

Strategies for thriving in a stressful world

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
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This week I touch on some methods that can help you restore balance to your life by better managing and coping with stress. These practices can include regular exercise and physical activity. For some, it can also be helpful to utilize prayer and spiritual practices as a source of support.

However, while many of us know that these techniques are helpful, when stress levels are truly high it can be difficult to find the motivation and energy to engage in these beneficial activities. I recommend breath work as a starting point. We all have to breathe and learning to breathe better can decrease stress levels almost immediately.

Breathing Exercises. When we are stressed our breath is often rapid and shallow. Breathing is an automatic and unconscious process, yet we have the ability to bring it under our conscious control. Relaxing breathing exercises are a simple and effective way to quickly bring about a rapid decrease in mental and physical stress. Here is a simple yet powerful one that I teach patients.

Abdominal Breathing. Many of us have gotten into the habit of breathing upside down. When we take a deep breath our chest expands but not our belly. Fundamental to all breathwork is learning to breath right side up -- to take deep breaths into your abdomen. Try this, first place your hands on your belly. With each deep breath you should feel your belly press against your hand. If you are not in the habit of breathing this way, this may be challenging at first. With each deep breath into your abdomen follow it by a full and complete and slow exhale. Repeat this cycle of slow deep breaths concentrating on breathing deeply for a count of 4 and exhaling for a count of eight. Repeat this cycle 10 times twice a day. In time you will become more accustomed to breathing this way. Practiced regularly, breathing exercises have been associated with decreased levels of depression and anxiety, decreased blood pressure and improved sleep.

Gratitude journal. It is also helpful to explore ways to break out of patterns of negativity that may be the fuel many of our stressors. Gratitude, a feeling of appreciation for others and our place and connection in this world is known to be a powerful tool in rapidly helping people improve their emotional state. Finding something to be grateful for is hard when one is facing very real problems and stressors. Individuals who can develop this skill have been found to be happier, less depressed and less stressed. One tool that you can use to start this process is a gratitude journal. Here is how it works: Find a time each day where think about and write down 3 things that you are grateful for. That's it. That is all you have to do. I want to state very clearly, that being able to find gratitude and see the good (even in the midst of bad), does not mean you are giving up. It is just the opposite. Being able to shift to a more positive outlook is energizing and will make you better able to tackle the challenges in one's life. Start a gratitude journal today.

Getting Support and Supporting Community. We lead busy and often disconnected lives

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where it can be hard to develop relationships that are trusting and mutually supportive. These types of connections are essential to our health and happiness. We must find and nurture ways to connect with others. Finding ways to interact with community can take many forms and does not have to involve a large effort: getting to know your neighbors, participating in a church or other faith community, and volunteering in our community. Many of us find it difficult to ask for help and support from others. If you are dealing with past hurts or anger this can be hard. If so, this can be an excellent goal to work on with a counselor or therapist or other mental health professional.

Here I have provided just a few examples of stress-reducing practices. While we work on managing and coping with stress, in time, it is also important to look at those aspects of our lives that induce stress and explore ways in which we may be able to shift our our habits and relationships so that they are more nurturing and less stress-inducing. Taking good care of ourselves (mentally and physically) is an excellent example for others and by prioritizing our health we encourage others to do the same.

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Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information, to leave suggestions for future articles and for additional resources as mentioned in the article visit www.functionwellmedicine.com