

Short Cuts to Stress Relief

Does life seem to be spinning out of control? Is it hard to balance work, home, family, finances, and lastly, yourself? Does life sometimes seem too stressful and yet, you just can't seem to make the time to exercise or meditate?

You need Shortcuts for Stress-Relief – quick well-being exercises that are triggered by ordinary activities and experiences. These strategies are so simple to do, so easy to implement, that you cannot help but feel better . . . right away.

1. Bon Voyage

Trigger: When you're washing your hair

Tool: Pour the shampoo in your hand and sniff the aroma. Close your eyes and inhale deeply. As you lather your hair, imagine yourself in a wonderfully pleasant faraway place. Maybe the fushion orchid and coconut milk will inspire a fantasy trip to the tropics. Or the ocean's breeze will have you sailing on the high seas. Concentrate on the fragrance and let the experience take you away.

Purpose: Directing your attention to a pleasant fragrance calms your stressful thoughts and transports you to another place. Let your imagination match the smell and take you on a mini-vacation. With this aromatherapy, you'll emerge from the shower peacefully restored and refreshed.

2. Freeze Frame

Trigger: When you drink a morning beverage, your coffee or tea

Tool: As you take your first sip, stop for a moment, take a deep breath, freeze the frame (make a mental or audible camera click sound), and think, Life is good. As you take your first sip of any drink, morning through evening, create the habit of stopping to take a mental snapshot. Feel the liquid going down your throat. Notice, breathe, absorb, and savor the tastes as well as the moment. Imprint on your mind the happiness habit of noting to yourself, Ah, this is a good moment.

Purpose: This tool helps train your mind to focus on a moment of simple pleasure. It identifies a happy moment and holds it in your consciousness, creating an imprint of positive experience. It cultivates gratitude, a quality highly correlated with peacefulness. Finally, it creates a "pause" which momentarily stops the physical and emotional spiral of the day.

3. Outstanding

Trigger: Whenever someone asks, "How are you?"

Tool: Most people expect the standard answer of "Fine". Instead, try answering with a "Fantastic," "Outstanding," "Superb," or "Awesome." It doesn't matter if these superlatives don't actually match your current mood. Focus on simple basics in your life that you can truly appreciate—like good health, a sunny day, safe children, living in a non-war-torn country. Answer the question with a descriptive stronger than "Fine" and notice another person's response. Watch how your mood begins to shift as well.

Purpose: When you find small ways to be grateful, you train your mind to focus on life as a daily gift and you spread that awareness to others. Using these turbo-charged "happy" words creates an opening in your life for more optimism and gratitude. Watch – it will improve your mood and the mood of others around you.

4. Take 5

Trigger: When you're stressed at work or home

Tool: Breathe in through your nose to the count of five. Feel the air as it comes through your nose and expands into your lungs. Hold your breath to the count of five. Exhale through your mouth to the count of at least five (longer is even better). Upon exhaling, purse your lips as if blowing through a straw. Repeat several times.

Purpose: Breath work is universally considered grounding and relaxing. Deep exhalations stimulate calming mechanisms in your body. When you redirect your mind to an awareness of our breath, you create a moment of calm in which inner peace can bloom.

5. Stop, Drop, and Roll

Trigger: When stopped at a red light

Tool: "Stop," "drop" down into your heart, and "roll" out a little goodwill to your fellow travelers. Look at the people in other cars in front of you, behind you, passing around you, and recognize that each one of them is just like you: They want happiness and they want to be free from suffering. To each person you focus on say or think something like:

May you know happiness.

May you be free from suffering.

Peace be with you.

I hope you have a nice day.

Purpose: This tool “quenches the fire” of road rage by getting you out of your own little world. Commuting for many people can be the most stressful time in their days. Actively using this Shortcut gives you another way to be in the car. Opening your heart with compassion, you experience a deeper sense of inner peace.

6. Rest in Peace

Trigger: When your head rests on the pillow at night

Tool: As you are in bed starting to fall asleep, review your day and list three things that happened for which you are grateful. Don’t just vaguely remember each instance, but actively recall it and re-create the experience of it. Hold the feeling and think of yourself as a sponge, absorbing the memory in your body.

Purpose: This tool is a way of focusing your mind on positive emotions. By reflecting on moments of joy during your days, a habit of positivity grows, and you become increasingly more joyful and more peaceful. Cultivating this evening gratitude practice will definitely help you sleep better.

Using these simple Shortcuts will open your heart, cultivate gratitude, and improve your mood. Use them every day and watch your stress melt away, so you can get back to the business of enjoying your life.

Ashley Davis Bush, LCSW is a psychotherapist in southern New Hampshire and a self-help author. Her most recent book is Shortcuts to Inner Peace: 70 Simple Paths to Everyday Serenity (Berkley Books).

For more resources, visit her website at

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