All-Natural Stress Remedies

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AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.
CONTENTMENT

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The Body’s Miraculous Plan for Stress Control
Breathe Deeply and Let Tension Go

By Marylou Gantner, Scientific Relaxation Specialist

Several years ago, the Journal of the American Medical Association listed 27 symptoms due to tension and improper breathing. Doctors warned of an over-reliance on anti-anxiety drugs that often lead to crippling dependency. I agree – there is a better way! For 35 years, I've successfully worked with thousands of clients who suffer from anxiety/tension disorders and stress by using scientific relaxation skills, diaphragmatic breathing techniques and EMG biofeedback.

In my own life, anxiety nearly overwhelmed me at an early age. Through the years nothing I tried worked. Marriage, family, religion, meditation and therapy offered only brief periods of respite. In my junior year at Rollins College, I undertook independent studies in Psychology at the University of Florida. One morning I heard the renowned psychiatrist Dr. Joseph Wolpe speak. He was world-famous for his groundbreaking treatment of anxiety and stress disorders. He said, “If you are relaxed, you can’t be anxious and tense. Relaxation is a technical skill. Anyone can learn it.” Hearing these words changed my life.

I asked Dr. Wolpe to train me personally at his behavior therapy unit at Temple University School of Medicine. Later I worked at Orlando Regional Mental Health Center as a mental health trainee. I noticed what was called the ‘revolving door syndrome.’ Patients went from one crisis to the next, returning in six to eight weeks for more counseling. With my supervisor’s encouragement and Dr. Wolpe’s help, I developed training programs for the Center and began working directly with patients. To my delight, even the most difficult patients benefited from the training.

The technical skill I taught is called Progressive Relaxation (also referred to as Scientific Relaxation). This Relaxation Response was discovered in the early 20th century by the brilliant internist, psychologist and physiologist Edmund Jacobson. As a young boy, he became curious about nervousness he felt in himself and saw in others. As a young man, Jacobson entered Harvard Graduate School in the departments of Psychology and Philosophy with the hope of understanding and correcting this human condition. Instead, he found his professor, the
famous psychologist William James, to be extremely nervous and unclear about its cause or what to do about it. Jacobson was further disheartened to learn that James was the author of what was referred to as “The Bible on Relaxation.”

Inspired that so few understood the condition of nervousness, Jacobson made three landmark discoveries in the early 20th century. These truths are the backbone of my practice. Jacobson’s first discovery confirmed that when we think or imagine, it is a whole-body experience, involving the brain, nerves and muscles. The body is impacted by our every thought!

I train my clients to be aware of urgent, fearful, negative thoughts that the body transforms into extreme body tension. This condition is known as Canon’s ‘fight or flight’ response. Over time, negative thoughts translate into chronic physical symptoms in the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal and immune systems. Further, mental clarity is diminished and psychological symptoms surface, such as crippling anxiety.

Jacobson’s second discovery — a universal message of hope — assures us that no matter how stressed or tense, the body has an innate ability to release tension and unlearn chronic habits. Nature wired it into our nervous system! Jacobson developed a teachable skill and named it Progressive Relaxation. By practicing this simple skill, we return our body to a healthy equilibrium.

Jacobson’s third discovery was really an invention, the result of a collaboration with Bell Laboratories: the EMG biofeedback machine that measures muscles tension. I find people are simply unaware of the extraordinary tension they carry in their bodies. The beauty of this tool is that it gives the person’s brain immediate feedback when they succeed in releasing tension. In fact, 70 years of Jacobson’s impeccable research shows that we waste 30 to 60% of our energy in chronic tension and shallow breathing habits.

Clients arrive in my office with a list of symptoms. What they soon discover is that their discomfort is largely fueled by excess tension in their muscles and the habit of shallow breathing. This style of breathing deprives us of adequate oxygen and the rhythmic diaphragmatic action needed to nourish our inner organs.

