

interrupt the stress cycle

five do-it-yourself alternative body therapies to bust
everyday tension (little or no training required)

TAKE A DEEP BREATH. DRINK WATER. MOVE. "These are the three most vital and basic ways we can take care of ourselves," says Jennifer Absey, R.N., a certified massage therapist in Woodland Hills, Calif., "but they're also the very things we tend to stop doing when we get stressed."

Anxiety and tension stimulate the release of stress hormones like adrenaline, norepinephrine and cortisol. That's fine in dealing with short-term stressors. But when we sustain a high stress level for an extended time, these hormones begin to interfere with the body's natural healing abilities. Over time, a high level of stress can weaken tendons and ligaments, thin bones, cause muscle spasms, elevate blood pressure, increase cholesterol production and disrupt digestion, among many other negative effects. To save your sanity and your health, it's vital that you put a stop to this stress cycle.

Start by making "breathe, drink, move" a daily mantra. Eat properly, even when you don't feel like it. Meditate. Try forms of exercise that offer mental as well as physical benefits, such as yoga or Tai chi. And make regular use of one or more of the following do-it-yourself body therapies, all of them designed to put the stress response on pause and allow your body to regain its natural balance.

NOTE: Avoid any type of manual therapy if you have a fever, active cancer, swelling of unknown origin or any other special concern; if in doubt, ask your physician.

1. lymphatic drainage

Lymph Drainage Therapy is a hands-on system developed by French physician Bruno Chilly to facilitate optimal lymphatic circulation. Why did he bother? Because it's critical to the body's ability to detoxify itself, regenerate tissues, and maintain a healthy immune system. The lymphatic system holds on hundreds of tiny muscular vessels called lymphangions, contracting to propel the flow of lymph, a clear fluid that carries proteins, minerals, white blood cells and more. The system collects and filters damaged cells, cancer cells, bacteria and viruses, but that process can be hindered or halted if the lymph nodes and vessels of the lymph system's drainage system become inflamed. And if you don't drain, your body's taking unnecessary stress.

The lymphatic system is related to the immune system in that it filters out toxins and waste from the body. It also carries out the body's defense against infection and disease. The lymphatic system is also responsible for the transport of lymphocytes, which are white blood cells that help fight infection and disease.

By Barbara Dennis Photographs by Amy Neunsinger

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WHAT TO DO:

1. Position your hands at the center of each clavicle (collarbone) and away from the center of the neck. The fingers should be only slightly spread, and pointing upward.

2. Applying gentle pressure (equal to about the weight of a nickel), use the pads (not tips) of all your fingers to sequentially press gently inward toward the middle of your body for 3 seconds, then outward for 3 seconds, moving like ocean waves upon the shore. Release for 3 seconds, then repeat 4 or more times. This will open the entire lymph system.

3. Next, move to the temple area. Place your fingers in the slight depression at the sides of your eyes. Using the same nickel-weight force, draw the pads of your fingers back toward the tops of your ears. Perform 3 very light, gentle and slow strokes; do this at least 2 more times.

4. Repeat the clavicle therapy (step 2) and continue as desired. You can perform this therapy 2 or 3 times per day.



2. chi nei tsang

CNT is a massage therapy developed centuries ago by Chinese Taoist monks to bring health and harmony into their lives and promote their spiritual growth. You can use it today to improve your well-being. The words *chi nei tsang* translate to "energy transforming internal organs," explains Celine Germain, a craniosacral therapist and CNT practitioner in Berkeley, Calif. The technique (which falls within the Traditional Chinese Medicine model) emphasizes moving chi energy to your abdominal organs so that they work better. Chi Nei Tsang may improve your digestion and elimination, reduce water retention, and might even decrease chronic nerve, back and neck pain. CNT is particularly valuable on days when your busy life leaves you drained emotionally as well as physically; practitioners believe that all unprocessed emotions are stored in the digestive system, and that this therapy allows your feelings to unfold and clarify.

