Four Ways to Calm Your Mind in Stressful Times

Most of us are really good at activating our stress-response. But how do you wind down? Here are four research-backed ways to destress your mind and body.

By Emma Seppälä

Life throws chaos at us on a regular basis—whether it’s our finances, our relationships, or our health. In the work world, around 50 percent of people are burned out in industries like health care, banking, and nonprofits, and employers spend $300 billion per year on workplace-related stress.

In response, we just keep on pushing through, surviving on adrenaline. We overschedule ourselves; we drink another coffee; we respond to one more email. If we stay amped up all the time, we think, we’ll eventually be able to get things done.

But all that does is burn us out, drain our productivity, and lead to exhaustion.

There’s another way—a calmer way. Cultivating a more restful, relaxed state of mind doesn’t mean we’ll drown under all our responsibilities. Instead, research suggests it will bring us greater attention, energy, and creativity to tackle them. And science also points to simple ways we can tap into that calm state of mind to be more resilient in our chaotic lives.

Stress was never meant to be a 24/7 experience. As Stanford professor Robert Sapolsky explains, you’re really only supposed to feel stressed in the five minutes right before you die. When you are being chased in the savanna by a wild animal, your stress response is supposed to save your life—it mobilizes your attention, muscles, and immune system to get you quickly out of danger. When animals escape, they come right out of fight-or-flight mode and into “rest-and-digest” mode, where the parasympathetic nervous system is working to replenish their resources.

That stress response is supposed to be short-lived because it wears down your body, your health, and your energy. It also impacts things like your emotional intelligence and
your decision making. When you’re tightly wound up, you are more likely to react to situations than to respond with reason.

You also perceive the world differently. Stress makes us narrowly focused, preventing us from seeing the bigger picture. When we’re calmer, our attention becomes broader. In fact, we literally see more things. In one study, participants went through a three-month meditation training. They then engaged in something called the attentional blink task, in which you watch images appear rapidly one after another. Usually when people do this exercise, their attention doesn’t pick up all of the target images. But after that mindfulness training, participants were able to pick up more of the target images than pre-retreat—suggesting that their state of mind had become more attentive.

Being able to attend more means that you notice more things about other people and you’re able to communicate with them in more powerful ways. High stress and anxiety (or any kind of negative emotion) make us self-focused, for an evolutionary reason: When our ancestors were stressed, it was because they were in a survival situation. It was good to be focused on yourself so you could save your life.

When we’re stressed, we’re less likely to notice if a colleague looks burned out or sad and more likely to get irritated if they don’t perform as we expect. However, when you’re in a calmer and happier place, that’s probably the day when you will have more empathy: You’ll notice your colleague and take the time to reach out and ask if there’s anything you can do to support them.

When you’re calm, you also manage your energy because you’re not burning yourself up constantly, spending your days with your sympathetic nervous system in overdrive. Calm helps you focus on what you need to do and get it done much more quickly.

Calmness can also impact your creativity. Research suggests that our most creative ideas come in moments when we’re not actively focused or stressed. We are most creative when our brain is in alpha wave mode, which is a relaxed state of mind—like when you’re in the shower or taking a walk in nature. Indeed, people who go on an immersive nature retreat for four days come back with 50 percent increased creativity.

If you want to get the most out of yourself in terms of your productivity, creativity, and innovation—making progress at work or just solving the basic problems of life that you’re faced with—calm is the key.

**Four ways to cultivate a calm state of mind**
We know how to become stressed. Most of us are really good at activating our adrenal system and getting wound up. The question becomes, then, how do you wind down? Research suggests several practices that not only feel good but also put us into a calmer, more relaxed state—a state from which we can cope better with whatever life throws at us.

1. Practice Breathing Exercises

Jake, who appears in my book *The Happiness Track*, was a U.S. Marine officer in charge of a Humvee on a convoy across Afghanistan, when his vehicle drove over an improvised explosive device. After the explosion, he looked down and saw that his legs were severely fractured below the knee. In that moment of shock, terror, and pain, he remembered a breathing exercise that he had read about for extreme wartime situations.

It allowed him to do his duty, which was to check on everyone else in the vehicle. It gave him the presence of mind to give orders to call for help, and to then tourniquet his own legs and prop them up before he fell unconscious—which saved his life.

Our breathing is a powerful way for us to regulate our emotions, and it is something we take for granted. Through your breath, you can activate your parasympathetic nervous system—the calming response in your body.