Most people find Progressive Relaxation training interesting. They appreciate learning a skill that puts them in control of their emotions and life energy. In our first session, I teach clients to make friends with diaphragmatic breathing. Most find it very relaxing and energizing. Next, we begin an educational process of identifying tension and releasing certain muscle groups, working especially on areas that feel specific to their symptoms (i.e. tension in a tight jaw or grinding their teeth, perhaps shoulder and neck tension patterns that create headaches).
Even though the body has over a thousand voluntary muscles, the beauty is that they work in groups. Clients learn to identify the few locations necessary to let go of tension and relax.

This relaxation generalizes to the smooth muscles of their inner organs. I assign daily practice based on a person’s schedule and their commitment. From the biofeedback machine, I get a profile of the client’s baseline level of tension. As training progresses, we see these readings improve and symptoms become less intense and less frequent.

**Progressive Relaxation**

Progressive Relaxation releases tension more deeply than many hours of restful sleep. It minimizes the cumulative effects of stress, restores energy and promotes mental clarity. With daily practice, the body literally releases stores of chronic tension from the muscles and nervous system. The benefits of this practice generalize to our waking, active day. Most people find this deep state of relaxation for the first time completely foreign and a “wonderful experience.”

**Differential Relaxation**

In addition to Progressive Relaxation, I teach a second skill called Differential Relaxation. The client learns to selectively relax those muscles not needed to perform a certain task. Clients begin to notice when they feel tense, rushed or anxious. While breathing deeply, they learn to scan their body and release unnecessary tension. Let’s think about the task of driving a car. Most drivers waste a significant amount of energy behind the wheel; they grip the steering wheel when all that is required is that the person’s arms comfortably guide the wheel. After learning Differential Relaxation, people don’t drop in exhaustion at the end of the day.

Having read this, you can see how we simply need to stop tensing our muscles unnecessarily. The Relaxation Response is our natural state of being! The very fact that nature has wired this response into our nervous system indicates we have the potential to help ourselves! After one of my presentations, a doctor remarked: “The Relaxation Response is the best-kept secret in medicine.”

Sometimes clients say to me, “Why haven’t I heard of this before?” I feel it is my mission to educate people. It concerns me that most people live their lives ignorant about how to optimize their mental and physical health with this simple skill. A skill that is designed into their very cells!

**The Quick Version of Progressive Relaxation**

To experience a modified version of Progressive Relaxation, lie flat with a pillow under your knees, or place your legs on a chair. Take a couple of deep breaths and let go the best you can. Watch your breath: on exhale mentally and physically let go. If you go to sleep, what you had was a nap. Try again another day. Eventually you will remain awake and experience the mental quiet.

Simple Strategies for Reducing Tension

Sleep
To get sleep, wet two cotton balls with a drop of water and place one on each eyelid. You will receive ‘feedback’ when you think. Relax your eyes and let your tongue relax into the floor of your mouth. Be patient, keep trying night after night, sleep will come.

Scotch Tape
On a day you are home alone, place a piece of scotch tape across your brow. Notice as it tugs at your brow as you began to ‘effort’ or think anxious thoughts. Relax your brow and mental images.

Smile
Smile, even when no one is around. It is true that it relaxes 42 muscles on your face. Start at the corners of your mouth and feel it lift up your cheeks and light up your eyes.

Release
For a relief from neck and shoulder tension, provided you have no neck problems: Allow your head to fall forward for only one minute. Try this several times a day.

Exercise
The benefits are plentiful. If you can’t start a formal program, choose simple ways like taking the stairs or walking briskly to your destination.

Fuel Up
Eat breakfast. Minimize caffeine and sugar intake. Eat regularly.

Be kind
Be unusually kind to everyone you meet. You never know what difficulties a person may carry.

