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# STRESS MANAGEMENT TIPS

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The average business professional has 30 to 100 projects on their plate. Modern workers are interrupted seven times an hour and distracted up to 2.1 hours a day. "People are asking me for answers," says [Sharon Melnick](#), Ph.D., a business psychologist and author of *Success under Stress*. "Everyone feels overwhelmed and overly busy." How do you keep cool under so many demands? Melnick offers the following strategies to take your work stress down a peg, before it takes over your life.

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## Act Rather Than React

"We experience stress when we feel that situations are out of our control," says Melnick. She advises that you identify the aspects of the situation you can control and aspects you cannot. Typically, you are in control of your actions and responses, but not in control of macro forces or someone else's tone, for example. "Be impeccable for your 50%," she advises. And try to let go of the rest.

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## Take a Deep Breath

If you are feeling overwhelmed or are coming out of a tense meeting and need to clear your head, a few minutes of deep breathing will restore balance. Simply inhale for five seconds, hold and exhale in equal counts through the nose. "It's like getting the calm and focus of a 90-minute yoga class in three minutes or less at your desk," says Melnick.

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## Eliminate Interruptions

Emails, phone calls, pop-ins, instant messages and sudden, urgent deadlines conspire to make today's workers more distracted than ever. While you may not have control over the interrupters, you can control your response. Melnick advises responding in one of three ways: Accept the interruption, cut it off, or diagnosis its importance and make a plan. Many interruptions are recurring and can be anticipated. You can also train those around you by answering email during certain windows, setting up office hours to talk in person or closing the door when you need to focus.

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## Schedule Your Day for Energy and Focus

Most of us go through the day using a "push, push, push" approach, thinking if we work the full eight to 10 hours, we will get more done. Instead, productivity goes down, stress levels go up and we have very little energy left over for our families. Melnick advises scheduling breaks throughout the day to walk, stretch at your desk or do a breathing exercise. "Tony Schwartz of the Energy Project has shown that if we have intense concentration for about 90 minutes, followed by a brief period of recovery, we can clear the buildup of stress and rejuvenate ourselves," she says.

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## Eat Right and Sleep Well

"Eating badly will stress your system," says Melnick, who advises eating a low-sugar, high-protein diet. "And when you're not sleeping well, you're not getting the rejuvenating effects." According to the CDC, an estimated 60 million Americans do not get sufficient sleep, which is a critical recovery period for the body. If racing thoughts keep you from falling asleep, or you wake in the night unable to get back to sleep, Melnick suggests a simple breathing trick that will knock you out fast: Cover your right nostril and breathe through your left for three to five minutes.

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## Change Your Story

Your perspective of stressful office events is a subjective interpretation of the facts, often seen through the filter of your own self-doubt. If you step back and take a more objective view, you will be more effective and less likely to take things personally. Melnick recalls one client who sent a request to human resources for more people on an important project. When she was denied, she immediately got angry and defensive, thinking they didn't trust her to know what she needed. She never consider there might be budgetary issues. Once she was able to remove herself from the situation, she called the HR director and said, "Tell me where you're coming from. I'll tell you where I'm coming from and then let's see if we can find a solution." Ultimately, it worked.

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## Cool Down Quickly

"When you feel frustrated or angry, it's a heated feeling in your body that can cause you to react," says Melnick. Instead of immediately reacting—and likely overreacting—try a "cooling breath" technique: Breathe in through your mouth as if you are sipping through a straw, then breathe out normally through your nose. Done right, you'll feel a cooling, drying sensation over the top of your tongue. It's like hitting the "pause" button, giving you time to think about your response. She says, "It's so powerful it will even calm the other person down."

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## Identify Self-Imposed Stress

"Learn to stop self-imposing stress by building your own self-confidence rather than seeking other's approval," says Melnick. If you're too caught up in others' perceptions of you, which you can't control, you become stressed by the minutia or participate in avoidance behaviors like procrastination. Ironically, once you shift your focus from others' perception of your work to the work itself, you're more likely to impress them.

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## Prioritize Your Priorities

With competing deadlines and fast-changing priorities, it is critical to define what is truly important and why. That requires clarity, says Melnick. It is important to understand your role in the organization, the company's strategic priorities, and your personal goals and strengths. Cull your to-do list by focusing on those projects that will have the most impact and are best aligned with your goals.

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## Reset the Panic Button

For those who become panicky and short of breath before a presentation, Melnick says you can quickly reduce your anxiety with the right acupressure point. Positioning your thumb on the side of your middle finger and applying pressure instantly helps regulate your blood pressure.

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## Influence Others

You are responsible for your behavior and outlook, but must still deal with other people's stressful behavior. Melnick advises confronting problem coworkers or employees by stating the bad behavior in a respectful tone, describing its impact, and requesting a change. For example, constant negativity might be addressed in this way: "When you speak in a critical tone, it makes others uncomfortable and less likely to see you as a leader. I understand your frustration, but request that you bring concerns directly to me, so we can talk them through." By transferring the ownership of the problem, you are more likely to resolve it.

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## Be Your Own Best Critic

Some 60,000 thoughts stream through your mind each day, Melnick says, and internal negativity is just as likely to cause stress as an external event. The fix? Instead of being harsh and critical of yourself, try pumping yourself up. Encouraging thoughts will help motivate you to achieve and ultimately train you to inspire others.

Excerpted from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2013/03/20/12-ways-to-eliminate-stress-at-work/#4ebffee47ff7>