3. still-point device

Osteopathic research has shown that when you bring about a temporary pause, or "still point," in the fluids that flow through the brain and spinal cord, you can interrupt the stress response, inducing a state of physical and mental relaxation. Craniosacral therapists recommend using a still-point inducer to prompt this momentary interruption. The inducer can be a manufactured device (you can order one from upledger.com or stillpointer.com for about \$15) or homemade, produced by placing two tennis balls inside a sock and tying the end to hold the balls in place.

NOTE: Do not use this technique if you have had internal bleeding in the head, acute stroke, acute head trauma or a brainstem tumor.



WHAT TO DO:

1. Lie on the floor. You can keep your knees bent or put your feet up on a chair, whichever way you're most comfortable.
2. Notice the spot where your head touches the floor. Place the still-point device between your head and the floor at that very spot. Separate the sides of the device just slightly so that they produce a bit of pressure on the back of your head but are still comfortably supporting your weight. Your chin will be slightly tilted. Let your whole body relax.
3. Rest on the device for 5 to 15 minutes. Your breathing will become easier and your muscle tension will decrease. There's no risk associated with daily or extended use, so don't worry if you fall asleep.

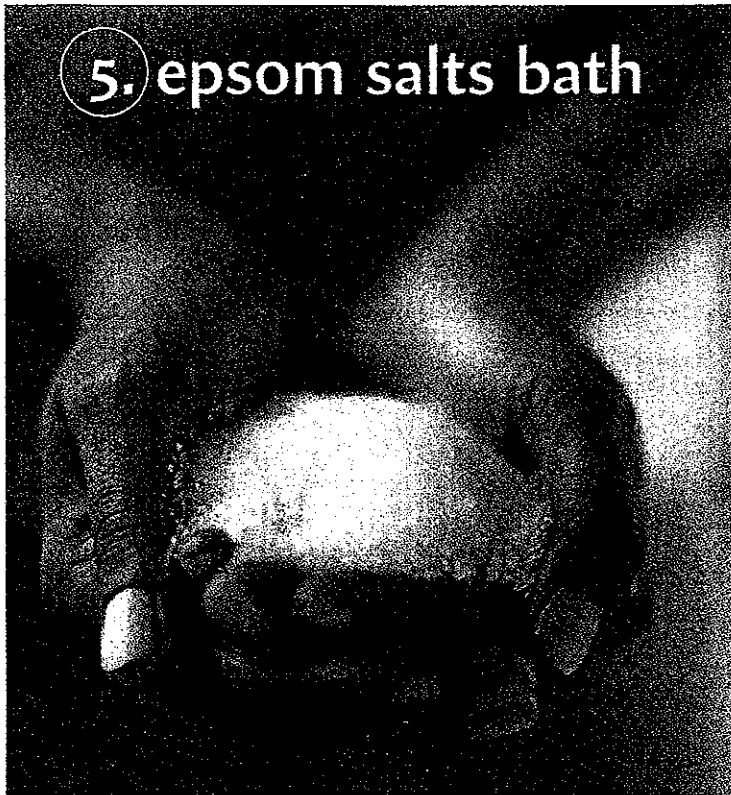
WHAT TO DO:

1. Lie on your back in bed or on the floor. Lift your knees slightly, hip-width apart, to keep your abdomen and lower back in a relaxed, neutral position. You can put a pillow under your knees for better support.
2. Place your hands on your belly and inhale deeply, drawing your breath down toward your sacrum and then up toward your shoulders, keeping most of the air pressure in your abdomen.
3. Exhale through your mouth, relaxing your jaw and your entire body. Breathe deeply and evenly; it's fine to breathe through your mouth, especially if your nasal passages are congested. Don't pause between breathing in and breathing out. Feel your belly rise and fall with the breath.
4. Using the pads of your fingers, begin to massage your abdomen as if kneading out knots; you also can make gentle circles. Start at the navel and work outward. When you discover an area that is tight or tender, linger there and breathe deeply as you press with your fingers until the sensation begins to release.
5. Place the fingertips just inside the hipbones. Sink the pinkie side of each hand deeply into the pelvic floor and pull gently upward, as if scooping the large intestines toward the navel.
6. Continue to alternate between these techniques for 10 to 15 minutes. Throughout, pay attention to what you're feeling—physically and emotionally.