More info
For more information about your personal stress score, Google: “Holmes and Rhea Social Adjustment Scale.”
About the Author
Marylou Gantner is a Scientific Relaxation Specialist with over 40 years in private practice in Orlando, Florida. She was certified by world renowned psychiatrist Joseph Wolpe, M.D., at Temple University School of Medicine Behavior Unit, in Philadelphia. She trains clients to restore mental and physical well-being by identifying and relaxing excessive neuromuscular tension patterns that create symptoms and illness. Many of her clients are referred by physicians, lawyers, and mental health therapists. Marylou graduated from Rollins College in 1973 and completed courses in her field at the University of Florida, Harvard University, the University of Central Florida, and Temple University. She has a passionate belief that people can develop a high level of wellness and personal excellence by practicing the basic skills of Scientific Relaxation in daily life.

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“Get a Grip” on Competition
Competition can be a good thing, because it can make everyone perform just a little better. But taken too far, competition can lead students to feel unnecessarily overwhelmed. If you feel overwhelmed, remember you are only human. In fact, one out of three college freshmen feels overwhelmed, and many high schoolers feel overwhelmed by achievement stress. You can get the proper grip on competition – not too tight, not too loose – by following these recommendations.

Overcoming Achievement Stress
A simple way to feel challenged and not overwhelmed is to use the Fourth R in education – Relaxation. By relaxing before a test or competition, you can really “show what you know,” and even enjoy it. Taking the edge off can actually give you the edge when trying to do your best.

Practicing the Fourth R
Using the Fourth R boils down to the simple ABC’s: Attitude, Breathing and Choices.

Attitude: Believe in your ability. You can learn anything new if you put your mind to it. Confidently say to yourself, “I know I can…” Convert bad stress into good stress just by thinking about it differently. Instead of saying, “I feel so stressed out,” just say, “I am so excited about the chance to…” Athletes commonly consider ‘butterflies in their stomach’ as excitement. Finally, remember to keep things in perspective; no school test or competition is a matter of life or death.

Breathe Right: In order to calm down, slow down your breathing. The most basic relaxation-breathing instructions are contained in the
number sequence 2-4-6. Here’s how it goes. Breathe in through your nose to the count of two (one-thousand one, one-thousand two); breathe out through your mouth to the count of four (one-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four); then repeat this sequence six times. If you have any medical concerns (for example, asthma) ask your doctor if this ‘relaxation-breathing’ is OK for you.

Choice: Choose to control your study time. Studying is the key to success on tests and assignments. In general, it is better to study a couple hours after school, several days a week, rather than cram several hours into a couple days just before a test or assignment. Cramming is very stressful. Having a regular time and place to study is important. Keep your study area free from noise and distraction.

If necessary, have someone take your calls during your study time so you are not interrupted. Once you develop a good habit of time management, you can apply it to other areas of your life (learning a sport, preparing for a competition).

Use a large calendar planner to write down your assignments or major tests. Keep this calendar visible (put it up on the refrigerator, a bulletin board or the door to your room). Reward yourself for sticking to your daily and weekly study schedule. For a daily reward you might choose to engage in your favorite activity for an hour. If you stick to your weekly schedule, then you might, for example, go to a movie.

You are the future, and the future is in your hands. Using the Fourth R will win you success in any endeavor.


About the Author:
Dr. Rubenzer is a school psychologist and the author of How to Best Handle Stress. He does private testing, SAT prep, and stress management at Triad Counseling and Clinical Services in Greensboro, North Carolina.
Stress lies at the root of almost every health challenge. It contributes to systemic inflammation which can impact our gut and our mood, down regulates our immune system which can contribute to auto immunity and cancer, throws our blood sugar levels out of balance and even impedes our detoxification. Fortunately, natural solutions like essential oils have been shown to support stress relief, without the stressful side effects of many other so called remedies.

**Essential Oils Support Stress Relief**

I don’t know about you, but when I was originally told that I needed to reduce my stress levels, I felt paralyzed.

It was clear that my job, my kids and my lifestyle were stressful, but I had no idea how to shift that stress. I wasn’t about to quit my job as I needed the money to put food on the table.

As stressful as my children could be, I didn’t want to sacrifice one minute with them. I was honestly overwhelmed and paralyzed.

I was told I had to reduce my stress to improve my health, but I had no idea where to start or what to do.