That’s why we turned to breathing to help veterans—50 percent of whom don’t see any improvement in their trauma symptoms from therapy or medication. The veterans were skeptical, but we began teaching them different breathing exercises. Within a couple of days, some of them started sleeping without medication; after the week-long program, many of them didn’t qualify as having post-traumatic stress anymore, and that persisted up to a year later.

Using your breath, you can change how you feel. In another study, researchers observed people feeling different emotions and found that there was a different pattern of breath for each one. Then, they gave other people the different breathing patterns to perform and asked them, “How do you feel?” It turned out that doing those breathing exercises actually evoked the emotions.

One of the most calming breathing exercises you can do is to breathe in (e.g., to a count of four), hold, and then breathe out for up to twice as long (e.g., to a count of six or eight). You can gently constrict your throat, making a sound like the ocean, which is used in deep relaxation breathing. As you’re doing this, especially thanks to those long
exhales, you’re activating the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing your heart rate and blood pressure.

2. Adopt an Attitude of Self-compassion

Often we are our worst critic. We think that being self-critical will help us be more self-aware and make us work harder, but that’s a myth. In fact, according to a good deal of research, self-criticism destroys our resilience. We’re less able to learn from our mistakes when we beat ourselves up. Self-critical people tend to have greater anxiety and depression, and an inability to bounce back from struggles.

Imagine someone running a marathon for the very first time in their life, and they trip and fall. Someone on the sidelines says, “You’re a loser, you’re so not a runner. What are you doing here? Go home.” That person is our internal, self-critical voice.
Self-compassion is somebody on the other side, who says, “Everybody falls, this is normal. You are so awesome, you’re totally killing this.”

Self-compassion is the ability to be mindful of your emotions—aware of the emotions that are going on inside whenever you fail at something. It doesn’t mean you identify with them; you can just observe and notice them, without feeding the fire. Self-compassion also involves understanding that everyone makes mistakes and that it’s part of being human. And it is the ability to speak to yourself the way you would speak to a friend who just failed, warmly and kindly.

When we adopt this attitude, research suggests, we are calmer—we have less feelings of stress as well as lower cortisol levels. We’re also more resilient: We’re less afraid of failure, and more motivated to improve ourselves.

3. Foster Genuine Connection

How often are we actually present for another person 100 percent? When was the last time somebody was 100 percent present with you, even your spouse?

There’s a loneliness epidemic in the United States and across the world. We know that those feelings of loneliness are extremely destructive to our body and mind, leading to worse health and even earlier death. And the stress and lack of calm in today’s world may contribute to this loneliness because of the way that it tends to make us self-focused.
Our greatest human need, after food and shelter, is to connect with other people in a positive way. From the moment we’re born until our last day, we have a deep and profound longing to belong to one another. And when we fulfill that need, it brings us more calm: The oxytocin and natural opioids that we release when we connect may exert a calming influence on our bodies, and the knowledge that we have the support of others can soothe our minds. When we face adversity, research suggests that our relationships and community have an important role to play in our resilience.

So how do we create a state of mind where we feel more connected?

The good news is that by taking care of yourself and your own well-being with practices like breathing and self-compassion, you are able to turn more attention outward to feel more connected, as well. Positive emotions like calm naturally make us feel closer to other people. You can try specific practices that research has found to boost your sense of connection, as well.

4. Practice Having Compassion for Others

Imagine a day when things aren’t going well for you—you spilled your coffee on yourself, and it’s raining. And then a friend calls who’s having a true emergency in their life, and you jump up and go help them immediately. What happens to your state of mind in that moment?

All of a sudden you have high energy; you’re completely at their service. That is what practicing altruism, service, and compassion does to your life.

It increases your well-being tremendously, as many of us have experienced when we perform little acts of kindness. When we feel compassion, our heart rate goes down and our parasympathetic nervous system is more activated.

Kindness and compassion can also help protect us from adversity. In one of my favorite studies, researchers found that people who had been through traumatic life situations had a shorter lifespan. But among these participants, there was a small group of people who just seemed to keep on living. What was going on with these people?

When the researchers dug a little deeper, they found that they were all engaged in helping friends and family in their life—from assisting with transportation or shopping to housework and child care. Service is one of the most profound ways to nourish the community around you, but also to nourish, inspire, and energize yourself. It’s like that children’s book—when you fill someone’s bucket, it also fills yours.
Cultivating calm isn’t about avoiding every kind of stressful emotion. In fact, when we make time to breathe, connect, and care, some of the negative feelings we’ve been running from might catch up with us. But that’s the time for self-compassion; it’s okay to feel bad. Resilience doesn’t mean that we’ll be happy all the time, but it does mean we have the energy, the mindset, and the support from others to help us weather the storm.