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14 NO-FAIL STRESS BUSTERS to deal with end-of-year craziness



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As we hurtle towards the end of the year, negative tension often comes along for the ride. Here are some simple things you can do to dial down the stress.

BY STEPHANIE DOLGOFF



While the festive season can be full of fun and excitement, there's no denying it also comes with a healthy slab of stress and anxiety. And that doesn't feel great – your shoulders are tense; your digestion is wonky; maybe you're headachy, spotty, eating or drinking too much and so irritable that the rest of the family is hiding from you. Stress shows up differently in each of us, usually some version of your brain and body crankily pushing back against all that you're trying to manage.

The question is, what can you do to feel better, especially when you're juggling a busy work period, end-of-school-year hecticness, pre-break catch-ups and organising festive celebrations. Not to trouble you further, but both chronic and acute stress can have negative impacts on your health and can lead you to engage in less-than-wise escapist habits (at a time of year when alcohol consumption is already at its peak).

"When we think about the body on stress, it's really fuel for the fight-or-flight response," says psychologist and anxiety expert Dr Debra Kissen. This surge of energy is helpful when you have to get in gear to, say, lift a car off a small child or flee an axe-wielding horror-movie villain, she says. "It's just that when your brain continues to feel that you're in imminent danger when you're not, that stress starts to create all kinds of physical and emotional problems," explains Dr Kissen. Adding anxiety – dread and worry about what may happen next – is a recipe for health troubles.

We asked the experts for their best ideas for stress-relieving activities that are perfect for those times when life throws you an unwelcome challenge or two (or three, or 12).

1 TRY SOMETHING TACTILE

Getting out of your head and into your senses (in this case, your sense of touch) can bring you back to the here and now, says Dr Kissen. Whether that's digging your hands into the dirt as you weed the garden, stroking your pet's fur or making homemade slime with the little ones, it'll centre you in your body. Or try this quick exercise: "Ask yourself, 'What's one thing I can smell, taste or touch?'" she says. "Activating all the senses is a good grounding technique." ►





2 AIM YOUR BRAIN AT A PROBLEM

If the stress is more mental than physical and you feel as if your mind is looping around itself, give yourself a task, such as organising your shoes or doing a word puzzle. "When you're stressed, your brain may be saying, 'Let's solve this problem!' – so it keeps spinning," Dr Kissen says. If you give your brain a short-term job to focus on, you'll feel calmer and be better able to deal with what's actually bothering you.

3 DO SOME QUICK EXERCISE

Short sessions of movement are great if tension is making you feel jittery or your heart is beating faster than normal. It doesn't matter if it's 20 jumping jacks, 10 push-ups or sit-ups or a quick jog around the block. "A burst of activity gets your heart rate up and, even if brief, will activate several neurotransmitters (including dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine) that enhance your mood and help cushion some of that anxiety," says orthopaedic surgeon Dr Guillem Gonzalez-Lomas.

4 GIVE YOURSELF A MASSAGE

If there's no one else willing or able to work out the tension in your muscles, you can do it yourself. "There are sensory receptors in the skin that send messages to the brain, signalling that it's safe to relax," says massage therapist Kiera Nagle. It also makes you more aware of where you're feeling tense so you can consciously calm those areas of your body, she adds. Some good spots you can reach yourself are the muscles of your shoulders, the hinge of your jaw and pressure points on your hands.

5 DANCE IT OUT!

Putting on your favourite playlist and letting loose isn't just good exercise (a long-studied stress reliever), "it also engages the mind and brings on feelings of inspiration," says Dr Kissen. Dancing to music from a happy time and place can trigger positive memories as well, taking your mind off your worries. But know that not everyone feels comfortable grooving, even solo, and that's fine. "Some people get stressed out when they feel pressured to dance," she says, so do what feels right to you.