So I drew on the one skill that I knew would never fail me. My ability to research. I was a journalist in a former life and a really good one. Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I approach the challenge as if I am writing an article. I get all my facts, lay them out and it helps me problem solve as I write. This is often the inspiration for my blog posts as well.

I knew that if I could clearly understand how stress works in the body, I could then map out a clear plan for reducing it that would not require drastic life changes like quitting my job or abandoning my children.
So What is Stress?
Stress is a process in which mental (psychological), physical, natural processes of the body (physiological), environmental and/or emotional demands strain our systems and our adaptive capacity.

We often think of stress in terms of psychological challenges, like a stressful job, relationship or situation. While those are clearly stressful to the body, they are not the only source of stress.

Physical stressors like an injury, scars, a structural misalignment or chronic inflammation can be stressful for the system. Physiological stressors could include low-level infections, sensitivities to foods like gluten or dairy, blood sugar imbalances, vitamin or mineral deficiencies, imbalances in your gut flora or a leaky gut.

Similarly, environmental stressors like mold, food additives, preservatives, pesticides, sugar, fluoride, even EMFs or chemicals in the home like cleaning or skin care products.

But the most interesting, and in my opinion, not widely discussed contributor to stress is the emotional stress. The repetitive thought patterns that arise when feelings of anger, fear, grief and others are present and unresolved.

We create anticipatory stress through our thought patterns and the body cannot differentiate between actual physical stress and emotional or anticipatory stress, like thinking about a potential stressor that could occur in some imaginary future. In other words, the body mobilizes a stress-response in response to thoughts of fear, anger, grief or in response to thought patterns of guilt, jealousy, or feelings like lack of control, poor boundaries, self-abuse, shame, humiliation, unworthiness, betrayal, shock or trauma.

How Essential Oils Can Support the Body in Stress
Understanding what actually triggers a stress response gave me the tools to help reduce it.

For example, nipping the thoughts that stir a stress response in the bud can help avoid it altogether. Essential oils are uniquely suited to help us address, transform and clear negative emotions and thought patterns.

Our sense of smell, which is part of our olfactory system, is one of the most powerful channels into the body. In fact, our sense of smell is estimated to be 10,000 times more acute than our other senses. Research has shown that scents can travel faster to the brain than other senses like sight or sound. Perhaps for that reason, inhalation can be the most direct and effective method for using essential oils. The entire process from the initial inhalation of an essential oil to a corresponding response in the body can happen in a matter of seconds.

When we inhale essential oils through the nose, the odor molecules trigger receptor sites in our mucous membrane, which then sends the odor information on to the olfactory bulb at the base of the brain. I find it interesting that it is not actually the essential oil itself that is sent to the
triggering emotions or memories. For me, the mere smell of mothballs transports me back in time to my grandparent’s apartment in Brooklyn, triggering a multi-sensory memory including both the visuals and the emotions that I experienced during our annual visits.

As you may know, the limbic system serves as the control center in the brain for emotions and feelings, along with hunger, thirst and sex drive. This helps explain how scent can influence appetite and sexual attraction. It also impacts long-term memory through our hippocampus which stores our memories. The hippocampus is the area of the brain at play during those powerful experiences of smell.

This powerful emotional reaction in the limbic system is triggered by nerve impulses which in turn trigger other areas of the brain that are responsible for secreting hormones, neurotransmitters and regulating body functions. For example, the pituitary gland releases endorphins, which can help alleviate pain and promote a sense of well-being.

The theory of how this works centers on the idea that essential oils can stimulate or sedate the brain to promote or inhibit the production and release of various neurotransmitters which then impact the nervous system.

Because smells can bypass the thought center of the thalamus and connect directly to the emotional center of the brain, known as the amygdala in the limbic system, they can trigger us to react first and think later. All other physical senses are routed through the thalamus, which acts as the switchboard for the brain, passing stimuli onto the cerebral cortex (the conscious thought center) and other parts of the brain.

