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8 No-Cost Ways to Protect Your Mental Health During Stressful Times



By Jenny Menzel, H.C.
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Medical Director of Vital Plan

If there's one thing we all have in common, it's that we've been [stressed out](#) at some point in our lives for various reasons, likely placing a strain on our mental well-being. Even as society gains more understanding of the importance of mental health, it remains misunderstood due to the long-standing stigma surrounding it. So what is mental health, exactly? And how can we protect it from the harmful effects of stress?

Mental health includes the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of a person (as well as how we act, think, and feel), according to the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#) (DHHS). And **problems with mental health can arise from a variety of factors like genetics, family history of mental illness, trauma, or abuse**. But it doesn't end there.

Common daily stressors from work, family duties, and social obligations add up, too — chipping away at the foundation of mental wellness more than we realize. Ideally, **a balanced mental state is achieved by alleviating acute stress before it turns chronic**. To do this, let's first look at how stress shows up in our everyday lives and then explore no-cost ways to manage it.

When Stress Impacts Your Mental Well-Being

Stress affects us all differently, but there are [general indicators](#) that stress is negatively impacting your mental health. If you're stressed out, you may experience one or many of the following symptoms:

- Increased hunger or loss of appetite
- Excessive sleep or difficulty staying asleep
- Feeling apathetic or “numb”

- Disassociating or secluding yourself from others
- Feeling irritable or argumentative
- Feeling unusually anxious or worried
- Unexplained body pain
- Intrusive thoughts or memories
- Feeling confused or forgetful
- Unable to perform your usual daily tasks
- Increased use of drugs or [alcohol](#)
- Thoughts of self-harm or harming others

Symptoms of stress greatly vary, as does the intensity. **No matter how severe or light your stress seems, incorporating the stress-reducing activities here will likely offer some relief.**



8 No-Cost Ways to Drop Stress and Support Your Mental Health

Here are eight practical, wallet-friendly tips to relieve stress and maintain a greater sense of well-being.



1. Take Your Mindfulness Outside.

If you don't meditate or have tried it and seemingly failed, you might be tired of seeing "meditation" listed as a top antidote to stress. [Meditating](#) in the modern world is tough, and it's easy to be discouraged when it doesn't work or if you don't think you're "doing it right."

But with [studies](#) demonstrating **meditation is a potent stress-reducing tool**, it's worth including it in your daily routine. **"Mindfulness doesn't need to take the form of traditional meditation to be effective,"** states Jenny Buttaccio, OTR/L, editorial director of Vital Plan and licensed occupational therapist. Here are just a few ways you can use the outdoors to make mindfulness a natural part of your day:

- **Sit in the morning or evening sun.** [Research](#) shows that safely soaking in the sun can improve your mood by boosting [vitamin D](#) and increasing serotonin levels. While the benefits of the sun are very real, the magic is in being present. Set a timer for 10 minutes, close your eyes, and bask in gratitude for the sun's anxiety-reducing warmth.
- **Walk near water.** A [study](#) found that walking near visible water for just 20 minutes can improve your mood. Don't live near water? Listening to soothing water sounds may produce similar [results](#) for some. Find some for free on [YouTube](#).
- **Experience the elements.** It's easy to enjoy sunny days and calm waters, but there is also something to be said for sitting stoically through a storm. Appreciating the rain while it soaks your clothes or watching the sky while resting

in a snowbank can be a peaceful practice, too.



2. Write it Out.

Research shows the act of journaling can have a calming effect similar to therapy by decreasing [anxiety and depression](#) after just one month and increasing resilience to stress after two to three months. If you think journaling takes too much time, there are alternatives, states Buttaccio.

“There are so many ways to journal without pouring over a page for 60 minutes,” she says. “If I’m feeling overwhelmed, I’ll just write one sentence before bed about what I’m feeling. Then, I’ll name a few solutions — one or two quick bullet points of easy, manageable things I can prioritize to set a more positive tone for the next day.”



3. Breathe It Out.

Nadi shodhana, better known as alternate nostril breathing, is a yogic breath control tactic originating from India that may decrease depression, stress, and anxiety, according to [one study](#). While many forms of controlled breathing offer [science-backed](#) benefits due to their calming effect on the central nervous system, **alternate nostril breathing gives your brain something to focus on during its slow inhales and exhales**, one nostril at a time.

