

STRESS-BUSTERS: WHAT WORKS

SOME OF US ARE NATURALLY RESISTANT TO STRESS, BUT ANYONE CAN USE THESE PROVEN STRATEGIES TO CALM BODY AND MIND

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As Stanford psychiatrist David Spiegel puts it, "Living a stress-free life is not a reasonable goal. The goal is to deal with it actively and effectively."

1. One approach is to emulate people who are naturally resistant to stress. Some people weather devastating experiences with uncanny serenity. By studying them, researchers have discovered that they share distinctive habits of mind.
 - They tend to focus on immediate issues rather than global ones.
 - Stress-resistant people also tend to share an optimistic "explanatory style."
 - * They assume their troubles are temporary ("I'm tired today") rather than permanent ("I'm washed up") and specific ("I have a bad habit") rather than universal ("I'm a bad person")
 - * They credit themselves when things go right, while externalizing their failures ("That was a tough audience," not "I gave a wretched speech").
2. At the University of Massachusetts' Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, specialists teach people to manage stress through meditation and other relaxation exercises.
 - Participants in the center's stress program concentrate on breathing to quell the mind's restless forays in the past and future.
 - Then they lie down and "scan" their bodies, relaxing one muscle at a time.
3. Massage is another proven antidote to stress. No one knows precisely how the kneading of flesh quiets the stress response, but the effects can be dramatic.
4. If massage and meditation are too tame for your tastes, exercise may be your medicine. Exercise is known to increase the body's production of morphine-like endorphins, while improving the brain's oxygen supply and releasing tension from the muscles.

There are many other options, from yoga to biofeedback to music therapy, and none of them excludes the others. So do what works for you. And whether you go to confession, join a support group, or start a diary, find a way to talk about your feelings.

How can such different exercises have such similar benefits? The key, experts agree, is that they combat feelings of helplessness.