

11 Stress-Busting Tips for the Busiest Time of Year

The year-end rush to wrap things up and cross off to-dos can make your blood pressure spike. We know we can't wipe everything off of your plate—so as a close second, we've rounded up a few stress-busting techniques to help you calm your nerves, revitalize your mood, and prep for the busiest day of the year.

Onward, ho!

PRIME YOUR BODY FOR BETTER SLEEP WITH A BEDTIME ROUTINE

Get the sleep you need before the big day with a soothing activity before bed. According to sleep specialists, it's important to establish a transition between wake time and nighttime in order to turn off anxious thoughts and prepare your body for sleep.¹ Set aside at least 30 minutes before bedtime to wind down with a good book, a warm bath, stretches, or relaxation exercises.

When you establish a calming pre-sleep ritual, you can separate your precious sleep time from the day's events and fully recharge. And if your brain is *still* buzzing about tomorrow's to-do list, try writing it down and setting it aside 'til the morning.

START YOUR DAY WITH LEMON WATER

Jumpstart your morning the right way with a large glass of lemon water. This healthy habit will help rehydrate your body, flush your digestive system, and stimulate your liver to increase bile production—an acid that aids digestion.² The lemon, packed with vitamin C, can also help clear up your skin and boost your immune system to kick any nasty colds.

¹ Psych Central, "12 Ways to Shut Off Your Brain Before Bedtime." <http://psychcentral.com/lib/12-ways-to-shut-off-your-brain-before-bedtime/>

² Happy and Raw, "Top 15 Tips to Support Optimal Liver Function." <http://happyandraw.com/support-optimal-liver-function/>

In the morning, squeeze the juice of a quarter to half a lemon into a glass of water at room temperature, and drink up. It's important that the water is warmer to improve digestion and encourage health benefits to kick in.³

GET YOUR BODY MOVING

Exercise is a fantastic stress-reliever that pumps up feel-good endorphins, enhances your mood, and gets you a better night's sleep.

Fit a short workout—even if just a 10-minute walk before work—into your last day of the year. Head outdoors for best results, since natural sunlight can release serotonin in your brain, lifting your mood and helping you feel calm.⁴

INDULGE IN DELIGHTFUL SMELLS

Spark a scent and flare those nostrils—research shows that aromatherapy can relieve stress.⁵ The smell of lavender, in particular, creates a calming effect that reduces anxiety levels.⁶ Use a lavender-scented candle or air freshener in your office, treat your body to a scented body wash or lotion, or massage a bit of essential oil into your wrists and temples.

SIP ON TEA

Rather than revving up on coffee, opt for tea to calm those nerves. To investigate its effects on stress recovery, one study compared two sets of participants: one group that drank a black tea beverage four times a day for six weeks, and another that drank a fake tea beverage for the same amount of

³ LIVESTRONG.COM, "The Effects of Cold Drinks on Digestion." <http://www.livestrong.com/article/519260-the-effects-of-cold-drinks-on-digestion/>

⁴ Healthline, "What Are the Benefits of Sunlight?" <http://www.healthline.com/health/depression/benefits-sunlight#Benefits3>

⁵ National Center for Biotechnology Information, "The Effects of Aromatherapy on Stress and Stress Responses in Adolescents." <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19571632>

⁶ University of Maryland Medical Center, "Lavender." <https://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/herb/lavender>

time.⁷ After experiencing a stressful event, those who drank the black tea had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Even just the ritual of brewing tea—taking a couple minutes from your day, hearing the sound of the kettle—may help you start to relax.

TURN ON SOME RELAXING JAMS

Research shows that music can alter your mood and body.⁸ Relieve your stress by listening to calming music while you work. Consider experimenting with some light jazz or classical numbers, or relax and focus to rain, thunder, or other nature sounds. Or simply go wild and mix and match your own soothing soundscape.

