

# Solutions

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## Staying Well in Anxious Times

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Life does not come in a stress-free version. With all the pressures and challenges in our lives today, it is natural to experience some level of fear - fear for our livelihood, fear for our health and the health of our family, fear for our security. Sometimes our fears, or rather not dealing with our fears, can actually increase the likelihood of the things we fear happening. This is because when we are distressed, we are less able to resist illness and to recover from challenges.

### The Fear Factor

Fear is a stress response, part of the natural survival instinct that we are all born with. Stress reactions are the body's way of heightening our physical and mental abilities in dangerous situations. A surge of adrenaline sends the heart racing, shortens breathing, tenses muscles and increases mental alertness. We are all afraid from time to time. As children, dealing with our fears could be as simple as letting go a good loud scream and then scrambling into the protecting arms of a parent. Our fears as children were likely in response to an immediate threat; we tensed in-the-moment and then relaxed when the danger passed. As adults, our fears are more often about what will happen in the future, the unknown, losing control, and how we will protect our loved ones from danger. Our fears are real and our body reacts, but because the danger may be less defined or does not pass immediately, there is no release from the tension, no letting go.



When a stressful situation goes on for too long without any relief, both mind and body begin to weaken. Unrelieved fears are no longer a response to danger but a danger themselves to our health and well-being. Prolonged stress contributes to illness and threatens our ability to function in our daily lives.

### The Immunity Challenge

Research has identified the stress response as a factor in many stress related illnesses such as high blood pressure and digestive problems. Now there is evidence that stress can weaken the immune system. The hormones cortisone and adrenaline released in response to stress are such potent suppressors of the immune system that they are sometimes prescribed for disorders in which the immune system is overactive, such as allergies and autoimmune diseases.

Studies of large groups of people and their patterns of illness and stress showed a connection - the more stress, the more illness. And animal studies show that cells of the immune system decline when the animal is under stress. If stress increases your chance of illness, from the common cold to cancer, does that prove that stress affects the immune system? Probably. You see, people under stress often behave in ways that are in themselves harmful to the immune system: they sleep less, exercise less, eat poorly, smoke, drink and use drugs more than people who are less stressed.

## The Mind-Body Connection

Your mind and body are connected. When your mind is healthy, your body can resist illness better. When your body is healthy, feelings are more positive.

Whatever the cause of stress or illness, one thing is sure. You can boost your health by dealing with stress head-on. This means taking a good look at your life and opting out of those activities that are stressful and not really necessary. Of course, no one can eliminate all stress - even boredom is stressful - but you can reduce your body's response to stress by learning some stress management techniques. Things like meditation, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization. Get regular exercise which is both healthful and stress reducing and avoid junk food. Cut back on those approaches that cover up rather than relieving stress - such as alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes.

## Five-Minute Stress Relievers

**Try these five minute exercises for relieving stress and anxious tension.**

□ **Deep Breathing.** Inhale deeply, feeling your stomach expand. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then slowly exhale, visualizing tension leaving your body.

□ **Meditation.** Close your eyes and mentally follow your breathing. As you exhale, mentally repeat a simple or soothing word with each breath. Or visualize a peaceful scene. Do this for at least five minutes and, for more benefit, extend over time to 30 minutes.

□ **Self-Talk.** Replace negative mental responses to stress, such as "I can't cope," with positive ones, such as "Everything is going to work out" or "I know I can do it."

□ **Laugh.** Just laugh out loud, or do something that will make you laugh such as reading a joke book, or watching a comedy on TV.

□ **Progressive Muscle Relaxation.** While sitting or lying in a relaxed position, tense the muscles of your feet as much as you can; then relax them, and notice the difference in feeling. Tense and relax the muscles in your legs, arms, stomach, back, neck and head, one region at a time. When finished, remain in a state of complete relaxation for a few minutes.

□ **Stretching.** Sit in a chair with your upper body resting forward on your lap. Slowly rollup, starting at the base of your spine, until your back is straight. Stretch neck muscles by tilting your head to the right and slowly rolling your head down and to the left. Repeat a few times in both directions.

□ **Self-Massage.** Sit with your shoulders relaxed. Use your right hand to massage your left shoulder and neck, working your way up to the scalp. Repeat, using the left hand for the right shoulder.

**If you have trouble managing your stress, some help may be needed. Speak with your doctor or a counsellor.**

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