direction of energy

This visualization technique is used to help heal injured, dysfunctional or painful areas of the body. First recorded in osteopathic literature in the 1930s, direction of energy is performed by "intending," or imaging, that a healing energy emanates from your hands and that you can direct it toward any part of the body that feels stressed or achy. Energy direction is especially useful for those body parts that bear the brunt of a hectic life (neck pain, anyone?). It can be used by mothers on their children, spouses on each other, and even by children on themselves (to ease the pain of a skinned knee, say). Various studies, particularly those on non-union fractures, have noted measurable success with the application.

5. epsom salts bath



An excess of stress hormones can reduce magnesium levels in the heart, constricting vessels and increasing blood pressure, coagulation and stickiness of blood platelets—all of which raise the risk of heart attack. Bathing in Epsom salts, a magnesium-sulfate compound, can counter these reactions, helping to lower blood pressure, relax muscles and regulate heart and blood-vessel functioning.

Research has shown that bathing in Epsom salts at least three times a week will increase blood levels of magnesium and sulfates for about 24 hours. Sulfates aid the clearance of certain drugs (after their intended action has occurred) and enhance proper joint and gut functioning; they also assist the lubricating proteins that enable joints to work smoothly and that help move contents through the intestines more easily. Increasing blood-sulfate levels may positively affect people with autism, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and ulcerative colitis—all of whom have been found to have low levels of sulfates.

WHAT TO DO:

Applying direction of energy for even a few minutes can be beneficial, says Roy Desjarlais, a massage therapist and certified craniosacral therapist at the Upledger Institute in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. Desjarlais suggests the following technique:

1. Place your hands in front and in back of the affected area; they can be on or off the body depending on your comfort level.
2. Focus your attention on that area and concentrate, or "intend," on sending healing energy from one hand to the other through the injured area. Think of your hands as jumper cables and the tissue as the drained battery. Your hands are sending energy to recharge the area, allowing the tissue to rebalance itself.

WHAT TO DO:

1. Pour 1 1/2 cups of Epsom salts (available at drugstores) into bath water heated to your tolerance level. Climb in and soak for at least 12 minutes. Be sure to drink 8 ounces of water during or after your bath because you'll be sweating.
2. After your bath, dry off and put on cotton pajamas or a cotton robe, which will help absorb any lingering perspiration. Do only those activities that restore you, such as reading or listening to relaxing music. (Forget about your favorite TV show; it'll only rev you up.) Residual sweating may disturb your sleep, so wait until you've cooled completely—but not so long that you get chilled—before hitting the sack.
3. If you're feeling especially frazzled, try to do this daily.

"After you've interrupted the stress response, it's beneficial to determine the nature of your reaction to stress to avoid unnecessary repetition," says Jennifer Absey, R.N. Don't accept that repeated stress is a given.

Start by figuring out what you're fighting, running from or running toward that's overwhelming you. Is it a misunderstanding with a family member, or perhaps a new (and intimidating) opportunity? After you identify the source, you have two choices: You can alter your response, or you can alter the situation. Sometimes the latter is more appropriate. For example, if a needling boss sends you home reeling on a daily basis, something needs to be fixed—and it's not realistic to expect such a boss to change.

Stressful situations that are constant reruns require that we take action or our bodies will suffer the consequences. Fuming in silence, then dashing home and attempting to relax with a hot bath or self-massage isn't a long-term solution. Commit to brainstorming at least three strategies for defusing your source of stress—then create a schedule to carry them out.