

Stopping the stress cycle

Being busy may make us feel valued but it can also be bad for our health.
Learn how to slow down with these simple tricks.



We are getting busier. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of women in employment has increased significantly since the 1970s. Being in paid work has given women more opportunities. The downside is that most women are still bearing a heavier load than men in caring for children and doing housework. Add to that the increasing dependence on mobile phones, tablets and computers. At least eight out of 10 Australians admit to checking work emails out of hours, doing an average of an additional 6.6 hours of unpaid work a week.

Not every woman actually wants to be on the busy bandwagon. They simply might not have a choice. "Some women thrive on competition and some women shy away from it," says Jean Hailes psychologist and Head of Translation Dr Mandy Deeks. "Competition is not always a bad thing as it can be motivating, but if it starts to affect your mental and emotional health and you find yourself under increasing stress that you can't escape from, that is going to impact on your health at some stage."

According to a recent survey by the Australian Psychology Society, which investigated stress and wellbeing in Australia, we are experiencing much higher levels of stress than we did two years ago. Being constantly busy means you may not have any time to yourself. Having too many commitments can leave you feeling mentally exhausted, stressed out and lacking the energy to actually enjoy yourself.

The body's response to stress

When you're feeling stressed, your body can go into "fight or flight" response, a natural response to fear or anxiety that results in adrenalin and a hormone called cortisol being pumped into your bloodstream. It's your body's way of getting you out of danger from a real or perceived threat.

This response raises your blood pressure and rate of breathing, sending blood pumping to your muscles in case you need to get away quickly. Non-essential functions such as immune response and digestion tend to stop or slow down.

Being in this state places a great deal of stress on your body and it is designed as a temporary, emergency measure, not a daily occurrence. Jean Hailes endocrinologist Dr Sonia Davison says that stress can have negative long-term consequences. "If work, family or health, or the combination, is causing you stress then this can adversely affect your health, for example by causing poor sleep, anxiety disorders and lethargy. These in turn can lead to lowered wellbeing and an increased risk for depression."



How to slow down your mind

Mindfulness is the non-judgemental focus and acceptance of your current thoughts, emotions and physical feelings. Simply put, it allows you to live in the present moment, safe in the knowledge that your thoughts or feelings cannot harm you.

Mindfulness has long been used as part of Buddhist meditation practise and is now widely accepted in modern psychology practices.

Mindfulness exercises can train you to recognise, reduce and tolerate unpleasant, frightening or painful feelings, thoughts and sensations. With practise, mindfulness helps you feel more in control of your emotions, instead of feeling they are in control of you! Try these techniques:

- 1 minute breathing exercise: Concentrate fully on breathing in slowly, holding your breath for a count of 6, and then exhaling slowly. Listen to the sound of your breath, feel your diaphragm rising and falling. Do this for 1 minute to begin with then increase as you feel comfortable
- Being still and present: Find a comfortable place to sit and concentrate on your breathing. If thoughts come into your head, notice them but don't dwell on them. Think "that's a sad thought" or "that's a painful thought" and let it drift away. Do this for 2-3 minutes, it takes practise but eventually you will realise you are an observer of these feelings and they will not have the same hold or effect on you
- Walking and being present: Go for a short walk somewhere you are comfortable. Concentrate on the physical sensations you feel: your feet touching the ground through your shoes, your leg muscles moving, your breath moving slowly in and out of your body. Concentrate on how it feels to be present in your body as you walk and breathe



The first step in combatting stress

Reducing or combatting stress is hard to do, says Dr Davison, but recognition that stress is excessive or affecting you adversely is a key first step. "A good strategy is discussing stress levels and causes with someone else - a counsellor or GP is a great start," she says.

Taking the time to identify the signs you are pushing it too hard can be helpful, says Dr Deeks. "For some the signs may be feeling tired more often, irritable or grumpy, lacking in energy and foggy in your thinking. Once you know your triggers you can then put things in place which you know help you."



Ways to reduce stress

Being well rested and eating a balanced diet is the first line of defence. Regular physical activity throughout your life not only reduces your blood pressure, it also reduces your chances of having a stroke and cuts your risk of cardiovascular disease in half. Moderate exercise such as brisk walking has been shown to help you deal with depression, stress and anxiety, help you sleep better and boost energy levels.

This doesn't mean you have to hit the gym but aim for 30 minutes a day and build up slowly. Any activity that gives a small but noticeable increase in breathing and heart rate will do. "It is vital you find ways to put breaks into your life," says Dr Deeks. "That can be a 10 minute cup of tea on your own or a walk around the block."

Putting yourself first sometimes is not necessarily selfish, it's essential for your wellbeing. "Tackling stress is good for your health! A critical part of this is having time for yourself, doing things that you enjoy, and having the time to do this without others putting demands on you," says Dr Davison.



How to wind down

- Ask yourself if you are getting real pleasure or value from your activities, or are they simply filling your spare time and giving you something to brag about?
- Remember, being busy is not the same as being important or valuable
- Take time out for yourself, away from your phone or computer
- Recognise your stress triggers and actively think of ways you can combat them
- Learn how to "switch off" – we all need time out to recharge our batteries
- Taking time out talking to your friends, having a laugh and having fun all release "feel good" hormones into your body
- Sleep more – try to get at least 8 hours per night
- Do something physical, just 30 minutes moderate activity per day will release "feel good" endorphins and reduce your risk of a range of chronic health conditions