5 ways to reduce stress

The nervous system regulates your movement, sensation, cognition, and emotion. It is comprised of the brain, spinal cord, and an intricate web of nerves throughout the body.

An important function of the nervous system is to respond to stress and perceived potential danger. This is commonly referred to as the 'fight or flight' response. When encountering a stressful situation your heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration can increase, while your digestion and immune function may decrease.

While this response may be necessary in the short term, your nervous system can sometimes struggle to return to its normal state. Sometimes non-threatening situations can also trigger a stress response which can feel uncomfortable.

Learning how to return your nervous system to normal can help improve your mental health, and reduce your risk of long-term health issues that are caused by stress (HelpGuide 2023).

5 ways to calm your nervous system and reduce stress

1. Deep breathing

One of the simplest and most effective ways to calm the nervous system is through deep breathing (Harvard 2020). There are no set rules, but one of the most popular techniques is the '4-7-8' technique. This involves inhaling for 4 counts, holding for 7 counts, and exhaling for 8 counts.

Start here with this 5-minute practice.

2. Meditation

Meditation is a mindfulness practice (NCCIH 2020). This means keeping a focus on the present moment and observing your thoughts and sensations without judgment. This practice is usually done while seated or laying down. You can link meditation with deep breathing by keeping your focus solely on your breath. You can do this practice alone or you can be guided through the process.

Start here with this guided practice.

3. Yoga

Yoga is a mind-body practice that combines body movement, controlled breath, and meditation. You can expect to move your body into many different poses or stretches during a yoga session. These poses are held from a few seconds to several minutes while focussing on slow, controlled breath. While relaxing, yoga is not always easy, so it's best to start slow. Also consider chair yoga.

Start here with this 10 minute beginner's practice.

4. Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing different muscles in your body. This technique can help to promote relaxation and reduce tight muscles. Start by tensing a muscle for a few seconds then releasing the tension and relaxing the muscles. Do this across a group of muscles like your shoulders, upper arm, lower arm, hands, and fingers. Repeat this process with different muscle groups throughout the body.

Start here with this guided practice.

5. Pets

Owning a pet can have many positive effects on your nervous system. Studies have found that interacting with pets can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (healthdirect 2021). Pets can also lower your blood pressure and resting heart rate. Spending time with a pet releases oxytocin, a hormone associated with relaxation and bonding (AHA 2021).

Owning a pet can also provide a sense of purpose and companionship. This is beneficial if you are experiencing loneliness or social isolation. While owning a pet is not a substitute for professional treatment, it can be a helpful support to therapy and medication for some people.

There are many other ways to promote relaxation and reduce stress that work together with these techniques. These include:

- Spending time in nature

- Getting regular exercise

- Practicing gratitude

- Engaging in creative activities such as art or music

Overall, it is important to find strategies that work for you. Incorporate these strategies into your daily routine to best support your health.

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