



Tell stress to take a hike

Spending time in nature is one of the best ways to recharge body and soul.

BY DR. JULIE T. CHEN

THERE'S no question that many of us feel stress from time to time, whether it's from hectic work schedules or the hustle and bustle of daily life. Stress brings on a number of ugly side effects such as poor diet, restlessness, anxiety and lack of good quality sleep. I often remind patients at my integrative medical clinic that feeling stress is normal, but it should always be balanced by plenty of leisurely or relaxing activities.

Often we don't realize that one of the best ways to de-stress is right outside our front door: Spending time in nature is not only beneficial for your health, but also proven to help reduce stress and anxiety. Being outdoors, especially if it includes exercise, can even help improve your diet and your sleep.

Best of all, it's always accessible. Even if you live in an urban area it is possible to carve out time in your daily schedule to simply go outside and take a breath of fresh air. Implement these tips into your daily schedule to get yourself in the habit of going outside into nature to relax, reduce distractions and reduce stress.

1 Do things you'd normally do inside—outdoors: If you're in the habit of eating lunch at your desk while you work or going to the gym for a run, switch up your routine and take advantage of nature around you. Take a stroll to the nearest park near your work to enjoy your lunch. Not only will nature give you a calming break from the demands of work, it may even give you an added boost of energy throughout the day. Plus, it is a great way to get some exercise and much-needed Vitamin D from the sun. Move your workout to the park or even to your neighborhood. Many gyms offer outdoor alternatives when the weather cooperates, such as outdoor yoga and group runs in parks.

2 Go for a walk, not a coffee: If you're looking for an afternoon pick-me-up, look

past the vending machines or your nearest coffee shop. Although coffee or snacks may seem like the right choice when you are slowing down mid-workday, they won't give you the rush of exercise and fresh air. We often choose sugary drinks or snacks that end up bogging us down. Instead, try taking a power walk around the neighborhood or the building you work in, or take the stairs to your office to increase circulation and heart rate. Getting fresh air can clear your mind and allow you to sharpen your focus. Listen to your favourite music on your stroll to pump you full of good tunes and energy.

3 Meditate in nature: Meditation can be one of the most effective forms of therapy for stress and anxiety. Meditating in nature can be even more rewarding, as natural sounds and landscapes lend themselves well to relaxation and peacefulness. If you're new to meditation, try not to feel intimidated. Meditation can be as simple as sitting quietly in one place and taking slow, gentle breaths. Shift your focus from your responsibilities, your workload and any other stresses and concentrate your energy on what is directly around you instead. Take evenly paced breaths and try to maintain this focus for as long as you can. Don't feel discouraged if you can only keep your concentration for a minute or two. Take a second to regroup and try again. Simply concentrating on your breath and nature will ease stress from your mind.



4 Ditch the electronics: Our devices and electronics help us communicate for work and leisure, yet are hindrances when it comes to reducing stress. Being constantly inundated by emails, text messages and social media can make separating yourself from your phone quite difficult, but remind yourself that this constant flow of information could be what's standing between you and stress reduction. Though it may sound impossible at first, try to go on a hike or run without music. Switch your concentration to your activity and take in the noises around you, the pace of your breath and your thoughts. Put away your phone during your lunch break and read a book or people-watch instead. If this all sounds too difficult, make an effort to turn off distractions just once a week, then work your way up to more. **2**

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