

Stressing Out? S.T.O.P.

Time: 1 to 3 minutes

Two-thirds of Americans say they need help for stress. But stress itself is not the problem. It's how we relate to stress.

The stress response is critical to our survival. It can save our lives or enable a firefighter to carry a 300-pound man down 20 flights of stairs. Of course, most of us don't encounter a life-or-death threat all that often. We usually experience stress reactions in response to thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations. If we're actively worried about whether we can put food on the table or get the perfect exam score, presto: the stress reaction activates. And if the bodily systems involved in stress don't slow down and normalize, the effects can be severe. Over time, we can succumb to, among other things, high blood pressure, muscle tension, anxiety, insomnia, gastrointestinal complaints, and a suppressed immune system.

Creating space in the day to stop, come down from the worried mind, and get back into the present moment has been shown to be enormously helpful in mitigating the negative effects of our stress response. When we drop into the present, we're more likely to gain perspective and see that we have the power to regulate our response to pressure.

Here's a short practice you can weave into your day to step into that space between stimulus and response.

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S

Stop what you're doing; put things down for a minute.

T

Take a few deep breaths. If you'd like to extend this, you can take a minute to breathe normally and naturally and follow your breath coming in and out of your nose. You can even say to yourself "in" as you're breathing in and "out" as you're breathing out if that helps with concentration.

O

Observe your experience just as it is—including thoughts, feelings, and emotions. You can reflect about what is on your mind and also notice that **thoughts** are not facts, and they are not permanent. Notice any **emotions** present and how they're being expressed in the body. Research shows that just naming your emotions can turn the volume down on the fear circuit in the brain and have a calming effect. Then notice your **body**. Are you standing or sitting? How is your posture? Any aches or pains?

P

Proceed with something that will support you in the moment: talk to a friend, rub your shoulders, have a cup of tea.

Treat this whole exercise as an experiment: Get curious about where there are opportunities in the day for you to just STOP—waking up in the morning, taking a shower, before eating a meal, at a stop light, before sitting down at work and checking email.

You can even use your smartphone's message indicator as a reminder to STOP, cultivating more mindfulness with technology.

What would it be like in the days, weeks, and months ahead if you started stopping more often?



For more on [mindfulness practice](http://mindfulnesspractice.go.mindful.org/inpractice), go to mindful.org/inpractice. To submit questions about techniques, the workplace, or relationships and home life, email inpractice@mindful.org

—Elisha Goldstein