

5 Tips to De-Stress and find your Zen

Zen defined: Emphasizing the value of meditation and intuition.

The pressures of everyday life can take a toll on our level of stress, health and overall well-being. The good news is that just as we have a stress response, we also have a relaxation response. Finding time and ways to relax will help reduce the negative effects of stress on our body and mind, relieving built-up tension and calming nerves and emotions.

Here are 5 techniques to help you relax, de-stress and bring about a positive sense of well-being.

1. Breathe

When we are feeling stress, we tend to breath more shallowly, even holding our breath at times which causes muscle constriction and tension. To counteract this, we can practice deep and slow breathing to bring the body out of its stress response and into a more relaxed state.

Give Diaphragmic Breathing a try. Begin by closing your eyes and take a few deep inhales through the nose and exhales out of the mouth allowing your belly to rise and fall. Now bring your breathing into a pattern using this sequence:

- Inhale through your nose for a count of 6
- Hold your breath at the top for a count of 2
- Exhale out your mouth for a count of 6
- Hold your breath at the bottom for a count of 2

With this rhythmic breathing, you can do this for as long as it takes for you to feel calm. 5 minutes is usually enough for you to feel refreshed and relaxed.

2. Meditate

Meditation is about quieting the mind. Not reacting, but just noticing. Even a minute can make a difference. Be in the moment as an observer without judgement and then let it go. Sit or lay down and close your eyes. Try to set aside any thoughts about the day so far or what you will do later. If these thoughts enter your mind, acknowledge them and then set them aside. Focusing on your breathing or a mantra helps. As you breathe in think "I am breathing in", as you breathe out think "I am breathing out." Or focus on a positive mantra with each inhale and exhale like "I am safe", or "I am protected", or "I am healthy", or "I am loved". As you sit or lay still, scan your body from top to bottom and intentionally focus on relaxing each body part. Think "My head is relaxed and completely still. My shoulders are relaxed. My torso is relaxed. My legs are relaxed and completely still".

3. Go for a Walk

Walking will help to clear your head and reduce stress hormones. Consider walking in a park or other green space to appreciate the environment around you. This wonderful activity can put your body into a state of involuntary attention which simultaneously allows for reflection. Remember, the purpose is to de-stress and mediate, not to get your cardio on.

4. Step Away from the Screens

Try taking breaks from the computer during the day and shutting off the TV or tablet screen at least an hour before bedtime. Smartphones can increase stress when we feel we must respond to messages all time. Limiting screen time for an hour or two may be just what we might need to quiet the mind, even just a little. And reducing the ongoing chatter in our heads.

5. Get Creative

Creative hobbies that use fine motor skills like knitting, painting, making jewelry and carpentry can soothe anxiety and stress. These activities can fulfill the two criteria of a mindfulness practice. One is the repetition of a sound, word or movement and the other is the passive setting outside of our intruding thoughts.

If one method doesn't work, try another and mix and match. Learning to relax and find your Zen takes practice so be patient with yourself. You are special and there is only one of you in the whole world. Take some space and find your Zen.

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