The amygdala plays a major role in storing and releasing emotional trauma. The easiest way to stimulate this gland is through the sense of smell. In other words – the emotional
brain responds better to smell than it does to words that are read, spoken or heard. Our sense of smell links directly to emotional states and behaviors often stored since childhood.

This makes essential oils especially powerful tools for enabling us to access stored or forgotten memories and suppressed emotions, like anxiety, depression, fear, worry, grief, trauma, anger and self-abuse. Once accessed, we can acknowledge and release them. The word ‘emotion’ includes the word motion, implying that they are supposed to move through us and be released. Negative emotions that we hold onto can contribute to health problems.

As you may recall, emotions and thought patterns can trigger an ongoing stress response in the body (since our stress response cannot differentiate between physical or emotional and thought driven stressors) which impedes our ability to heal. Smelling essential oils can be a powerful tool for moving through and releasing these thought patterns. To learn more about different essential oil blends to help release emotions, click here https://vibrantblueoils.com/introducing-emotion-balance-blends/.

**Essential Oils as Tools to Relieve Stress**

Armed with this knowledge that I could use essential oils to help balance my stress, and not need to abandon my job or my children, I incorporated several emotional blends (my personal favorites are Liver Support™ for my anger and Small Intestine Support™ for my boundaries), along with:

**Parasympathetic™:** The first line of defense against stress is known as the ‘fight or flight’ response triggered by the sympathetic nervous system. We are designed to switch into this sympathetic state, flee from danger, then drop back into the balanced parasympathetic rest and digest’ state where we can rest, repair and heal. To help stimulate the Parasympathetic response, apply Vibrant Blue Oils Parasympathetic™ blend to the vagal nerve (behind the earlobe on the mastoid bone). For more aggressive vagal stimulation, you can also apply at the base of the skull (where you feel a small indent). Apply before meals to optimize digestion and up to 6 times daily to help reset the body into the Parasympathetic state.
Chronic and prolonged stress can damage the hypothalamus’s ability to receive clear messages from the body which then impacts all outgoing endocrine and neural signals. Applying Vibrant Blue Oils Hypothalamus™ blend over the third eye may help reset the natural ability of the hypothalamus to send and receive clear messages to and from the body.

**About the Author**

Jodi Sternoff Cohen is a bestselling author, award-winning journalist, and founder of Vibrant Blue Oils, where she has combined her training in nutritional therapy and aromatherapy to create unique proprietary blends of organic and wild-crafted essential oils that helped her heal her own anxiety, insomnia, and autoimmunity.

Her #1 bestselling book *Healing with Essential Oils* has been widely praised as one of the most well-researched consumer books in years. In it, Jodi synthesizes decades of leading scientific research to save you from years you might have spent researching your health issues, and gives you the knowledge and tools to ‘take action’ immediately.


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**Adrenal™**

The adrenal glands help determine and regulate the body’s stress response by secreting hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Prolonged periods of stress can deplete our reserves of these hormones and exhaust the adrenal glands. Applying Vibrant Blue Oils Adrenal™ blend over the adrenal glands (back of the body, one fist up from the 12th rib), may help to increase the body’s ability to adapt to stress and maintain healthy adrenal function.

**Hypothalamus™**

The limbic lobe can also directly activate the hypothalamus – a pearl size region of the brain often referred to as the ‘master gland’ which acts as the hormonal control center for neural and hormonal messages received from/sent to the body and plays a key role in the body’s stress response. The hypothalamus releases hormones that can affect everything from sex drive to energy levels. The production of growth hormones, sex hormones, thyroid hormones, and neurotransmitters such as serotonin, are all governed by the hypothalamus. It is constantly reading blood hormone levels, and adjusting resulting signals sent to the body to maintain internal balance (homeostasis).


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Simple and Natural Stress Relievers

By Elizabeth Scott, M.S.

There are many effective ways to manage stress, but sometimes the simplest strategies are the best. Keeping things simple and focusing on activities you can work into your daily life can help you to save effort and money as you increase your resilience to the stress of daily life. The following are five simple stress relievers to take advantage of in your life.

