answer them in groups. If your work requires concentration, block time off your calendar and signal to colleagues not to disturb you. For example, shut your door, hang a sign with “work in progress, please do not disturb” or sign off the internal instant messaging account.

Likewise, if you're in the habit of checking personal email, answering texts and/or scrolling news and social media sites at all hours, resist the urge. Instead, schedule breaks as appropriate and possible to check these items and respond.

5. Take a break

Understanding that relaxation is the natural countermeasure for stress, it's important to take breaks to help you refresh and recharge. Even short breaks help improve your mood, performance and well-being. So, yes, get up and go for a short walk, talk to a pal, run an errand, watch a funny cat video or whatever it is you might enjoy. Also, schedule in activities you enjoy that have nothing to do with your job, other people's milestones or holidays. So, for example, read a book, watch a movie or go for a hike. When it comes to taking a break, it doesn't matter “what” you do, so much as “that” you do take the opportunity to rejuvenate.

If you do feel intensely stressed, use relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation, yoga or whatever else you find that helps slow your breathing and heart rate to bring you back to equilibrium.

6. Take care of your health

Even when your schedule heats up at work or at play, make time for regular exercise, getting enough sleep and eating healthy, balanced meals. It's true — all of these can help you be more resilient to stress and feel better overall:

- Exercising has a myriad of physical and mental benefits, from increasing your energy and lifting your spirits to calming your nervous system, and more.
- Making healthy food choices and eating regular, small meals can help maintain your energy and focus, while helping you avoid the risks of becoming lethargic or agitated as a result of low blood sugar.
- Quality sleep improves your productivity, creativity, problem-solving skills and focus.

7. Reach out

Whether in-person or virtually, having a solid support system among co-workers, friends and loved ones can help you ultimately be less stressed and more productive. In the moment of high stress, just having someone to talk to who will listen to what you're going through can help you calm down or cool off and reset.

Plus, maintaining positive friendships generally correlates to mental health and happiness. That's because healthy friendships can help keep your spirits up, give you a sense of connection and improve your self-confidence, among other benefits.

Bonus! Take time to laugh

Let's face it, laughing is fun and feels good. It also offers short- and long-term health benefits. Laughing stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and triggers endorphins that help improve your mood and even temporarily relieve pain. Laughing also releases and relieves muscle tension, so it can help you relax. And it boosts your immune system by releasing chemicals in your body that help fight stress.

Laughter has other benefits, too. It can strengthen relationships by creating bonds and shared experiences. And, when used appropriately in certain situations, humor can help defuse conflict.

These are just a few ways to help you reduce stress and be more productive at work.

Sources:

American Psychological Association. Psychologists' advice for newly remote workers. [apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/newly-remote-workers](https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/newly-remote-workers).

American Psychological Association. Give me a break. [apa.org/monitor/2019/01/break](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/break).

HelpGuide.org. Relaxation techniques for stress relief. [helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm).

HelpGuide.org. Making good friends. [helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm).

KidsHealth. "Stress" for teens. kidshealth.org/en/teens/stress.html?ref=search.

HelpGuide.org. The mental health benefits of exercise? [helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-in-the-workplace.htm](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-in-the-workplace.htm).

HelpGuide.org. Stress at work. [helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-in-the-workplace.htm](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-in-the-workplace.htm).

American Psychological Association. Coping with stress at work. [apa.org/topics/work-stress](https://www.apa.org/topics/work-stress).

This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 if you are in the United States or the local emergency services phone number if you are outside the United States, or go to the nearest accident and emergency department. This program is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g., employer or health plan). This program and all its components, in particular services to family members below the age of 16, may not be available in all locations and are subject to change without prior notice. Experience and/or educational levels of Employee Assistance Program resources may vary based on contract requirements or country regulatory requirements. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks or the property of their respective owners. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.

© 2022 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF5978377 216294-012022 OHC