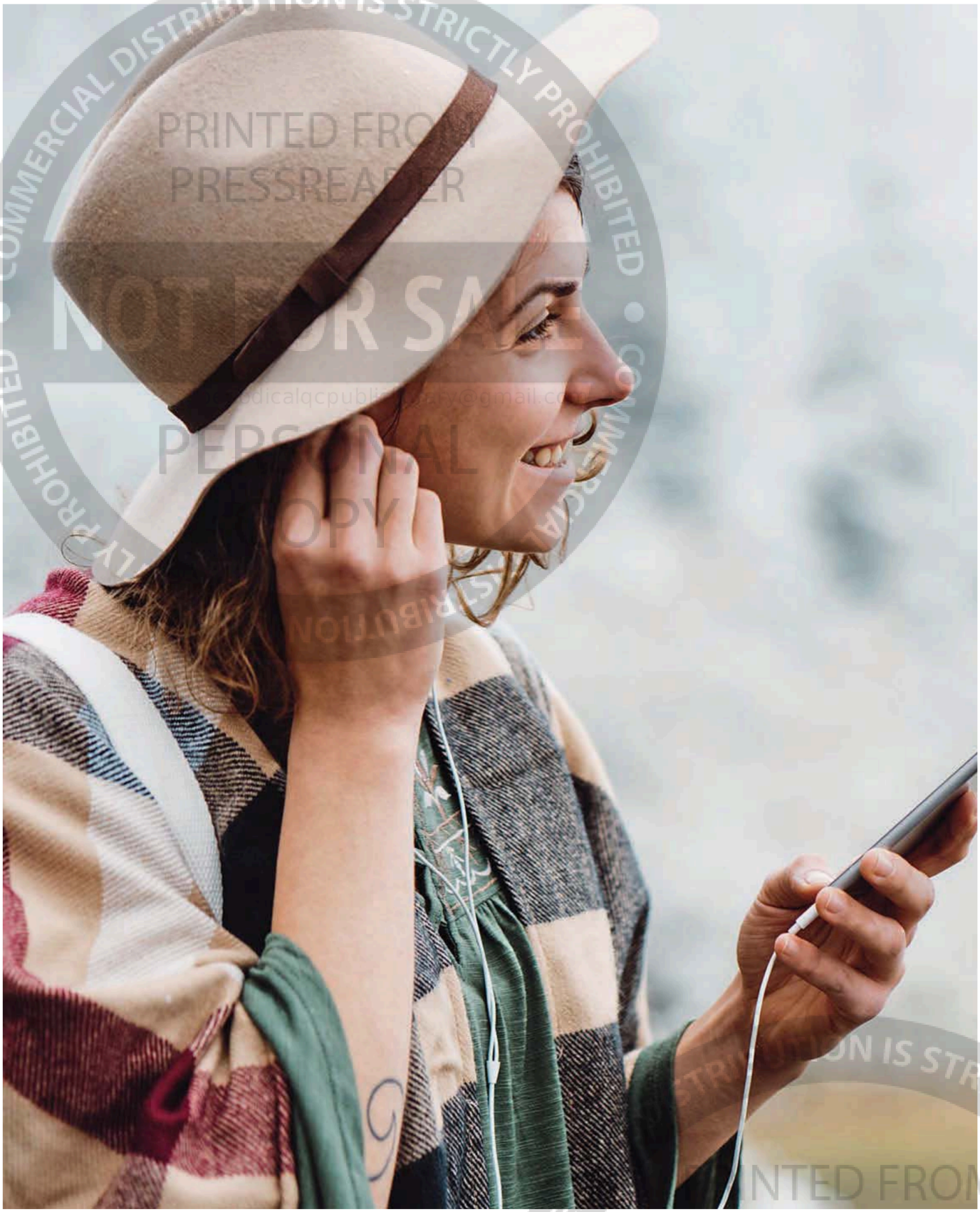
- Habit / Lifestyles / Stress



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Simple, daily habits to keep your stress levels in check

From humming to imagining yourself in the future, wellbeing experts share their favourite ways to keep calm when the world feels crazy

BY ELLA WALKER

Everybody feels stressed sometimes, it's a completely normal — some would even say vital — part of being human. The adrenaline that comes with it is what helps power you through a job interview; sharpens your focus when you're dealing with a tricky task; and helps you spot and navigate potentially dangerous situations quickly. Take away 'flight or fight or freeze' mode — your body's natural response to stressful events — and things can unravel when you least need them to.

That said, too much stress can be a danger in itself. If you don't know how to manage it, you can end up feeling anxious and upset, sick and dizzy, and lacking in confidence. Long-term unchecked stress can leave you burnt out, overwhelmed and physically and mentally exhausted.

As with so many things, balance is key. And the good news is there's a lot we can all do to keep an eye on our stress levels, and steps we can take to make sure they don't get out of control. Not sure where to start? We asked a gaggle of experts for their ultimate stress-busting tactics that you can implement today...

