

Eight instant ways to de-stress – and all for free

After the Duchess of Sussex was spotted wearing an ‘anti-stress’ patch, we ask the experts for their top mood-boosting tips. *By* Suzy Walker

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From writing down how you feel to tensing your thighs, here are some of the top anti-stress fixes.

Last weekend, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, was snapped in her hometown Montecito, wearing a NuCalm biosignal processing disc “anti-stress” patch on her left wrist. According to NuCalm, the disc “provides the resonance and frequencies to ensure a fast-acting, deep and long-lasting NuCalm experience”.

While this product will only set you back £63 for a pack of 20, the experts are dubious as to NuCalm’s efficacy. Guy Leschziner, professor of neurology and sleep medicine at King’s College London, told The Telegraph this weekend that its claims suspiciously “sound like pseudoscience”.

So how, then, can you de-stress quickly and for free, without resorting to the unproven “woo”? We ask the experts.

Observe your beating heart

Nick Scaramanga, a mindfulness and meditation teacher and founder of [Zen Skills](#), says: “I have a teenage son and when I used to get triggered by his behaviour, I would start to notice my jaw clench, my heart race, but when you pay attention to the symptoms of stress versus react, the stress dissipates.” Studies show that mindful observation of your thoughts and symptoms of stress will not only de-stress you but it will also change your brain.



'The brain that observes itself changes itself,' says Scaramanga CREDIT: Digital Vision

Neuro psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz at the University of California, a practising Buddhist, found that when he showed OCD patients pictures of their fearfully overreacting on an MRI scan, their symptoms improved. “The brain that observes itself changes itself,” says Scaramanga.

Write down how you feel

Dr Tanmeet Sethi, author of *Joy is My Justice: Reclaim What is Yours* (Hachette, £14.99) is a clinical associate professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine – she advises putting your thoughts to paper. She is also mother to three children with one son, Zubin, diagnosed with duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD), a progressive, muscle-wasting disease that will eventually kill him. His journey inspired her book.



Sethi recommends putting your feelings on paper in an 'emotion bubble' CREDIT: Westend61

“Neuroscience studies have shown that if you name the emotion, it dampens down the limbic system and stimulates the prefrontal cortex, which allows you to feel more settled and allows you to think more clearly,” says Sethi. Allow your emotions to arise and write it down on the page in an “emotion bubble” – fear, anger or resentment etc. “Notice how the emotion is separate from you and does not overwhelm you. I use this exercise several times a day – it works,” she says.

Try the box breath

“The US Navy Seals have recently adopted this technique to assist soldiers in dealing with high-stress situations during combat and battle,” says [Brenda Winkle](#), teacher, healer and breathwork practitioner. “We teach the box breath as a tool to use for [the] problem-based intervention system when I’m teaching – and it’s incredible for calming the kids when you’re dealing with challenging situations in the classroom.” It’s easy to do, says Winkle. Breathe in through the nose for a count of four, hold for a count of four, breathe out for a count of four, and hold for a count of four. “Box breathing causes the body to enter the parasympathetic or ‘rest and digest’ mode, which helps calm the body down in stressful situations. I use this technique daily,” says Winkle.



Box breathing causes the body to enter the ‘rest and digest’ mode CREDIT: E+

Tense your thighs

“This helps ground you and gets you out of your head and more connected to your body,” says Eve Menezes Cunningham, a trauma therapist, who specialises in somatic therapy, a body-centric approach which treats mental disorders with physical methods. Author of award-winning *365 Ways to Feel Better: Self-Care Ideas for Embodied Wellbeing* (White Owl, £12.99), she adds: “If you’re stressed, strong movement (running/dancing/stamping your feet) burns off excess stress hormones and works with the body’s fight/flight impulse. But you can’t just get up in the middle of a meeting and go for a run, so tensing and de-tensing your thighs does the trick. If I’m overwhelmed with too much to do, I do this for one minute and I feel instantly better.” Inhale as you tense your thighs, exhale as you release, says Menezes Cunningham.

Draw yourself a picture

Studies show that drawing can help in trauma therapy and can reduce PTSD by more than 80 per cent, an approach recommended by Susan Magsamen, co-author of New York Times best-selling book *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us* (Canongate Books, £20). Magsamen, alongside her co-author Ivy Ross, offers compelling research that neuroaesthetics, which is the study of how the arts can improve health and well-being, can extend your life by as much as 10 years.

“Twenty minutes a day – working with clay, dancing to singing, writing, humming – is proven to de-stress you. Me? I always doodle during a stressful phone call,” she says.



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Sniff some soil

Cheryl Rickman, positive psychology expert and author of *Tree Glee: How and Why Trees Make us Feel Better* (Welbeck Publishing, £16.99), explains how the bacteria found in soil – *mycobacterium vaccae* – activates the brain to produce serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with feelings of happiness, calm and focus.

Trees also produce a cocktail of botanical compounds – a blend of essential oils called phytoncides and aromatic terpenes – and when we breathe them in from the woody air and absorb them via our pores, our nerves send electromagnetic signals to our brain – specifically to the hypothalamus – which literally flicks the switch to shut down our “flight or fight” stress response. “This is why my fail-safe de-stresser is to go for a woodland walk and breathe in the trees,” she says.

Eat peanut butter on toast with an apple

“In this day of high protein diets and fasting, a low intake of carbohydrates can make you feel stressed and depressed,” says [Amanda Bullat](#), registered dietitian, nutritionist and host of the Savour Food and Body podcast.

“If you’re not eating enough, especially if you’re not eating enough carbohydrates, your body will not make serotonin, the feel-good hormones that improve your mood and lower anxiety,” she says. “If I’m feeling stressed, I will have a piece of wholemeal toast with peanut butter and an apple and feel an instant mood-boost.”

Look for beauty

“I am supporting my partner right now who is in hospital for brain surgery. It is stressful but I’m choosing each day to post on social media a photo of something beautiful,” says Vanessa King, positive psychologist and author of *List Happy: 75 Lists for Happiness, Gratitude and Wellbeing*. (DK, £12.99).



Looking at beautiful objects, or artwork, can help to boost your mood

A leading expert on the science of happiness, head of psychology and a board member of Action For Happiness, Vanessa recommends we seek out art, music or objects of beauty that can uplift and inspire us. “Research suggests that it can reduce stress, rumination, boost our mood and increase life satisfaction.”