6 GET INTIMATE

Do it either by yourself or with someone who, at the very least, doesn't stress you out. An Israeli study found that sex was a stress reliever for pairs who were in a satisfying relationship, and a Swiss study checked the levels of the stress hormone cortisol in couples' saliva and found that people who had sex had lower levels and were in a better mood all around. As for solo sex, masturbation is a sensory experience that helps you focus and releases bodily tension; doing it to the point of orgasm releases dopamine and endorphins, both of which can lift you out of a tense state.

7 FIRE UP THE OVEN

Baking checks so many stress-reduction boxes: It can be a sensory experience (the feeling of smooshing the dough, the yummy smell of baked goods and, of course, the taste); it's a project that requires planning, concentration and mindfulness, which activate your brain; and, if you enjoy it, it's fun. If you're trying to cut down on sugar, food editor Kate Merker suggests buying pre-made dough and making your own healthy pizza. "It feels comforting, and you can put literally anything on top," she says. (Perfect if the fact that no two people eat the same thing in your household is making your head explode!)



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8 STRETCH YOURSELF

You don't even need to own a yoga mat, let alone be physically flexible, to reap the benefits of yoga. There's loads of research on its role in stress reduction, and even taking 10 minutes to breathe and stretch in any way that feels good to you can be incredibly soothing, Dr Gonzalez-Lomas says. Download an app, such as Glo or Pocket Yoga, and, if the weather cooperates, do your moves outside so you can take some fresh air into your lungs while you do happy baby pose.

9 MEDITATE – OR EVEN JUST BREATHE CONSCIOUSLY

This is another well-researched stress-relieving practice that some people are intimidated by but that is simple and effective once you do it, even for two minutes. Forget about the clearing-your-mind thing and focus on breathing. Research has shown slow breathing to have calming effects on the central nervous system and the cardiovascular system, and a recent study from China found that belly breathing might improve attention, mood and levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Try guided meditations on the apps Calm and Insight Timer, or set a timer for a minute or two and just sit and breathe deeply from your diaphragm.

10 DOODLE AWAY

Artistic skill (or lack thereof) doesn't matter here. Just let your pen have its way with the page – or, even easier, pick up an adult colouring book. "Anything that can get you out of your head, if you enjoy it, can be a stress reliever," says Dr Kissen. If you're not focused on whether the flower you drew looks like the real thing, then the stakes are blissfully low.

11 GO ON A CLEANING BINGE

Taking to the sofa cushions with a vacuum attachment has multiple stress-reducing benefits on top of keeping you from hearing a mysterious crunch when you sit down. Any kind of cleaning requires a little planning and physical activity, both of which, Dr Kissen says, can reduce stress and it's likely to result in a sense of achievement. Doing it mindfully can reduce tension even more: One study in the journal *Mindfulness* found that people who were told to stay gently focused on what they were doing while washing dishes felt much less nervous.

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12 SINK INTO A BATH

"By changing the body temperature, it gives a full sensory slowdown – kind of like rebooting a computer that has lots of windows open and is doing too much processing," says Dr Kissen. "Turning it off and starting again will help it get unstuck." If you like, add other calming sensory stimulators, like fragrant soap and chill music.



13 DO PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION (PMR)

Research has found that PMR helps reduce anxiety and calm breathing. Lie down and relax, then tighten, hold and release each muscle in your body one at a time, starting with your toes and moving to the crown of your head. Do it slowly and methodically, and don't forget your facial muscles.

14 GET LOST IN A STORY

It may be hard for some people to dig into a good book when they're feeling stressed, but bingeing on an absorbing program that transports you out of your life is a positive distraction. "Whether it's a podcast or a really dumb series, mindfully attending to a target is a great anchor," says Dr Kissen. In other words, the point isn't simply to distract yourself, but to make an active choice to place your attention elsewhere, she says. The mind, explains Dr Kissen, thinks, 'If only I keep thinking and thinking, I'll solve the problem and get out of it,' and choosing to anchor the mind elsewhere can stop this stress response. P