STAY HYDRATED

Feeling physically healthy is a good way to feel mentally healthy. 'If it's not easy for me, I'm not going to do it — it needs to be obvious and unavoidable,' says Dr Alexandria Phillips, clinical psychologist at Soke Wimbledon. 'Drinking lots of water helps me ward off stress headaches. I put my glass on top of my phone on my bed stand, so that when I wake up in the morning, I have to pick up the glass of water to be able to pick up my phone. First glass of water achieved before I'm even out of bed!'

BREATHE IN

Practitioner psychologist Dr Ravi Gill uses breathwork to manage her stress: 'While juggling work and two young children, taking time out for me is a rare thing. So whenever I can I try to take deep breaths to help regulate my emotions and contribute to my wellness — waiting at the traffic lights, waiting for the kettle to boil or the toaster. Deep breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for promoting calmness and reducing the "fight-or-flight" response.'

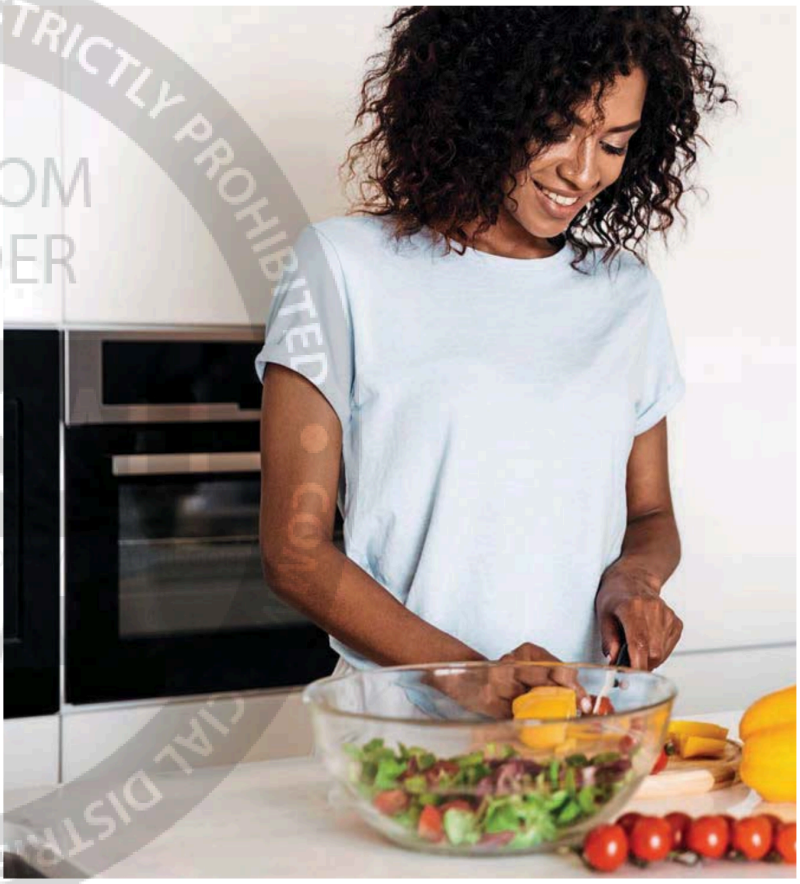
LISTEN TO A BEAT

It's amazing what throwing some shapes can do to boost your mood. Charli Harrison, a counsellor at Nuffield Health, says: 'I pop my earphones in and put on some of my favourite music and either go for a walk or a run, or have a sing and dance about my house (when no one else is home — obviously!). Music always helps me when I'm feeling stressed or overwhelmed.'

USE AFFIRMATIONS

Dr Phillips swears by positive thinking via affirmations — in ways you've probably not thought of before: 'I've started to change my passwords to my affirmations. Imagine logging into your work computer and writing "TakeABreath!". It'll remind you every morning

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that you have the power to slow down and take a breath, and that you deserve to look after yourself.'

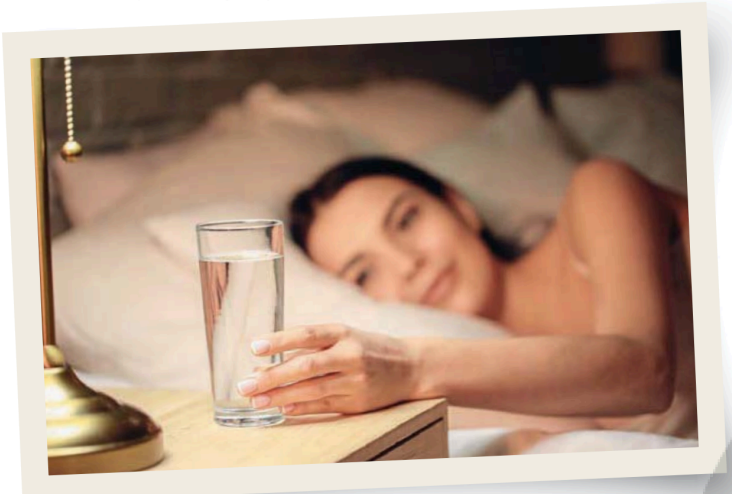
Dr Gill uses the 'I AM' app: 'It sends me a new affirmation throughout the day, every 90 minutes or so. In the busyness of my day, I can still take a small minute out to reflect or certainly stop and reframe my thoughts. I commonly use affirmations while I complete my morning routine; brushing teeth, skincare etc. like: "I am strong, I am brave, I am accomplished, I am enough."'