You might even notice that the background noise helps you focus and problem solve. Researchers have found that a moderate level of ambient noise improves creativity for most people.⁹

TAKE A MOMENT TO WRITE A THANK-YOU NOTE

When your year-end tasks feel overwhelming, taking time to appreciate what you have can really put things in perspective. Research consistently shows that gratitude helps people feel happier, improve their health, handle hardships, and nurture relationships.¹⁰

Take a moment to write down a few things you're thankful for from this past year. Or, better yet, send a quick thank-you note or text to someone who has made a mark on your life. One study found that

⁷ University College London, "Black Tea Soothes Away Stress." <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/media/library/tea>

⁸ University of Nevada, Reno, "Releasing Stress Through the Power of Music." <http://www.unr.edu/counseling/virtual-relaxation-room/releasing-stress-through-the-power-of-music>

⁹ Journal of Consumer Research, "Is Noise Always Bad? Exploring the Effects of Ambient Noise on Creative Cognition." http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665048#full_text_tab_contents

¹⁰ Harvard Health Publications, "In Praise of Gratitude." http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/in-praise-of-gratitude

participants who delivered a letter to someone thanking them for their kindness demonstrated a huge boost in personal happiness.¹¹

SNACK ON DARK CHOCOLATE

It's time for your inner chocoholic to take a bite out of year-end stress. Amid research that suggests chocolate relieves stress, one 2009 study confirms that eating 40 grams of dark chocolate everyday for two weeks reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol and catecholamines, "flight-or-fight" hormones produced in response to stress.¹² Other studies also show that dark chocolate can lower blood pressure and risk of heart attacks or strokes.¹³ The flavonol antioxidants in cocoa help reduce blood pressure and improve blood flow.¹⁴

Munch on a bit of dark chocolate during your work day. Since processed foods contain fewer flavonols, opt for dark chocolate with 70 percent cocoa content or more.¹⁵

PROOFREAD YOUR EMAILS FOR DECEMBER 31

With 12 percent of all charitable gifts being made in the last three days of the year, it's important to maximize this opportunity by sending at least two emails on December 31.¹⁶ Pull up your last emails for the year and do a onceover for spelling and grammar.

¹¹ Harvard Health Publications, "In Praise of Gratitude." http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/in-praise-of-gratitude

¹² Journal of Proteome Research, "Metabolic Effects of Dark Chocolate Consumption on Energy, Gut Microbiota, and Stress-Related Metabolism in Free-Living Subjects." <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/pr900607v>

¹³ European Society of Cardiology, "Study Shows Chocolate Reduces Blood Pressure and Risk of Heart Disease." <http://www.escardio.org/The-ESC/Press-Office/Press-releases/Last-5-years/Study-shows-chocolate-reduces-blood-pressure-and-risk-of-heart-disease?hit=dontmiss>

¹⁴ Cleveland Clinic, "Heart Health Benefits of Chocolate." <http://my.clevelandclinic.org/services/heart/prevention/nutrition/food-choices/benefits-of-chocolate>

¹⁵ GreenMedInfo.com, "Dark Chocolate Relieves Stress and Lowers Blood Pressure." <http://www.greenmedinfo.com/blog/dark-chocolate-relieves-stress-and-lowers-blood-pressure>

¹⁶ Network for Good, "The Network for Good Digital Giving Index." <http://www.networkforgood.com/digitalgivingindex/>

If you haven't written a second email yet, don't panic. Just whip up a quick message to go out in the evening that a) counts down the number of hours left, and b) emphasizes donors' last chance to lock in their tax-deductible gifts for the year. It can be as short as, "3 hours left to make your tax-deductible donation!" A deadline can hike up a sense of urgency and compel donors to act fast.

SCHEDULE YOUR THANK-YOU EMAIL AHEAD OF TIME

You're working hard to get those year-end appeals out, but scratch one more thing off of your list before December 31: your thank you email. You don't want to have to worry about emailing donors when you wake up after your New Year's celebrations. Instead, prep your follow-up message ahead of time and set it to fire off first thing on January 1. When you're enjoying a leisurely New Year's Day with loved ones, you'll be glad you took care of this ahead of time.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

We are often our own worst critics. In the midst of your day, start paying attention to your self-talk. Would you speak to a best friend the way you're speaking to yourself? If not, replace those unhealthy, negative thoughts with positive ones. Give yourself an inner pep talk and remind yourself you're doing a great job. You really are—believe it!

At the end of the day, take a breather and know that whatever's going to happen is going to happen. Be proud of all of the incredible work you've accomplished in 2015. Now it's time to kick off your shoes, grab a cocktail, and ring in the New Year!