To [practice nadi shodhana](#), sit comfortably in an upright position, resting your back against a wall or chair if you need extra support:

1. Place your right thumb on your right nostril, gently pressing it in while you inhale through your left nostril.
2. After breathing in fully, release your thumb and press your left nostril with your right ring finger — exhaling through your right nostril.
3. Then, inhale on your right, and exhale on your left.
4. This completes one cycle.
5. Set a timer for five minutes or do a certain number of cycles until you feel more relaxed, making sure to always end with an exhalation through the left nostril.



4. Sleep It Out.

“When you’re under stress, it’s easy for [sleep habits](#) to be knocked off course, but it’s perhaps the most important habit to prioritize in stressful times,” Buttaccio states. **Research** conducted on the effects of sleep deprivation on mental health found that **participants who slept six hours or less per night were 2.5 times more likely to experience frequent mental distress**. To get a good night’s rest, avoid stimulating activities in the evening, stop using electronic devices one to two hours before bed, and use a sleep mask to block out nighttime light.



5. Take A Social Media Timeout.

As we’ve become digitally dependent on operating in the world, it’s hard to go more than a couple of hours without checking your phone or computer for the latest social media trends and updates. But **taking a scheduled social**

media break for as long as a week can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, suggests a [study](#) published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. But what if you can't do a full week?

There are less drastic workarounds that can offer similar benefits for those unable (or unwilling) to jump offline for so long, says Buttaccio. **"Consider turning off notifications for all social apps, and train yourself to only look at social media at certain times of the day,"** she says. **"Also, take at least one night off of social media per week** to help de-stress and prioritize self-care activities."



6. Clean it Out.

A great physical way to help you clear out mental clutter is to clean up the physical mess, too. In fact, **levels of the stress hormone cortisol were more likely to spike in women who used adjectives such as "cluttered" to describe their home environments**, according to [research](#) published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. In contrast, women who described their home using restorative word choices had a more gradual cortisol slope throughout the day.

But before you tackle the mounting piles around your house to create your home sanctuary, consider making a checklist of small, measurable goals (such as cleaning off one table a day or donating old clothes). After completing the task, you'll be able to relish your progress and avoid adding to your stress load.



7. Cry it Out.

When all tools seem to fail, sometimes, it can help to simply cry. **"If you have a natural implication to cry, don't suppress it,"** says Buttaccio.

"If it gets too overwhelming, reach out to friends or ask for recommendations for a trained therapist, so you don't have to bear the burden alone." If you're not a fan of crying, try releasing pent-up anger, frustration, or stress with [exercise](#), [eating healthy](#), or even visiting a rage room to safely blow off some steam while breaking a few plates.

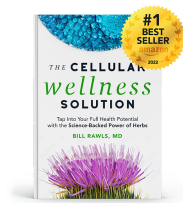


8. Get Out and Connect.

Humans are built for connection: Going out for lunch, tea, or just a fun night with friends might be the reset button you need. If your friends and family aren't available or if you feel isolated, consider volunteering at places you might enjoy. For example, if you love animals, offer to walk dogs or care for cats at your local [Humane Society](#). **Helping others through volunteering has been [shown](#) to boost endorphins and promote mental wellness.**

The Takeaway

Whether it's from happy events or unwanted ones — stress will happen. **Know that making attempts to reduce stress will be an ongoing practice.** "Don't worry about adhering to a stringent stress relief schedule," Buttaccio emphasizes, "Whatever healthy activity you can do to unburden yourself is going to be a positive step toward mental health."



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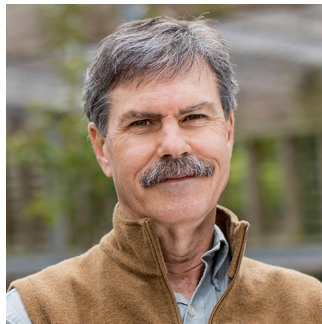
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Dr. Rawls is a licensed medical doctor in North Carolina and a leading expert in integrative health. He has extensive training in alternative therapies, and is the Medical Director of Vital Plan, a holistic health and herbal supplement company in Raleigh, NC.

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