

# MANAGE YOUR STRESS

at work and  
at home

BY KAREN CHILDRESS

These lucky seven tips can help you lead a **stress-free** life.

A survey conducted in 2007 by the American Psychological Association revealed that one-third of us are living with “extreme” stress and almost half of us feel that our stress has increased in recent years. Is it any wonder? Most of us have way too much on our plates. We’re holding down demanding jobs, balancing work and family life, trying our best to stay fit and healthy, and wondering if, or when, the economy will ever settle down. We’re bombarded with information around the clock (much of which does us little, if any, good), we’re more connected and “wired” than we’ve ever been, and time has become our most precious resource.

Sometimes, stress is “acute” or incident-specific (a key employee quits or you have a large unexpected expense). This kind of stress is inevitable—we’re all subject to the uncertainties of life. But it’s usually chronic stress that wears us down the most. Job worries, money problems, childcare issues, taking care of elderly parents, an ongoing illness, or simply a schedule that is just too

jam packed can all contribute to chronic stress.

Symptoms of stress can include fatigue, irritability, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, GI upset, headaches, muscle tension, and insomnia. Left unchecked, chronic stress can weaken the immune system, cause pain and disease, and lead to depression or anxiety. Chronic stress may make us choose poor coping mechanisms like overeating, overdrinking, or over-shopping.

It’s unlikely that anyone can eliminate all life or job stress, but there are ways to manage it. Here are seven tips to manage your stress and resources that can help.

**1 DO A REALITY CHECK.** If your stress is related to feeling overloaded with too much to do, the first step out of overwhelm mode is to be honest with yourself. Make a list of everything that you have to accomplish over the next three months at work and at home.

**RESOURCE:** Read *Getting Things Done* by productivity expert David Allen. His time

management approach is based on getting everything—errands, tasks, chores, projects, and commitments—out of your head and down on paper. Feeling confident that you have a handle on your obligations and that nothing will fall through the cracks can reduce stress, even if your list is longer than you’d like.

**2 LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD.** Once you have a clear picture of what your schedule looks like and what your commitments are, look for what you can reduce, eliminate, or delegate. Review tasks that you habitually do daily or weekly and determine whether reducing the frequency is feasible. During particularly busy times, practice saying “no” to anything that isn’t essential. Learn the fine art of delegation at work and at home.

**RESOURCE:** Visit the Website of Donna M. Gennet, PhD, ([www.wantitdoneright.com](http://www.wantitdoneright.com)) to read about the benefits of effective delegation. Dr. Gennet is the author of *If You Want It Done Right, You Don't Have to Do It Yourself!*

**3 CLEAR THE CLUTTER.** Some people are fine working and living in a cluttered environment, but even the messiest among us appreciate having a clean desk or an organized kitchen once we finally get around to creating a degree of order. Reduce your stress by clearing away clutter and getting organized at home and at work. Set aside a couple of hours at the end of each week to put your office in order and update your weekly list of “to do” items. Once you make this a habit, Monday mornings will be much less stressful.

**RESOURCE:** If clutter and disorganization has gotten out of hand, consider hiring a professional organizer. To find an organizer near you, visit the National Association of Professional Organizers at [www.napo.net](http://www.napo.net). According to Standolyn Robertson, president of NAPO, expect to pay \$50–150 per hour for a qualified organizer. Robertson says that corporate work is sometimes priced by the project rather than by the hour and that the results are measurable. “It pays off in terms of found time, found resources, and greater productivity,” she says.

**4 MIND YOUR FITNESS.** We’ve heard for years that physical exercise is one of the best possible methods of reducing stress. For it to be effective, exercise needs to become a habit. One weekend hike or one trip to the gym will not cure all ills. If you plan to incorporate regular exercise into your stress management plan, set goals to practice yoga, go for a brisk walk, work out at the gym, or play a sport you love (tennis, anyone?) three to four times a week. Combining aerobic workouts with strength training will help keep both stress and “exercise boredom” at bay. Be sure to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program, especially if you have physical limitations of any kind.

**RESOURCE:** If you don’t have the time or money to go to a yoga studio, consider prac-

ticing at home. Rodney Yee and Patricia Walden are both excellent teachers who offer instructional videos for all levels. Check out [www.gaiam.com](http://www.gaiam.com). DVDs run \$15–\$20 and a mat for home use is in the \$25–\$30 range.

Taking the time to reduce stress can have a positive impact on almost every area of our daily lives.

**5 EAT LIKE A GROWNUP.** When we’re busy, stressed, or overly tired, it’s tempting to reach for comfort food—often something overly sweet, salty, or high in fat. Resist the temptation by keeping healthy snacks in your desk and purse. A handful of almonds, an energy bar, or a banana will do far more to get you through a hectic day than a snack brimming with empty calories. At home and when dining out, make healthy choices, watch portion size, and monitor alcohol and caffeine consumption.

**RESOURCE:** Visit [www.mealsmatter.org](http://www.mealsmatter.org) to find free resources including a food personality quiz, a personal nutritional planner tool, meal suggestions, recipes, and articles on healthy eating.


**6 PAMPER YOURSELF.** A massage—especially one focused on the neck and shoulders—can work wonders to relieve the immediate symptoms of stress. If you don’t have time or can’t afford a professional massage, offer to trade an old-fashioned shoulder rub with your spouse or a good friend. During especially busy times in your practice, consider hiring a licensed massage therapist to visit the office and give everyone chair massages. If massage isn’t your cup of tea, indulge in a relaxing facial or pedicure.

**RESOURCE:** Visit the American Massage Therapy Association ([www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org)) to find a licensed massage therapist in your neighborhood. For an inexpensive massage, see if there is a reputable massage therapy school in your town where students practice on clients at discounted rates.

**7 TUNE IN TO YOURSELF.** If you’ve never written a journal on a regular basis, give it a try. Twenty minutes first thing in the morning over a cup of tea or coffee is a positive way to start the day. Writing about your dreams and goals is inspiring.

Getting worries and fears out of your head can be a huge relief. Making lists of what you’re grateful for is a good way to keep everything in perspective. A little ranting and raving on paper can be quite cathartic. Meditation, breathing exercises, and listening to soothing music are also good ways to get in touch with yourself, relax, and let go of stress.

**RESOURCE:** Read *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron. She describes the benefits of writing “morning pages” in a way that is sure to inspire you to pick up a pen.

Pay attention to what triggers your stress. Watch for symptoms and recognize that they may be trying to tell you something. When you find yourself experiencing stress that is impacting you negatively—physically, emotionally, spiritually, or in your relationships—review these steps and see which ones are worth implementing. Taking care of yourself isn’t selfish. In fact, it may be the most unselfish thing you can do. When you’re on top of your own game, you’ll have the resilience to take care of others at work, at home, and in your community. 

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