



Struggling with stress and tools for managing it

Question

Dear Alice,

I have this problem with my studies. I feel that I need to work 24 hours a day in order just to keep up. I have been getting panic attacks and outbreaks of eczema because I am so stressed out. Can you advise me of any relaxation techniques that will allow me to unwind after a hard day?

Yours, A tightly wound spring

Answer

Dear A tightly wound spring,

All work (or studying) and no play can certainly take a toll on you, both emotionally and physically. It's common for students to feel stressed out by their academic demands, so know that you're not the only one who gets wound up. Relaxation practices may release some of your tension, but it might also be worthwhile to check in with an expert about how to address the root cause of your stress and panic attacks.

There are a variety of techniques that can help to relax your mind and body after a long day of hitting the books. You could try some of these stress-relievers in the morning to help you start the day smoothly or between study sessions to renew your energy throughout the day. Here are few ways to relax your mind and body:

- **Turn up the volume.** Music has a powerful effect on mood. You might experiment with nature sounds, soft jazz, or more energizing tunes with a hot beat to combat your stress.
- **Get moving.** Physical activity boosts feel-good chemicals in your brain called endorphins and provides a physical outlet for pent-up worries. Other schools of movement such as yoga and tai chi can also help to relax the body and clear the mind.
- **Take a breath.** There are many approaches to meditation, but some common elements include rhythmic breathing, visualizing a peaceful place, and repeating a mantra.
- **Rub it in.** To address some tension in the muscles, you could suggest taking a study break with a friend and take turns giving each other a quick shoulder rub.

In addition to relaxation techniques, it may be useful to pinpoint what specifically is causing you to feel so stressed out. As you gain clarity around the sources of your stress, it may be helpful to consider some tips for processing and managing it:

1. **Acceptance:** You can ask yourself if the current stress you feel is acceptable to you. If it is, then you can go with it. Stress in itself isn't bad. In fact, it often reflects that you care and that what you're doing is meaningful to you. Sometimes, though, stress is more than that, and it can benefit from some intentional management and help.
2. **Problem-solving:** If the stress level isn't acceptable, you can ask yourself if there is anything you can do

to fix or influence the situation. Trying to fix or problem-solve your stress can help, and it's especially beneficial to focus on the process, rather than the outcome of problem-solving. For example, if you get in a fight with a friend and your solution is to talk it out with them, putting the focus on the act of talking it out, rather than whether or not you successfully repaired your relationship can be beneficial. If your stress management is dependent on outcomes that you can't control, you could be setting yourself up for more stress if you don't get the outcomes for which you were hoping.

3. **Self-imposed pressure:** If you still feel stressed beyond an acceptable level and have done problem-solving steps that are within your control, you can ask yourself, "Are there any self-imposed pressures or perceptions I am adding to this stress?" Becoming more aware of the parts of the stress stemming from your own self-imposed pressure can help you to catch those thoughts and interrupt them when they happen. Instead of adding to the thoughts, you might consider pivoting from those thoughts and switching your focus to what you think would be healthy for you.
4. **Effective coping:** If you still feel stressed beyond an acceptable level, if you've attempted problem-solving steps that are within your control, and you're managing your own self-imposed pressures, then you'll likely want to learn to cope with the stress. Starting by honoring your reaction and challenging any conclusions can help. Your reaction is valid, and it doesn't need to have implications for who you are, your future, or the world around you. It's okay to feel what you feel and have it just stay at that. Also, as a part of coping, practicing self-care can be helpful in managing your stress and difficult emotions. Converting emotional energy into any form of verbal, social, physical, creative, or meditative expressions can be great ways of practicing self-care. And last, doing something that matters to you or that expresses one of your personal values can also be a great way of coping. It can help keep you defined by your authenticity rather than your hurt.

For some experiences of stress, relaxation and coping on your own may not be enough. Stress has a pesky way of blurring the big picture and magnifying troublesome details. To help you put your concerns into perspective, you may want to talk with a health promotion specialist or mental health professional about your recent stress and panic attacks. If you're on a college campus, you could check to see if there is a counseling center to make an appointment. They may also offer a variety of support groups and workshops, including some related to stress and time management. While you're booking appointments, if you haven't already, you might also consider visiting a health care provider to treat your eczema as well.

Setting high academic standards is something to be proud of, but all studying and no personal time may quickly leave you feeling burnt out. By taking time out to relax, practice self-care, and cope, you'll likely "wind up" happier and more productive in the long run!

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