

Baby Steps

A close-up photograph of a bee on a pink flower with a yellow center. The bee is positioned on the left side of the flower, facing right. The flower has a dense, yellow, conical center and several long, pink petals. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

12
SIMPLE
STEPS

TO A HEALTHIER
LIFESTYLE

12 STEPS TO LIVING HEALTHY!

**STEP
FOUR**

*Reduce
Stress*



STEP FOUR REDUCE STRESS

A DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO REDUCING STRESS & LEARNING TO RELAX

A little stress can keep us on our toes and even save our life, but too much can lead to poor health and indecision. Stay in tune with your body to determine when you need to unplug and relax. To achieve truly superior health, you must learn to reduce stress. Easier said than done? For sure. Keeping stress to a minimum is often quite a challenge.

Baby Step number four is to equip you with the strategies you need to cope with the inevitable stressors in that occur in life. Let's take a look at some ways you can begin to reduce stress.

Devote time to the pursuits that matter to you in life.

What makes your heart skip a beat? Is it knitting, photography, art, music, tennis, your children or all of the above? Take some time to figure out what matters to you deep down in your soul. What is your mission, your passion, your purpose?

Take some time to put some thought into your answer. Then start to make a plan. If your life is not in line with the pursuits that matter to you, what steps can you make to begin lining up your life with your passion? Are you living in a way that is consistent with your soul goals? If not it's time to re-evaluate things.

It can be a resolution to "say no" to the stuff that does not matter or have an impact, things that just make you busy. Or it could be devoting time to what is important means a major overhaul. One great way to decide what matters to you is to imagine or even write down what an ideal perfect day would look like to you.

What kinds of things would you do and when would you do them? Take some time to schedule in time for what matters and be consciously aware of your actions in guarding that time.

After you have your list, think about how much time you spend doing things that do not contribute to your life passion. Eliminate those things as ruthlessly as possible. For example, if you spend 1 hour every day on Facebook, but you'd like to learn another language, well, you get the idea.

Recognize that it is ok to say "No" sometimes and when you choose to say "no" resist the urge to give an explanation as to why. If it is necessary to give a reason, keep it short and do not be overly apologetic about saying no. Your time is valuable. Being busy does not always equal productive or even successful.

Prioritize your life

Keeping your pursuits and priorities in mind will help you to reduce stress levels by keeping you on track. Now that you know what matters to you, it's time to prioritize things. Naturally, if you have a job outside the home, you can't just start devoting all your time to traveling for pleasure. Although, thinking about how you can incorporate things that are the most important to you into your daily life is not a bad idea.

When putting your life pursuits in order remember to focus on the importance, not urgency. Do the most important things first. Delegate anything you can, such as yard work, housekeeping, and cooking. How can you delegate these tasks?

One great way to get out of cooking every night is to double up on the nights you do cook, reserving one meal for the freezer to use on a night when you don't have time to prepare a meal. If you are open to the idea and have friends with similar eating styles, you could also do meal swaps.

If you enjoy cooking, why not devote time to enjoy the task. Collect recipes that you want to try then invite someone you enjoy spending time with and get in the kitchen! Add some music and have a blast.

If you have children, it's a good idea to train them early to help around the house. Taking out the garbage, manicuring the lawn, loading the dishwasher; these are all jobs where children could offer some help.

If "spending time with the kids" is one of your passions, realize that not all of the time you spend with them has to be recreational. Bonding and relationship building can occur while you are teaching your child to clean their room, as long as you do it in a friendly way without being too bossy!



If you would like to spend more time focusing on other areas of your life, consider hiring a housekeeper if it fits your budget. A lawn care company that can do outdoor tasks around your home could free up some of your time for pursuing things you enjoy. Enjoy a leisurely activity. If you enjoy dancing, go to a dance class or sign up for Zumba at your gym. Do what makes your heart happy.

When possible, leave work on time. Don't always be the one volunteering to do that additional project or at least don't tackle the project on your own. Remember most worthwhile projects get done with team efforts. This principle also applies when you are addressing problems and technical issues. For example, when your car breaks do you read through a giant mechanics manual or do you take it to the repair shop?

Busyness

Busyness is the enemy of relaxation. A mind full of clutter makes it hard to focus or even identify what you want from life. Keep a blank notebook around to use for doing a brain dump. I keep one in my kitchen and one in my bedroom. When my head is full of mental clutter, I pull out my notebook and write down every thought, whether it makes sense or not.

Once I have the thoughts on paper, I can set priorities based on my life passion and pursuits. This kind of brain dump helps me to focus on what I want to spend my energy on and what is simply not worth it. I have found that for me, a blank notebook or sketchbook works best because I don't have to bother with staying on the lines!

Negative Emotions and Thoughts

When your negative emotions concern another person, instead of bottling up your emotions or complaining to a 3rd party speak directly to the person with whom you have an issue. It's best not to place the blame on the other person and to avoid using absolute terms such as "always" and "never. Try expressing your feelings like this: "When you ____ I feel ____" For example: "When you break a promise to me, I feel unimportant" which will help get your point across without the negative emotions associated with words like always and never.

