

Ten tips to combat stress

It doesn't matter at all if you feel stressed from time to time, but it shouldn't become a "normal" condition for you. Do you notice that your stressful feeling is persisting? Are you no longer able to relax anymore? Do you feel like you're 'on' all the time? If so, take a look at these anti-stress tips.

Tips for your BODY

Mental stress regularly manifests itself in physical problems. Paying attention to your body, recognising the signals in time and learning to deal with the body differently, are essential for dealing with stress.

Tip 1: Get Moving

Your body needs exercise to be able to remove excess stress hormones. So make sure you get some form of exercise every day. You don't necessarily have to work out intensively. The Dutch Healthy Exercise Standard states that adults need at least 30 minutes of moderately intensive physical activity 6 days a week. For example, it could be a half-hour long brisk walk or bike ride. You can, of course, do more intensive sports, but be careful not to make a performance thing out of it. Exercise in a way that suits you, choose activities that you enjoy. The easier you make it for yourself, the more likely it is to succeed. And if you do your exercise outdoors, you will kill two birds with one stone. Daylight and nature around you contribute to your feeling of well-being.

Tip 2: Do less and do it slower

A packed diary makes you feel stressed, even though it's full of fun things to do. So create more room for 'doing nothing at all'. Give your body the space it needs to remove the stress hormones and stabilise itself before you go back into action. Avoid time pressure and unnecessary haste. Slow things down. Walk slower, eat slower, talk slower... Every time you have to hurry, your body produces stress hormones. So leave in time for appointments, preferably planning some extra space. You're in charge of your schedule, and no one needs to know how full or how empty it is. It's okay to say no, even if you don't have any other urgent appointments. Allow yourself fresh air and space. Your time is your own, and nobody else's.

Tip 3: Take care of yourself

When you're stressed, you often neglect your body. Just think about it: too tired to cook something healthy, too restless to go to bed on time, too tense to be able to leave that wine on the table... But this only makes you feel more physically stressed. Avoid sugar, fatty foods, coffee and alcohol when you feel stressed. These foods promote the production of the

hormone cortisol, which promotes stress. Instead, eat many slow carbohydrates (whole grain products, vegetables, fruit, legumes) and drink plenty of water. Don't try to 'remove' the stress by using caffeine and alcohol, that's counterproductive. And, if at all possible, make sure that you have a fixed sleeping pattern.

Tip 4 **Relax**

Do something that really charges your batteries on a regular basis. For some, it means an afternoon sauna, others prefer to take a walk and a third person wants to relax on the couch with a good book. Do what suits you, as long as it gives you a feeling of peace and space.

Tips for your **HEAD**

Our brain is a fantastic organ, but it's annoying that it doesn't have an 'off switch.' Especially when we're stressed, it can feel like our heads are about to burst. We get chaotic, we can't put things into perspective anymore and we lose the overview. So it's a matter of restoring order in our heads, too.

Tip 5 **Write down your thoughts**

Writing is a wonderful way to achieve peace of mind. You can write in a number of different ways. Here are a few possibilities:

Every time something comes to mind that you 'have to' do, you write it down. Then you don't forget and you can let it go. And when you look at it again later, you might notice that it wasn't all that important.

Write down, at the end of the day, what you were satisfied with. What went well, what are you proud of, what was positive about the day?

Do you spend a lot of time worrying? Write down your negative and worrisome thoughts. Don't try to come up with a solution right away, just shake them off by writing them down. This can be a great way if, for example, you can't sleep at night.

Tip 6 **Be neat**

Messes are stressful. By cleaning up your surroundings, you immediately become calmer. There are a lot of things you can make neater: your workstation, your home, your computer, your bag, your car... Also, getting rid of excess 'stuff' is very effective. The less stuff you have, the less you have to clean up, keep neat, maintain, search for things, and so on. What do you really need? And what makes you really happy? All other things can be thrown away or given away. Want to read more on this subject? Marie Kondo's 'Spark Joy' offers a rather extreme, but also inspiring approach.

Tip 7 **Stop multitasking**

The term *multitasking* originates from the computer world and means that several programmes can run at the same time on the same processor. Very handy, you'd think. However, people aren't computers. For people, multitasking is usually not productive at all. Yes, multitasking works when it comes to fully automated physical processes. We have no problem breathing and writing a piece of text at the same time. But as soon as we want to do two things at once that both require conscious attention, things go wrong. The working memory in our brain can only perform one task at a time. When we think we're multitasking at home or at work, we're actually doing *switch tasking*. We're alternating between tasks at breakneck speed. The consequences are clear, as neuropsychiatrist Theo Compennolle puts it: "It takes more energy, you forget more and you're less creative: multitasking is completely counterproductive." Therefore, always try to do one thing with your complete attention. Not only will it make you much more effective, it will also make you feel much calmer and happier.

Tips for you HEART

Knowing what you want, being able to follow your feelings, being in touch with yourself and others, is like a protective coat against stress. But how do you do that? A few tips.

Tip 8: **Know yourself.**

Know what's important to you in life. Later, when you're old and look back on your life, what would you like to see? What makes life valuable to you? Being in contact with these 'higher values' can serve as a compass in your life and helps to set your course. On a more practical level, it means: know what gives you energy and what costs you energy. You can make a list of all the things that cause you stress, and of all the things that charge your batteries. If this doesn't work, take a week and write down what you're doing, and indicate with each activity how much energy you're getting from it. A 1 means that you don't get any energy from it at all, and a 10 means that it completely recharges you. Who knows, you might discover new things about yourself. Then you take stock: What things should I do more of? What things can I delete? What should I minimise? What should I approach differently?

Tip 9. **Meditate**

By meditating, you can neutralise the "fight-flight" reaction. While meditating, breathing calms down, muscle tension decreases and you notice that your mind becomes less agitated or impatient. All of these things are exactly the opposite of what you experience during a stress reaction. By meditating, you consciously take the time to let go of this stress reaction. People who meditate on a regular basis are ultimately also less likely to have a 'fight-flight' reaction. Your stress system is then readjusted, as it were, so that it is less likely to 'switch on'. Finally, mediation helps you to become more aware of specific sources of stress and tension.

The tension dissolves completely or awareness and new possibilities arise on how to deal with it in a different, often more sensible, way.

Meditation doesn't have to take long, simply a few times a day and a few minutes can make a difference. You can meditate independently with, for example, a meditation app (the one from VGZ is free and offers many exercises). You can also take a mindfulness training or meditation course

Tip 10. Release control

People who experience a lot of stress are often afraid of losing control. But we have less control over our lives than we tend to think. The 'illusion of control' is a well-known psychological phenomenon, which means that we tend to overestimate our own influence on a particular outcome. This gives a pleasant feeling in the short term, but in the long term it is a real source of energy leakage. It ensures that we continue to invest our energy in things that are not 'up to us.' For example: we continue to be annoyed by a roommate who never cleans up his mess, no matter how many times we have asked him to. Or we continue to seek the approval of a supervisor, who is not at all the type to give compliments. We may wish the other person to change, but the reality is that it is not our task to do that. It's better to differentiate: what do I really have control over, and what don't I control? That way you can spend your energy on things that will also deliver something. What about the rest? Let go of the rest.