



Stress

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Welcome to this podcast by Doctor's Digest, bridging the gap between the business of medicine and the practice of medicine, with single-topic manuals that provide practice solutions from the experts.

Sudden anger—edginess—a feeling of being out of control. These are easy-to-recognize stress signals. And we all know that stress is a killer. Stress management experts are seeing consistent signs of stress among medical personnel, including marriage troubles, overeating, and physical problems like insomnia, headaches, and lower back pain. One thing you can count on: the stress of practicing medicine will always be there. So it's going to be up to you to recharge your battery on a daily basis. Here are several easy ways to do it—without taking more than a few seconds from your schedule.

One of the simplest and quickest coping mechanisms for managing stress is called breakthrough breathing. Commonly used by dancers and athletes, breakthrough breathing is simply a matter of breathing deeply into the body. As you breathe in through your nostrils, visualize your breath as light. Expand your belly or push out your abdominal muscles, like a balloon, to bring in the new air. Then, as you breathe out, pull your abdominal muscles back in. Wellness experts suggest practicing this technique twice a day at the same time each day—once in the morning and again at night—for five or ten minutes. Also use breakthrough breathing during stressful situations in your practice, such as working in the emergency room or before delivering bad news to a patient or family.

One doctor, who is the author of a book on stress management, adds another wrinkle to this technique. As he breathes in, he finds that a variety of thoughts enter his mind. He doesn't fight them or resist them. Instead, he allows each one to drift past in his mind. And as he breathes, he focuses on relaxing all the muscles in his body, starting with the head and going all the way down to the feet. As he exhales, he feels his entire body relaxing.

A second technique, which can be combined with the deep-breathing exercise, is concentration. The untrained mind tends to jump from one idea to the next, which can be hazardous for doctors. To improve your concentration, as you inhale, focus on a single positive image, like your favorite tree, color, or shape. Then, as you exhale, release that image, relax, and allow other thoughts to enter and pass by, like clouds in the sky. When you breathe in again, visualize that same image and stay focused on it by detaching your thoughts from all other images or feelings.

A third popular technique for managing stress is called mindfulness. This involves non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. Mindfulness is a way of correcting everyone's tendency to wish away the present moment—if only it wouldn't rain like this, if only I didn't have to drive in rush-hour traffic, if only my patients would behave differently. Instead, claim a time to let those wishful thoughts go, and focus on the present moment and the positive sensations that surround you: the aroma from your morning coffee, or the taste of that sandwich you're

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eating. The idea is to bring yourself back to the present moment, capturing that moment for yourself. Such moments offer an effective escape from the stress of medical practice.

Finally, there is a technique that one clinical psychologist calls “mental imagery vacations.” The next time you need a break from stress, go into your office and close the door. Sit down in a comfortable chair. Picture one of your favorite vacation spots. Remember every detail. Maybe you sense the sand between your toes. Smell the fresh, salty ocean air, or perhaps the fresh scent of pine trees. Imagine yourself in that experience, and make it as real as possible to bring back the pleasant, positive sensations and emotions that accompany it. Use the same visualization over and over again, day after day; it will gather momentum and you’ll be able to get more quickly into that mental imagery vacation each time you try to relax.

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