

6 Steps to Less Stress

Various authors

With vacations and summer parties coming to an end, long weekends and half-day Fridays a fading memory, September can be a particularly stressful time. It seems everyone is trying to get back on track and make up for lost time.

Unfortunately, that extra tension can wreak havoc on your eating habits and increase your risk for heart disease and other health problems.

If you're feeling a tad tense, try these strategies for easing the anxiety. Incorporate them into your life now and by the time the holidays (perhaps an even more stressful season) arrive, you'll be better equipped to handle whatever comes your way.

1. Clear away the clutter

If disarray at home or work has you pulling your hair out, [getting organized](#) could go a long way toward helping you reduce anxiety. Simply having the space to get things in order can make a big difference. Purchase an extra file cabinet or storage bins, and rearrange your closets, pantry, filing cabinet or desk -- anything that seems to be contributing to your harried state. You'll be amazed at how calm a sense of order can make you feel. If you think you need help, contact a professional organizer. Try the National Association of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net) for a referral to a professional organizer in your area.

2. Work it out

You've heard it before, but it bears repeating: One of the simplest, most effective strategies for reducing stress is aerobic exercise. Ask people who do it regularly, and they'll tell you that they feel less anxious when they're keeping up with their cardio routine. And even better than just any old exercise is any workout that involves both body and mind, such as Yoga, Pilates or Tai Chi. Exercise even helps you sleep better -- which means less stress the next day.

3. Delegate duties

This goes for both work and household chores. While it may be hard to let go of that old, "If you want something done right..." chestnut, you'll be happier in the long run if you let people help you. For starters, make a chart with household tasks and divvy up the responsibilities [among family members](#).

4. Enlist outside help

If you hadn't noticed, you're living in an era when just about anything you want or need can be ordered or delivered. And that means if you can afford an extra expenditure here and there, you don't have to do everything yourself. Instead of spending two hours in a laundromat, try sending your laundry out (you may find you're not spending much more). Check the yellow pages for a dry cleaner that delivers or order your groceries online. Hire a caterer when you don't have time to cook for the party. If you have trouble with the idea of paying someone to do something you can do yourself, think about the money as an investment in your mental well-being.

5. Practice forced relaxation

Do you have trouble relaxing? While exercise should be your first solution, pairing it with one of the many tried and true relaxation techniques is even better. Try deep breathing, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization. For instructions on how to do each, look for a book such as Judith Lazarus' *Stress Relief and Relaxation Techniques*.

6. Fine tune your finances

If you feel like you're swimming in bills and junk mail, try simplifying things. Start paying your bills online so you don't have to worry about getting to the post office, buying stamps or remembering when everything is due (contact your bank to find out if you have an online bill-payment option). You can also contact utility companies and authorize them to automatically debit your checking account each month. Have your paychecks directly deposited so you don't have to wait in line at the bank. Try to consolidate your credit cards. Let a computer calendar or BlackBerry keep track of important meetings and birthdays for you.