When your inner voice is talking mean to you, tell her to zip it! Don't say things to yourself that you would never say to your best friend. My husband corrects me when I speak poorly about myself by telling me if anyone else said that about me, he would hurt them! I don't think he really would, but that's how strongly he feels about the way I talk about myself.

One great way to shut down negative emotions is to change activities. As soon as a negative emotion pops into your mind, stop right there and move on to a different activity. Even if you can't physically leave the situation, think of something funny or even start laughing for no reason.

Smiling can improve your mood, but laughing can increase your heart health. That's enough reason alone to put a positive spin on your negative thoughts. Keep your sphere of influence full of people who are positive and avoid individuals who are overly critical or always negative. Spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself and life as a whole.

Solitude can often be stressful. Keep in touch with your closest friends. Try to make it a point to reach out to others in your circle. I am often surprised by how much just a quick chat with a cheerful cashier at the supermarket can lift my spirits when I am feeling down.

Take time to go to coffee with a friend or meet for a quick lunch. I also like to meet my friends in the park or on a greenway for a "walk and talk" therapy session!

Take small breaks throughout the day to clear your head. Walk away from the desk, computer, or dishes and just close your eyes and take a deep breath. Researchers have discovered that creativity increases by as much as 60 percent in people when they walk.

These benefits are said to occur inside or outside walking. Since exercise is a mood elevator, it makes sense that it would result in keeping your creative thoughts flowing!

Pay it forward

Another great idea is volunteering, it might sound odd, but giving my time to those who are less fortunate than myself can bring me back to reality. Volunteering with my kids grounds me to what our purpose in life is.

Here are some suggestions that can be naturally incorporated that also might make you feel good about yourself which definitely reduces stress!

- Pay for the person behind you in line next time you're at the drive through.
- Hold the door open for people when you are entering or exiting a building.
- Let someone in during rush hour instead of cutting them off.
- Compliment a coworker on their smart looking outfit or whatever you notice.
- Do a task for someone in your family that they always do and leave a note saying thank you for always doing that task.
- Add a few extra items to your grocery cart from time to time when you go shopping then donate them to a local food pantry.
- Instead of reselling items, donate them.
- Send someone a postcard or handwritten note for absolutely no reason.
- Take cookies to a neighbor or friend out of the blue.
- Make a charitable donation to a nonprofit organization or if you can't spare the cash, volunteer your time. The rewards for all involved are better than you think! We have volunteered to raise guide dog puppies for the first 18 months of their lives in the past. It was a rewarding and fun job.

Garbage in Garbage Out

Listen to uplifting podcasts, watch funny shows or movies on TV (but don't go overboard on television!), go to a comedy show or hang out with a funny friend!

Don't over exaggerate problems in your head. I have a tendency to do this; it's called making a mountain out of a molehill. Recognize the problem, look for a solution, execute steps to reach a resolution.

Physical ways to reduce stress

If possible, schedule a massage once per month to relieve tension. If this is not feasible due to financial reasons, consider trading out the favor with your spouse or best friend. Even my kids can give a decent shoulder massage when I need it!

Self-massage can even give you some benefit. So stick your feet in a nice Epsom salt soak then towel dry and rub in some beneficial essential oils or even just coconut oil. Then cover with nice warm socks and lay back and relax. Try to use coconut oil and add a drop or two of lavender oil to a teaspoon for a relaxing self-massage. You can use a foam roller to roll out those kinks and knots.

Use an essential oil blend in your home or office instead of toxic chemical fragrances. Not only will using essential oils help you stay calm but replacing the plug-in type air freshener will reduce the number of toxins in your environment, helping you to live a healthier lifestyle!

I like orange, peppermint, basil, lavender, and chamomile as a great blend to help relaxation and with stress reduction. Combine these oils and add to a diffuser or buy a blend like Aura Cacia Chill Pill for the office and Pillow Potion for the bedroom at night.

Establish routines to put yourself on auto-pilot in the morning and night. Having routines that are a set list of tasks that you do without thinking can help destress. I do the same routine every morning when I wake up and every night before I go to bed. It may alter slightly on occasion due to circumstances, but the majority of the time I follow the same routine morning and night.

Eat to Reduce Stress

Eat a nutritious and well-balanced diet. Here are a few suggestions of Super Stress-Reducing Foods to Eat to help cope with stress:

- blueberries
- avocado
- pistachio
- wild caught salmon
- dark green leafy veggies
- dark chocolate
- green tea
- granny smith apples
- fermented foods
- nuts and seeds especially sprouted

Foods to Avoid

- sugar
- excessive caffeine
- processed foods
- fast foods

Stress has physical and psychological effects. Start implementing these stress reducing techniques for longevity and overall health. Reducing and managing stress can contribute to better immune function, higher energy levels, better sleep, a calmer and more relaxed feeling overall, fewer illnesses and physical complaints and the ability to focus and be more positive.

Shifting yourself into a healthier pattern of dealing with everyday stress has a huge payoff as you can see. When you realize that most daily stressors are not worth sacrificing your health for, you will start avoiding stress like a pro!

Now go
Relax!

