

From Breakdown To Breakthrough

Proven strategies for helping you survive the stress and anxiety of trying times.

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*Don ' t push me ' cause I ' m close to the edge
I ' m trying not to lose my head
uh uh huh huh huh
It ' s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.
— "The Message," Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five*

A lot of people are feeling that life is increasingly stressful as our world seems to be spiraling out of control. We watch helplessly as our retirement funds and stock portfolios melt down in slow motion almost every day, death by a thousand cuts. "Do I sell everything and cut my losses or wait for a rebound? What if I'm wrong? Who can I trust?"

Home foreclosures are surging. Few experiences in life are more humiliating than losing your home, not being able to adequately provide for your family, and trying to explain *why* to your child who doesn't understand, or to your spouse, who does.

And it's not just the economy that's melting down. Afghanistan meltdown: the Taliban is resurgent. Middle East meltdown: Iraq still can't seem to govern itself. Nuclear meltdown: Iran continues to develop nuclear technology. Global warming meltdown: the polar ice cap is melting even faster than predicted. Even Iceland is melting down.

How can we avoid an emotional meltdown? Fortunately, while we can't always change what's going on in the world, there is a lot we can do about how it affects us.

Several studies have shown that your *perception* of stress is more important than what is objectively occurring in your life. And you have a lot more choice about how stressed you feel than you may realize. When you practice some simple stress-management techniques on a regular basis, you can be in the same situation, but you can react in more constructive and healthful ways. As a patient once said to me after learning meditation and yoga, "Well, the situation didn't change, but *I* did."

Some people thrive on stress, and it doesn't cause them to get sick. Studies have found that they can turn it on when needed, but they can also turn it off. In contrast, people who feel chronically stressed and anxious have stress hormones that remain elevated, and this predisposes them to a wide variety of illnesses.

Stress-management techniques can help you turn it off. They are not about withdrawing from the world; rather, they enable you to embrace it more fully and effectively. When you're feeling less stressed, you can think more clearly and creatively, making it easier to find constructive solutions. When you're less desperate, you're more empowered.

At a time when your family and friends need you more than ever, taking care of yourself is the most unselfish thing you can do. Even your heart pumps blood to itself first so that it can then take care of the rest of your body.

Give yourself a break. Remember, stress is most likely to cause disease when it's chronic and unrelenting. One of the keys to managing chronic stress well is to be able to turn it off sometimes. Even your heart, steadily beating, rests in between each contraction.

So, for 24 hours, re-experience what it feels like to live without the constant stimulation of the television, radio or Internet being on 24/7. Don't check your stock portfolios, don't read the newspaper, don't go online, don't watch the news on television, and don't listen to talk radio. Spend the day with your loved ones and friends. While it's important to stay informed, the world will get by without you for one day, and if something really major happens, you'll hear about it anyway. When you return from your break, you'll be able to make clearer decisions and stay healthier in the process.

Breathe: Your breath is the link between your mind and your body. It both *reflects* and *affects* your level of stress. In other words, your mind affects your body, and your body also affects your mind. When you're relaxed, you tend to breathe more slowly and deeply. When you're feeling stressed, your breath becomes more rapid and shallow, so it can be a way of letting you know when you're feeling stressed. When you become aware that you're stressed, remind yourself to take some slow, deep breaths, which will reduce your stress level almost immediately.

Meditate: Meditation gives you a break from chronic stress—providing an internal oasis that you can experience anywhere. Meditation is the practice of paying attention. You can meditate on almost anything—a sound, a word, a prayer, a song, an image, or your breathing. Interestingly, different cultures meditate on words that sound very similar—beginning with an "ah" or "oh" and ending with an "m" or "n," like a parent humming to a baby. Om. Shalom. Salaam. Amen. Ameen. These words are often translated as meaning "peace" because they help you to experience it. The word "one" works just as well, if you prefer something that sounds more secular. Choose a word, sound or image that's comfortable for you.

To meditate, close your eyes and sit in a comfortable position with your back straight in a chair or on the floor. Take a breath, and say the word out loud, emphasizing the humming sound at the end. When you come to the end of the breath, take another one and say the word again. And so on. When your mind wanders, just bring it back to the meditation, without judging or berating yourself. I describe different ways of meditating in my book, "[The Spectrum](#)."

Practice yoga: Gentle hatha yoga stretches can relax chronically tensed muscle groups and increase both physical and mental flexibility. When your body is more relaxed, your mind feels less stressed as well.

Reduce stimulants: Caffeine, found in colas, "energy" drinks, coffee, tea and many medications, potentiates stress—in other words, it shortens your fuse and makes you more reactive to stress, the opposite of meditation. Slowly draw down your intake of caffeine so you don't go into withdrawal. If you drink alcohol, do it in moderation with friends, and avoid the temptation to "drown your troubles," which only creates new ones.

Exercise: In addition to the many physical benefits, exercise is a great way to discharge stressful feelings that accumulate during the day. Just walking for 20 to 30 minutes per day makes you feel better and look better. Do what you enjoy. Incorporate exercise into your daily life: park a little farther away, take the stairs, have more vigorous sex. Which brings me to:

Enhance social support, altruism and service: When you're depressed, it's easy to feel like you're the only person who feels this way since it's not something that most people talk about. You're not, especially now. The most commonly prescribed drugs in this country are antidepressants. People who feel lonely, depressed and isolated—the silent epidemic in this country—are many times more likely to get sick and die prematurely than those who have a strong sense of connection and community.

Call a friend. Get a dog or a cat. Volunteer in a hospital. Find a therapist. Splurge on a massage. Talk with your minister or counselor. Make love with your spouse or significant other. Go to church or synagogue. Have dinner with your family. Volunteer at the local food bank. Make a family budget.

Practice forgiveness, altruism and compassion: Chronic hostility and hatred are among the most toxic forms of stress. When you are really angry with someone, you empower the person you hate to make you stressed out or even sick. That's not smart. When you forgive someone, it doesn't excuse their actions; it frees you from your own stress and suffering.

Suffering can be a powerful catalyst for transforming our lives for the better. Change is difficult, but if we're in enough pain, then the idea of making beneficial changes may start to seem more appealing. In this context, suffering can have meaning, which makes it more bearable. As my wife, Anne, often says, "A breakdown can lead to a breakthrough."

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