



Tips to Tame Acute Stress

Picture this: You are taking a walk on a pleasant afternoon. Suddenly, a large dog barrels around the corner, barking and running straight at you. Your heart beat speeds up and your breathing quickens. You feel your face flush, your hairs stand up on end, and your mouth goes dry. You may start to sweat. This is the stress response, which helps you to flee or defend yourself from harm.

The stress response is triggered any time your brain senses a potential threat to your well-being. In this example, the dog is the source of the threat. This is called the acute stressor. Acute means that the source of stress won't last long. You may be familiar with these acute stressors:

- Rushing to catch a plane or a bus
- A pending deadline
- A crying baby
- Having an argument
- Sitting in traffic
- Riding a roller coaster
- A job-related crisis
- A minor car accident
- Getting lost

How acute stress can harm

If the barking dog runs past you, your body begins to recover right away. Your heart rate slows, your blood pressure drops, your breathing slows, and you feel better. This is called the relaxation response.

But acute stress can be harmful if you have repeated bouts of it day after day. This can lead to tension headaches, migraines, trouble sleeping, back pain, upset stomach, depression, worry and other problems. Repeated bouts of acute stress also can contribute to problems at work and at home.

Tips to tame acute stress

You can't avoid all the stress in your life, but you can learn how to consciously produce the relaxation response. Try one of these methods to release tension and regain calm and control in stressful moments:

- **Deep breathing.** If you can, find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Relax your stomach muscles. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose. Breathe in as much air as you can, letting the air move downward into your belly rather than puff up high in your chest. If you do it correctly, your lower belly will expand.

Next, breathe out through your mouth or nose. Do this for several minutes. As you inhale, think about breathing in peace and calm. As you exhale, imagine that you are letting go of your tension and worry.

- **Guided imagery.** Find a comfortable, private place to sit. Close your eyes and picture a peaceful, calming place and immerse all your senses. For instance, if your peaceful place is a beach, “listen” for the shore break; “feel” the sand and warmth of the sun; and “smell” the salty air. Dwell in the place for several minutes until your breathing is relaxed and you feel refreshed. Some people are able to guide themselves into this relaxed state. Many people use a sound recording, like a CD or podcast, as a guide.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** If you can, find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Close your eyes and take several deep, slow breaths. Starting with the muscles in your head, tense and relax your scalp, brow, jaw and so on. To tense your muscles, squeeze them tight for a few seconds. Then relax. Repeat two or three times if you need to. Notice how your muscles feel when they are relaxed. Work through the various muscle groups, tensing and relaxing, until you finally reach your toes.
- **Mindfulness meditation and repetitive prayer.** Close your eyes or focus on an object while silently repeating a sound, word, phrase or prayer. Stay focused “in the moment” without thinking about the past or future. Ignore distracting thoughts that come into your head. **Breathe slowly and relax your muscles while repeating your word or phrase.**

Relaxation methods are generally safe, but may take some time to learn. You may want to take a class or follow a guide to help you get started. Once you get the hang of it, you can use most methods whenever you need to release tension quickly. You may prefer to use only one method or to mix it up depending on the situation or time you have. These techniques also work well at managing ongoing stress, especially if practiced for 10 to 20 minutes every day.

Resources

- *American Psychological Association*
- *Mental Health America*
- *National Institute of Mental Health*
- *Getting Started with Mindfulness*

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Looking for additional support? Contact us today.

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