

INSTANT SERENITY: 30 SECOND STRESS BUSTERS

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With economic worries piling even more pressures onto day-to-day life, catching your breath these days--let alone a little serenity--may seem all but impossible. But in fact just 30 seconds is all it takes to relieve tense emotions and muscles and fight life-shortening stress.

The advantage of the following "serenity bytes" is that unlike conventional relaxation/meditation methods, they allow stress management to become an automatic part of your life, because you can tap into these "exercises" anytime, anywhere for instant anxiety release.

THE INSTANT CALMING SEQUENCE

This Instant Calming Sequence (ICS) can be learned quickly and used collectively to quickly neutralize negative stress pressures.

STEP 1. Breathe easy

Surprisingly, most of us halt our breathing for several seconds or more at the first sign of stress. That reduces oxygen to the brain and increases feelings of anxiety. The ICS approach is simple: Focus on continuing to breathe--smoothly, deeply, evenly--when pressure hits.

STEP 2. Flash a Smile

Learn to relax your face into a little smile--or at least don't frown--when you find yourself in a tight spot. Stress researchers say that the slightest smile--even when you don't feel like smiling--may increase blood flow to the brain and help "reset" the nervous system so it's less reactive to stress

STEP 3. Shift your stance

A common stress response, known as somatic retraction, is to assume slouching posture: chest tightened or collapsed, shoulders rolled forward and down, abdomen, back or neck tensed. This position not only restricts breathing and blood flow to the brain, but it also creates muscle tension, slows reaction time and can magnify any feelings of panic. The solution: Just shift your body around. Pretend a sky hook is gently lifting your spinal column upward from a point on the top of your head. You'll feel less tense when your head is up, neck long, shoulders broad and loose, pelvis and hips level, back straight and abdomen tension free. Also, simply changing positions--getting up if you're sitting, sitting down if standing--can do a lot to release pent-up emotions.

STEP 4. Do a tension check

Another common stress reaction is to unconsciously tighten muscles in the jaw, neck, back, shoulders and/or abdomen. To release the tension, first locate your own knots and tight spots by taking a fast mental scan of all your muscles, from clenched jaws to curled toes. Just doing this should signal your body to relax

STEP 5. Pause, then react

In the critical first instant of a challenge, you're better off pausing for a moment to acknowledge reality, clear your mind and focus on the situation--then make a quick, appropriate response. Don't think that a momentary pause will make you appear weak or indecisive. On the contrary, by heading off counterproductive responses such as anger or victimizing thoughts, it helps you regain your powers of alertness and concentration, and get back in control.