

RELEASE PHYSICAL TENSION

While the mental aspect of distress manifests itself mainly as worry, the physical aspect often surfaces as tension in the body. Distress can register in the body as tight shoulders, stomach cramps, or cold, clammy palms. As the techniques explained below demonstrate, we can respond in kind by doing something different with our bodies.

Laugh

The physiological benefits of a belly laugh can be profound. Laughter affects our heart rate and breathing. It also softens muscles in various parts of the body. After a prolonged bout of laughter, we usually feel a wave of well-being and relaxation.

Learning to laugh on cue is a useful skill in managing stress. Keep a stash of jokes, cartoons, and humorous quotes. During times of stress, you can bring these goodies to mind and enjoy the results.

Relabel the sensation

We can discover alternative labels for various physical sensations—even those we associate with distress. For example, the sore muscles we used to complain about after a hard physical workout can now be enjoyed as “signs of getting into shape.” We can experience effectiveness in finding new ways to code our sensations in words.

Set aside time for fun

We can lower distress by setting aside definite times each day and week when we’re “off task”—freed of the expectation to compete, produce, or accomplish anything.

If we feel anxious or unsure about what to do during these times, we can forgive ourselves. With a little practice, we can remember ways to have fun. We can commit ourselves to having fun whether we like it or not.

Chant or sing

Words have the power to relax us. Sacred phrases and prayers are intoned by the adherents of many religions. These words offer ways to steady the mind and body that people have used for centuries.

We can use the same principle when confronted with distress. Bring to mind a favorite saying or prayer and repeat it several times. You can also speak these words out loud, write them down, or even sing them. Sometimes the sentiment expressed in these words is enough to restore our perspective. In addition, the sheer repetition of them can have a hypnotic, calming effect.



Breathe deeply

You do it naturally anyway; it's called sighing. Sighing is one way to deepen your breathing, and it's amazing how breathing deeply and slowly can relax you. When you're tense, remember that a different state of being is just one breath away.

Take care of your body

One of the most powerful things we can do when distressed is to take care of our bodies. That's just the opposite of what many people do. When they're under pressure at work or in the midst of strained relationships, they neglect sleep, exercise, and nutrition. Often they turn to junk foods or drugs for relief.

Our bodies can cope better with distress when we do just the opposite—stick to a regular meal schedule, get adequate sleep, and minimize or eliminate alcohol, sugar, caffeine, and other drugs. Cardiovascular exercise is a particularly potent antidote to stress.

Get physical

Hit a pillow with your hand or a tennis racket. Physically releasing pent-up energy can restore a level of calm. There are no advocacy groups for pillow rights, so go ahead and bang away. For added effect, shout at the pillow at the same time.

Get a massage

I would be willing to sell my house and move into a mobile home if that's what it took for me to afford a weekly therapeutic massage.

You can massage much distress right out of your life when you enlist the services of a skilled massage therapist. And don't forget that you can give yourself a massage. With your own hands, a massage vibrator, a foot massage machine, a vibrating chair, or a variety of other contraptions, you can do a pretty good job of relaxing yourself.

Do some hot water

People in almost every culture know the power of hot water in some form to de-stress the body. Experiment with anything from a hot bath to a sauna or sweat lodge.





Breathe to relax

Sometimes the simplest relaxation techniques are the most powerful. One is to purposefully slow down your breathing and take deeper breaths.

The speed of your thoughts and the level of tension in your body are frequently connected to the pace of your breath. By slowing down your breathing, you can often moderate thoughts and tension.

Practice slowing and deepening your breathing right now. Pay attention to any physical or emotional changes, and write your observations in the space below. Remember to practice this exercise and notice its effect on your level of distress.



Scan your body to relax

One option to reduce distress is the body scan. To do it, lie down on a bed or carpeted floor and close your eyes. If possible, darken the lights in the room.

Next, systematically focus on each part of your body. You can start with your toes and move slowly up to your head. When you notice any spots of tension, mentally relax them. To accentuate the effect, you can tense each muscle group and then relax it.

With practice you can apply this technique in other positions, including sitting, standing, or walking. You can even learn to relax while going to the dentist, filling out tax forms, or boarding planes for transcontinental flights.

Practicing a body scan will improve your ability to relax. Use it several times in the next few days. Once you get better at it, you might choose to make it a regular habit.

Choose new habits for managing distress

Complete the following sentences by writing in the space below.

When it comes to my overall effectiveness in managing distress, I describe myself as ...

Distress could get out of control in the following areas of my life:

The most important thing I intend to do right now to effectively manage distress is ...

