

# How To De-Stress At Work

With 77% of employees experiencing burnout from stress, it's never been more important to relax at work. [1] Let's explore ways for you and your team to chill out.



## 1. Rest your eyes

Most of us stare at computer, phone or tablet screens for work. But studies show that too much exposure to screens can increase stress levels, disrupt our sleep and even lead to depression. [2]

It turns out the blue light of LEDs messes with our circadian rhythm – the body's biological clock – which interrupts sleep, makes us feel anxious and low. [3] It's not just the glare but what's on screens. **Information overload** raises levels of stress-response hormone cortisol, which increases anxiety and affects our decision-making. [4] To help, you can:

- Try meeting colleagues face-to-face or pick up the phone instead of playing email table tennis.
- Take regular breaks and stretch your legs. Fresh air helps you to relax further by flooding the brain with mood-lifting endorphins. [5] (Just leave the phone behind.)
- Avoid looking at screens before bed. If you must, set your device to 'night mode' or download an app that filters the troublesome blue wavelength.

## 2. And, breathe...

After some scepticism, scientists have come round to the fact that meditation helps us de-stress. A recent study of anxious people revealed that mindfulness techniques lower levels of stress-related hormone ACTH and **increase resilience to future stresses**. [6]

The group practised breathing exercises to focus on the moment and help clear their minds of worries. Slow, deep breathing also lowers blood pressure, relaxes muscles and flips our nervous system from 'fight-or-flight' response into rest mode. [7] Here's a simple breathing exercise you can do at your desk:

1. Inhale through your nose and count to four
2. Exhale through your nose and count to four
3. Repeat until you feel calmer [8]

Apps such as BoxBreathing have more breathing exercises to try. (Just remember night mode!)



### 3. Stretch out the stress

Stretching eases tension in muscles exacerbated by stress. It also improves blood flow to the brain for an **afternoon energy boost**. [9] For those of us who hunch over our desks, stretching out the muscles in your back is a great way to ease tension. Here's one to try.

1. While seated, cross your arms over your chest
2. Grab your shoulders
3. Rotate your upper body from the waist, turning gently from left to right as far as you can

Both sides of your lower back should tense as you stretch. [10] Discover more [desk stretches to ease aches and pains](#).

### 4. Tick off a to-do list

The humble to-do list prioritises tasks and stops you fretting which to tackle first. Plus, every time you tick off a job, you'll enjoy a sense of accomplishment and a **burst of dopamine** - the neurotransmitter that controls the brain's pleasure centre. [11] So,

after each task, we're keen to tick off the next item on our list and repeat the sensation. A good to-do list should:

- **Be updated the day before** - you'll put off worrying about work that evening, see how much you've accomplished that day and hit the ground running tomorrow.
- **Be specific and actionable** - think 'write first paragraph of proposal' instead of 'work on proposal'
- **Have a top three** - number tasks with the biggest potential impact on your day. Now, tackle them when you're most productive. Are you a morning or afternoon person?



## 5. Chomp on chocolate

New studies reveal that eating dark chocolate (with 70% cacao or more) reduces stress and improves mood, memory and immunity. [12] The antioxidants in chocolate lower blood pressure and improve circulation - **helping you relax**.

One study reveals that chocolate even "enhances neuroplasticity for behavioural and brain health benefits." [13] You had us at "mood", to be fair. For an extra kick, keep your bar in the fridge. Crunching releases serotonin (aka the happy chemical) in the brain.

## 6. Glug green tea

Coffee is a great way to help you focus. But too much caffeine has the opposite effect - leaving you jittery and sluggish in the afternoon. So, after your third cup, try switching to low-caffeine green tea. Studies show that five cups of green tea a day can **reduce psychological distress** by up to 20%. [14]

For extra zen, take a tea leaf from the Japanese. Their 'Way of the Tea' is an ancient ceremony that helps you escape everyday concerns. Don't have a Chashitsu in the office? The humble tea round can lift your mood too. Simple, tactile rituals can cause an

autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) – a tingling sensation with waves of relaxation. Ahh, tea. [15]

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[5] Anna Magee, 'Why fresh air is the best medicine' (2016). Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/body/why-fresh-air-is-the-best-medicine/> (accessed 13 August 2018).

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[10] 'Desk stretches to ease aches and pains'. (2017). Available at: <https://www.bupa.co.uk/newsroom/ourviews/desk-stretches> (accessed 13 August 2018).

[11] 'The Psychology of Checklists' (2016). Available at: <https://blog.trello.com/the-psychology-of-checklists-why-setting-small-goals-motivates-us-to-accomplish-bigger-thing> (accessed 13 August 2018).

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[15] Rachael Schultz, 'What Is ASMR and Why Should You Try It for Relaxation?' (2018)

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