Try Aromatherapy: Aromatherapy provides a simple and effective way to minimize stress passively: just create a soothing environment with aromatherapy and you can feel less stressed without making much of an effort beyond that. This is a great asset to have when you’re exhausted, busy, or just want to feel less stressed in minutes with very little effort on your part. Studies have found that certain scents bring specific benefits: peppermint can help you to feel more mentally sharp and even enable you to perform better on mental tests while lavender can help you to sleep more easily and soundly and feel more relaxed. Using a diffuser or even a scented candle can really pay off.

Use Positive Affirmations: Positive affirmations are an easy way to boost your confidence, stay focused, and relieve stress. It’s true that repeating these simple mantras to yourself really can minimize stress and boost resilience as you remind yourself of your strengths, remain mindful of your personal resources, or even stop yourself from catastrophizing or jumping to worst-case scenarios. Positive affirmations have been linked with greater academic performance, better problem-solving, and reduced psychological stress, among other things. The key, according to research, is to focus on the best of what you know is true rather than creating affirmations that state what you wish were true but don’t really believe. For example, if you state to yourself, “Today, I am performing at my best,” or; “Today, I appreciate all that I have,” or; “Today I operate from a place of strength,” these are all affirmations that you can believably create for yourself. If you use affirmations like, “I am the best player on this team,” or; “I never stress under pressure,” (if you are
Indeed someone who has to fight to keep from stressing under pressure), your unconscious mind may step in and add doubt to your affirmations. This can weaken their effectiveness or even cause them to backfire. However, by creating affirmations that highlight your strengths and remind you of what you can do, you can create a mental habit that can transform your life one day at a time and help you to relieve stress in the process.

Sip a Cup of Tea: The thought of sitting in a quiet room and sipping a cup of tea may sound relaxing, but when people think about effective, science-backed stress relief strategies, tea isn’t always the first one that comes to mind. Perhaps it should make the list, however. British researchers conducted a double-blind, randomized study with seventy-five men who were either given black tea or a placebo for six weeks. Results showed that drinking black tea was associated with significant benefits over the placebo including greater relaxation and lower post-stress cortisol levels. Combining tea with mindfulness or positive visualizations is a great, all-natural way to minimize your stress and a fun daily ritual to have.

Work Music Into More of Your Life: Listening to music is another one of those extremely user-friendly stress relievers that can help you to passively minimize your experience of stress without putting significant effort into it. In addition to minimizing stress, music has been found to be effective in a wide range of benefits including increasing energy and running speed, elevating mood (especially while driving), improving health, and reducing feelings of depression. Listening to soothing music while you eat can actually help you to eat less and digest more easily. Putting on uplifting music can boost your mood and increase your overall feelings of wellbeing. Listening to music with lyrics that inspire us can be a way of setting affirmations to song. Some studies have even found a link between music and increases in IQ. Most of us listened to music a lot as teens, but we may forget that we can work music into our daily lives more; we can listen to music in the shower while we get ready in the morning, during the daily commute, while cleaning, exercising, and drifting off to sleep. And studies have found that the type of music you listen to doesn’t matter as much as whether you enjoy it, so put on your favorite tunes and let the stress melt away.
Get Your Daily Dose of Laughter:
Having a good laugh is a known way to release tension, but many people wait for the humor to strike them rather than taking specific steps to get more laughter into their lives. Because laughing is associated with lowered levels of stress, increased immunity, cardiac health and even better abs, there are many great reasons to take steps to get more laughs into your life. You can hang out with your funny friends more, listen to podcasts and watch videos that make you laugh, make light of the stresses in life when you can, and watch funny movies. When you’re with your friends, make it a point to share some of your funnier memories, and when you’re by yourself, recall and savor your favorite laughs. You’ll be glad you did.

About the Author
Elizabeth Scott is the author of 8 Keys to Stress Management, part of W. W. Norton’s 8 Keys to Wellness series. She has written about stress management and positive psychology for 13 years.

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