

WORKPLACE

Stressed at the top? Relax with quick fixes – at your desk

Text by LOUISA MATTSON

It is no surprise that it's stressful at the top. Senior executives usually know that they need to do something to manage their stress levels, but carving out the time is often difficult to do.

Wouldn't it be great to have at your fingertips some quick ways to stay energized, calm and upbeat throughout the work day – and to get yourself back on track during those times when you are feeling really stressed out?

Here are just a few on-the-spot stress reducers you may want to adopt for yourself. They may seem too simple at first blush to be very effective, but the science behind these techniques supports their validity.

Slow down your breathing

Interesting fact. When your sympathetic nervous system is activated, initiating the fight/flight response, your breathing speeds up; and when your parasympathetic nervous system is activated, initiating the relaxation response, your breathing slows down.

A fast-paced lifestyle can lead to a chronic physiological state where your sympathetic nervous system remains in overdrive and leads to unnecessary wear and tear on the body. But it is equally true that the way you breathe affects the activity of your nervous system.

This means that you can shift from a stressed-out state to a restorative physiological one just by consciously slowing down your breathing. Slow, deep but unforced breaths seem to be



the most effective.

What you can do. When you notice yourself getting tense and/or just breathing shallowly, focus on extending the length of your out-breath.

This will naturally slow and deepen your breathing. Try shifting your breathing rate so that you are inhaling for about five seconds and exhaling for five seconds and do this for a minute.

If this were the only stress management tip listed here that you adopted, you would be giving yourself a great health benefit.

Show those pearly whites

Interesting fact. Facial feedback research suggests that “fake it ’til you

make it” may work when it comes to smiling. Apparently, just as you tend to smile when you're feeling pleased and happy, you also are likely to experience a positive change in mood when you position your facial muscles to form a smile.

What you can do. Smile for a few minutes and see what shifts for you. You may experience a subtle but noticeable general lightening of your mood.

March in place

Interesting fact. Research on mood regulation shows that exercise is a better mood regulator than just about anything else (even shopping), and a brisk 10-minute walk is the quickest way to shift your mood from negative to positive.

What you can do. When you don't have time for a walk, a lively march in place can help rev you up. Try this technique: With your arms bent at the elbow, swing them as if you are marching, so your arms cross in front of you – your left hand coming out in front of your right side, and vice versa. By cross the midline of your body in this way, you are helping coordinate the left and right sides of your body and brain (helping you think a little more clearly, too).

Relive a happy moment

Interesting fact. Recalling a positive event and letting yourself fully relive it has been shown to enhance physio-

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logical functioning as well as a sense of well-being.

What you can do. Take a five-minute break and recall a happy moment in your life, one in which you felt a positive emotion, such as love, appreciation or gratitude. Don't just think about it; really let yourself re-experience it in a full-sensory way.

Make like Tarzan - or Jane

Interesting fact. The thymus gland, just under the upper part of your breastbone, is involved in the healthy

functioning of the immune system. The Thymus Thump, a technique from the field of behavioral kinesiology, helps you keep this gland tuned up by tapping on it.

What you can do. Using your fist or fingertips, tap your breastbone firmly but gently a couple of inches below your collarbone. Do this for 20 seconds in a 1-2-3 waltz rhythm.

Thinking of something positive and saying "ha-ha-ha" with a smile can add to the benefit of this exercise. It may sound silly, but use it anytime you

need a quick pick-me-up.

Give these on-the-spot stress reducers a try. They are great to have in your stress management toolkit and, if used on a regular basis, can also be resources for high-level well-being and peak performance.

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