FIND THE FUN

'I was very taken by research in Scandinavia that looked at those who were so stressed they were becoming burnt out,' says Dr Richard Graham, consultant psychiatrist at Soke Wimbledon. 'They thought that people who experience burnout feel guilt and anxiety when they try to take care of themselves. So, my prescription is to make sure that you do something enjoyable, something rejuvenating. For me that might be trawling for a new recipe and really enjoying the discovery of whether it is as good as the pics!'

FIND YOUR STRENGTH

Regular exercising is a no-brainer for reducing stress — the NHS recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week for adults, or 75 minutes vigorous intensity. Nutritionist, personal trainer and wellness coach Rachael Sacerdoti, focuses on strength training: 'This is the most effective for both my mind and body. I aim for five strength sessions a week, emphasising progressive overload (gradually increasing intensity) to continually challenge myself.'



DISCOVER WHAT SUITS YOU

'Tackling stress can be quite stressful in itself. There is no one fit for all and the key is to find what naturally works for you,' says Dr Aarthi Sinha, GP and wellbeing specialist at churchcrescent.co.uk. 'I find exercising helpful, but going to the gym a stressful experience, so I will often do a small workout at home and go for a walk.'

LOOK AHEAD

Lauran Grayston, a therapist at Nuffield Health, jumps forward in time in her head when she's feeling overwhelmed. She says: 'If there are particular things causing stress, I love the question: "Will this matter in five years, one year, a month's time?" It helps to put things into perspective of importance and how long I should spend ruminating or worrying about it.'

HIT THE HAY

Yep, you've got to get your sleep in. Adults typically need seven to nine hours of sleep a night, and if you're missing out on enough zzzzs, stress can swiftly build up. 'My sleep alarm goes off at 10pm each night to remind me it's time to prioritise rest,' says Sacerdoti. 'Adequate sleep is my non-negotiable, especially when balancing fitness goals with running a business and caring for my family.'

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Find out more about how your mind affects your health on page 84



EMBRACE HOT STUFF
It can be hard to drift off if your stress tends to crash over you before bed. 'I have two evening rituals I swear by,' says Rebecca Dadoun, founder of Pilates Prescription. 'One is a bath and the other is a hot calming bedtime tea. I always think back to when my kids were babies and we would set up the perfect bedtime routine of a bottle, bath and bed; so why can't we have the same?'

HAVE A HUM
You can do this one wherever you might be — even on the bus. Phoebe Liebling, nutritional therapist and founder of Liebling Health, recommends a daily bout of humming. She says: 'Take an in-breath through your nose, hold it, then hum with your mouth closed, with as much intention as you can, for five to six minutes. The vibration through the head and neck stimulates the vagus nerve, which triggers the calming parasympathetic nervous system to take charge.'

MATCH AND MIRROR
For many of us, daily social situations can trigger stress. Jessen James, a former psychiatric nurse and human behaviour expert at jessenjames.com, has a nifty trick to 'diffuse stress and tension and make interactions feel smoother'. He says: 'Matching and mirroring involves subtly aligning your body language with the person you're speaking to. By matching someone's posture, gestures, or tone, you create a sense of connection. This not only makes the conversation feel less stressful but also increases the likelihood of being heard and understood, and when you feel heard and understood, you feel more confident. The more confident you feel, stress and anxiety levels are dramatically reduced.'

PRACTISE GRATITUDE
Dadoun uses 'gratitude check-ins' as a way of building up her psychological immune system. 'Just noting three things in your head, out loud with your kids or written down, can be so uplifting and humbling,' she says. 'For instance, my body works (stretch your arms and legs), I can breathe freely (take a nice big breath with this one) and my family, who I love (hug them), reminds me that whatever stress I am feeling. I am and will be OK!'

How does stress weaken the immune system?

'Whilst stress alone cannot make us catch a cold or flu virus, it weakens the immune system's ability to respond to invaders, leaving us more vulnerable to infection,' explains life coach Marianna Kilburn from avogel.co.uk. 'Recovery is also liable to be slower since the immune system is suppressed in favour of dealing with stress.'

The body's stress-response system should be self-limiting. Once the perceived threat has passed, adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, the heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume thei r regular activities.

'However, when stressors and "feeling under attack" remain constant, the fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on, over-exposing the body to cortisol and other stress hormones,' explains Kilburn. 'The cells of the immune system (and other body systems) are unable to respond normally and produce levels of inflammation which increase the risk of further health issues.

'Stress can also have an indirect effect on the immune system as we tend to resort to unhealthy coping strategies, such as smoking or drinking too much caffeine and alcohol, eating too much sugar and processed foods, not sleeping properly and giving up on exercise and healthy social activities.'

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