

Five easy approaches to reduce your stress and boost your wellbeing

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‘Tis the season for making lists, so here’s my attempt at joining the fun. For many people, it’s also the season for feeling more stress, though these days it seems like stress has become year-round.

In our modern, high-tech, fast-paced society full of social, financial, and environmental challenges, stress is so common and pervasive that it’s easy to get used to it as if it were normal – but it’s not normal and it’s really bad for our health.

Countless studies from the last few decades have shown that chronic stress is not only a major contributor to mental health problems, but also most general health conditions, including diabetes, chronic pain, heart disease, obesity, dementia, cancer, asthma, COPD, and autoimmune diseases. Chronic stress in one’s childhood years, because of how it affects brain development, might actually be the main cause of these conditions.

OK, all my rambling probably isn’t helping anyone’s anxiety, so let’s move on to five suggestions to help manage stress.

Practice self-awareness

This might sound like an odd one, but stick with me. The skill of self-awareness is as important as any other health activity. It’s also one that we all stink at because our demanding society considers sensations like fatigue and pain, or emotions like anxiety and sadness, as counterproductive. So we collectively learn to ignore them. Consider your car’s dashboard.

It has lots of signals that let us know how the car is doing. It thankfully alerts us to gas getting low so we know to refuel. The check engine light similarly warns us the car may need attention so it doesn’t break down. Body sensations are our check engine light. If I’m dehydrated, I sense a dry mouth so I know to drink something to prevent problems; my body then rewards me with a pleasant sensation after drinking water.

If I’m doing yard work and push my back muscles to the point of harm, they let me know that by sending a signal of pain, prompting me to take a break. But what if I don’t listen to my body and keep working? Then instead of a whisper in the form of a mild pain, I later become unable to ignore my body screaming at me in the form of severe pain. Having good self-awareness means we hear our body’s whispers and respond accordingly, avoiding either more wear and tear on our body, or unsettling emotions.

How can we improve self-awareness? When you feel a certain emotion, notice what you feel in your body. How do you know you’re anxious? What sensations have led you to know? A tightness in your chest? Butterflies in your stomach? Mine is often a lump in the throat. Do the same when you feel angry, depressed, or happy. Structured and relaxing ways



to practice self-awareness include yoga, body scan meditations, and progressive muscle relaxation training (see internet videos on all these).

Move your body

The adrenaline your survival brain called for is there for a reason: to help you get the heck away from here or fight that threat off. Fight-or-flight is one of the two physiologic survival responses all mammals have (shut-down is the other, which deserves its own discussion). Be grateful our hunter-gatherer ancestors had adrenaline, as it helped them escape from predators.

While we don’t need to worry anymore about getting eaten, our survival brain (not our thinking brain) hasn’t evolved as quickly as society has, so fight-or-flight remains the body’s default response to daily challenges. As adrenaline builds up to prepare for the big action, that energy needs to be released, otherwise it wears the body down (hence all the diseases above). So, go for a walk, dance, or do yard work. Stuck inside? Do some stretches, even from your chair. Shake your arms. Hop up and down.

Connect with nature

From time immemorial until not that long ago, the lives of our ancestors were dependent on being intimately connected to the land. Our survival brain evolved to recognize daylight, bodies of water, trees, plants, and other creatures as sources of survival, which explains why we’re naturally drawn to them.

Nowadays, we just make a few clicks on the Door Dash app to get a meal. However, our survival brain still sees trees, water, and sky as signs that we’re safe. So to help soothe that brain, get outside, and while you’re out there, notice how the air feels, listen for birds, and watch the clouds. Tend to a garden. Hunt for mushrooms. Put your bare feet on the earth. If you’re stuck indoors, look out a window, play ocean wave sounds on your phone, or get an indoor plant and give it some love.

Do a mindful or meditative practice

By “mindful” I mean be curious about your surroundings, notice what your five senses are telling you, and

pay attention to body sensations. Try not to analyze things too much, like if something is good or bad - just notice it.

If you’re really stressed in the moment, there’s the classic grounding exercise of naming five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, and one thing you taste. Practice by doing this when you’re not stressed.

By “meditative practice” I mean something that involves being mindful or involves a repetitive activity. Our brain loves repeating, rhythmic things (rocking, ocean waves, drumbeats, vacuuming), so listen to music, focus on your breathing as you take slow breaths, rub your arms, create art, or sing.

Don’t look at doing the dishes as just an annoying chore (which it is), but also as an opportunity to mindfully notice the soap bubbles and the

rhythm of the scrub brush. Don’t rely too often on your phone or TV. Looking at screens can distract us from discomfort, but largely gets our focus out of the here and now, thereby disconnecting us from our bodies (see #1).

Lastly, don’t listen to me; go figure it out yourself

Ok, let me say that more nicely. We’re all unique and our bodies have unique tastes. Meditation is life changing for some, but can trigger panic attacks in others.

I’ll never forget when I was introduced to ASMR, a type of sound therapy, and realized it explained why certain sounds sometimes put me in a blissful trance. When I shared the good news with my wife and started playing her an ASMR video, she grimaced and pleaded within two seconds to turn off the horrible sound.

Work in partnership with your body (see #1) and figure out what it likes. Be curious and open to trying new things. Discovering things on your own is better than following orders from someone else (including a doctor).

Have fun with these and be patient with yourself. Like any skill, it takes practice to get good, so commit to making a relaxation practice part of your daily routine. If you’re trying that meditation app your sister raved about, but can’t go past three seconds without losing focus, then appreciate those three seconds and set a goal of someday getting to 10 seconds, then 30, then 10 minutes and beyond!

2026

CTSI PLANNING DEPARTMENT

SAVE THE DATE

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

IN-PERSON MEETINGS WILL INCLUDE A LIGHT DINNER.
A ZOOM OPTION IS ALSO AVAILABLE FOR ALL MEETINGS.

STARTING AT 4:30 PM

EUGENE AREA OFFICE
JANUARY 14TH, 2026

SALEM AREA OFFICE
JANUARY 28TH, 2026

PORTLAND AREA OFFICE
FEBRUARY 11TH, 2026

SILETZ TRIBAL
COMMUNITY CENTER
FEBRUARY 25TH, 2026

OUT OF AREA/ZOOM
MARCH 11TH, 2026

PLUS!

All Siletz Tribal members who fill out a Community Survey will be entered into a drawing with a **Grand Prize of \$500!**
Other cash prizes will be available. Ages 18 and older can participate.

Zoom
<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/88971082362>

For further information, please call 541-444-8229 or email IanK@ctsi.nsn.us or KennethJJ@ctsi.nsn.us