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STRESSED OUT?

TIPS FOR TAMING THE STRESS MONSTER

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Stress seems ever present in 21st century life. Since it's a fact of life we'd all better figure out how we're going to handle it. Otherwise, it's going to slow us down or derail our business and personal goals.

Plus, stress is a health risk. Many well-respected studies link stress to heart disease and stroke — the No. 1 and No. 3 causes of death in the United States. Stress is also implicated in a host of other ailments such as depression and anxiety, chronic lower respiratory diseases, asthma flare-ups, rheumatoid arthritis, and gastrointestinal problems.

In our society today, we often seek the “magic” pill that will help us solve our problem. But in many cases it's the small things we do to relieve stress that reap large rewards.

EXERCISE: Exercise really does help. It sparks production of your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters, called endorphins. Exercise is the single best thing you can do for your brain in terms of mood, memory, and learning, according to Harvard Medical School psychiatrist John Ratey.

But sometimes thinking about starting an exercise program can make people feel even more stressed. It feels like yet another burden to add to an already overflowing schedule.

THE SOLUTION: make time for short stints of exercise. Recent research has shown 10 minutes of exercise a day can have positive health effects. And it doesn't matter what kind of exercise—walking, dancing, yoga. Find something you like to do. This can ensure that you'll want to do it on a regular basis. Or find an exercise buddy. You can motivate each other to keep to the program.

TRY A NEWS BLACKOUT: The world around us is in turmoil and the reports of disaster bombard us. If you're going through a particularly difficult time, consider placing a moratorium on watching and reading the news. Just give yourself a break from all the negative developments. The world and its problems will still be there when you tune back in.

STOP BEATING YOURSELF UP: Sometimes stress comes from the pressure we put on ourselves by harping on our shortcomings. Constant self-disparagement is not going to help us overcome problems. Acknowledging we're not perfect can be the first step in moving in the right direction.

Here are some other stressors and ideas to conquer them:

ALWAYS TARDY? If this is a chronic problem, always add an extra 15 minutes or more to get to your destinations. If lateness stems from dragging your heels, figure out what's causing your reticence. Are you anxious about what will happen after you get to work or to a social event, for example? Or maybe you're trying to jam too many tasks into too little time.

UNSURE OF YOUR ABILITY? Don't try to go it alone. If the problem is work, talk to a co-worker or supportive boss. Ask a knowledgeable friend or call the local library or an organization that can supply the information you need. Write down other ways that you might get the answers or skills you need.



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OVEREXTENDED? Clear the deck of at least one task. Look at your list and figure out what can be put on the back burner (without creating more stress) or what you can outsource. Is your house a mess and you're having company? Hire a cleaning firm to get it ready.

And here are some suggestions for **taming your stress-inducing to do list**:

The first step is to focus on what's most important and what will really make a difference in your life. To-do lists can become cluttered because we put everything on them from major projects at work to picking up the dry cleaning on the way home.

LEARN TO PRIORITIZE: When you set priorities and ask yourself the question what will really make a difference in my life, some of the to-do list clutter starts to disappear. Of course, many of us like to keep "pick up the dry cleaning" on our list because we know we can get that done.

One strategy: have a list for life's everyday tasks—get the dry cleaning, pick up milk, etc. That way you won't let something slip. But you're not giving those tasks more importance than they deserve. They're errands, not major projects.

Then create a list of the important things that you have to do—the tasks that will give you a sense of accomplishment and move you forward in your career and life.

Often, we let major projects overwhelm us because of the sheer size and scope. When you feel that happening, break a project into smaller parts—whether it's cleaning out the basement or creating a new marketing plan.

For example, if it's cleaning out the basement, your first task could be to organize the holiday decorations into one area or take the old electronic equipment to be recycled. If it's creating a new marketing plan, you could start by reviewing the last five marketing campaigns, pinpointing successes and failures. Go one step at time. And don't forget to give yourself a mental health break and a pat on the back when you finish each subtask.

DELEGATE: Finally, don't be afraid to ask for help. If the house needs to be cleaned but you have a dozen other family and work responsibilities, hire a cleaning service. Services like these, whether it's cleaning, dog walking or detailing your car, can free you up to concentrate on the important things.