

Three feel-good, stress-busting, tip-top tips!

#1 Look after your body

The mind, body and emotions are inextricably linked.

If your emotions are taking a bashing, don't make it unnecessarily worse on yourself by giving your body a bashing too! Better still, looking after your body can go a long way to preventing the worst effects of stress in the first place. A body that has all the nutrients it needs can more effectively deal with challenging situations. Easy beginnings: start off by designating one day of the week 'nutritious day' and one day of the week 'guilt-free day'.

Similarly, cut back on coffee, sugar, fags, recreational drugs and booze. Sugar crashes, caffeine jitters, hangovers and 'withdrawal symptoms' aren't just unpleasant for you - so are your mood swings for those around you. Try the 'one day a week, one week a month, and one month a year' rule for giving yourself a break from the naughty stuff. No-one's saying you have to be a saint, just be sensible.

Sleep is under-rated. Give yourself at least half an hour before heading to bed to wind down - that means no Bruce Willis, hot baths, or alcohol (especially not all three!). For a week, squeeze in an extra 30mins (better still an hour) sleep each night than you normally get. You will feel the benefit. Don't take my word for it. Don't say to yourself it's not do-able. Try it and see.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we get to the issue of *exercise*. As well being good for your physical health, it's good for your mental health too - effective in reducing stress, improving blood-flow to the brain, helping you think more clearly, releasing endorphins (the feel-good hormones and natural painkillers) and building self-esteem for the body-conscious. They're almost clichéd these days but tips like walking up the escalator, getting off the bus or tube a station early, walking (rather than driving) to Tesco, really are very easy ways of incorporating exercise into anyone's day.

Of course, remember to speak to your GP if you're about to make changes to your usual diet or exercise regime. To whatever degree you choose to challenge yourself, set realistic goals and take things slowly to begin with. Above all - enjoy yourself!

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2 Do what makes you smile

Smiling is natural. Smiling is good. Not everybody does it, but everybody should.

It's really important to make time for relaxation and fun. Much as I'd like to say "just leave work earlier", I know this isn't always easy or practical - at least straight away. What you *can* do is grab 10 minutes at lunchtime to get outside. Don't tell yourself it's not worth it. It is. Better still if you have some sort of greenery near by. Nature seems to be something that we need to connect to for our mental well-being.

Not at work? No park in your area? Got a TV? Put the Discovery Channel on! It may sound daft but if watching "24" or "Big Brother" gets the adrenalin going even if you're not really there, then marvelling at the wonder of nature from your sofa is going to be just as impactful in a positive way.

Speaking of TV, what else do you choose to watch? Ask yourself how you feel during these programmes and afterwards. TV can be a great way to relax, but is it really relaxation if you feel depressed by the news, angry at some reality show or scared ****less by a late-night horror? If I'm working from home I sometimes have the TV on in the background as, personally, I find it stimulating. But it's always 'Frasier' or some other comedy, because I'd rather have laughter in the background than anything else.

What else makes you happy? What do you enjoy? What do you think of as a treat? For me it can be reading a cool graphic novel, redeeming points on a loyalty card (thanks Cafe Nero), or diving into the National Gallery for 10 minutes on my way to a meeting. Make an 'energise list' now of 5 things you know give you a little lift. Keep your happiness tank topped up and you'll have plenty of reserves for dealing with those draining situations when they come along.

Finally - and assuming you like kids - make the opportunity to spend quality time with them. There's nothing better than a two-year-old niece getting you to dress as a pirate to make you forget about your worries. (Yes, I speak from experience). No kids in the family? Then let yourself be one now and then.

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3 Hug a hoody

People, connections, doing something for someone else.

In the days of Facebook and MySpace it's easy to forget that a social network is made up of real people. Our psychology demands that we have contact with other human beings, and this is especially important when you're feeling stressed. Even a simple hug has been shown to reduce cortisol (as well as feel nice).

Talking to friends or family not an option? There are loads of alternatives only a Google-step away - and not all professionals are scary and bearded.

Are you an optimist? In part, positive thinking is being able to interpret external events in their proper context and not seeing them as the only source of your happiness; as well as realising that your thoughts and actions are what really determine your happiness.

One great way to tap into this natural optimism (yes it's in you too, even if it doesn't feel like it right now) is to do something for someone else. I won't go into all the whys and wherefores here but anything that focuses your attention anyway from negative inner thoughts has to be sensible, right? Whether it's phoning a friend to ask how *they* are, setting up that £2-standing order to that charity, or helping a random stranger with a large bag - doing something for someone else helps you at the same time as it helps them.

And the best news is, you get out what you put in! Assuming you set proper boundaries for yourself, and don't do anything that results negatively on your well-being, the more energy you put into 'stuff' the more you create a virtuous cycle that soon becomes virtually self-perpetuating.

Go on. Put some of what you've read here into practice *right now*.

For more advice, guidance and support, get in touch via the contact page or email me:

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