

4 Steps to Restful Living

An AdventHealth
Discovery Guide



Stress impacts not just one area of our body but many at the same time. Our body is like a mobile hanging over a crib. Each part is separate, hanging from one of many wires. But here's the thing: if you touch one part, everything else is affected. One part moves, they all move. The entire mobile is completely interactive. That's what makes it unique.

When we feel stress, we feel it throughout our body. It cannot affect our neck or shoulders without also rippling throughout other elements of our biology. Therefore, if we are to find true rest, the antidote to stress, we must consider methods that have a broad influence. They must give systemic relief.

Embracing simplicity, deep breathing, contemplation, and relaxation will lead us to a more whole and restful way of living. And reduce our stress. You can make them an integral part of your lifelong journey toward optimal health.

1. Embracing Simplicity

The daily lives of most Americans are jammed with busyness. We are overcommitted and over-scheduled. We lack time to rest, unwind, reflect, and renew. We lack space for ourselves.

Here are some keys to simplicity that many have found helpful:

Do nothing. Society says that our worth is determined by our productivity, how much we get done. Christianity says our worth is determined very differently. It is a gift from a loving God who values us regardless of how much we make or earn. One of the best ways to say a resounding “no” to society’s perspective is to do absolutely nothing.

Start by doing nothing at home. Feet up, head back, arms relaxed by your side. Just put your body and thoughts in neutral.

Extend out from there to doing nothing while you wait in line at the market. No worrying about the cost of what’s in your basket. No reading magazines. No trying to remember what you forgot. Next, do nothing while you drive except drive. No radio, CDs, texting, calling, applying make-up, or multi-tasking. Simply doing nothing is like poking a finger in the eye of our production-crazed world.

Schedule periods of “nothing” in your week and stick to them. Legendary baseball pitcher, Satchel Page, observed, “Sometimes you need to sit and think. Sometimes you need to just sit.”¹



Cut back on TV watching. It's possible to become addicted to watching the morning and evening news. Simplicity and freedom dictate breaking away from all addictions. What do we think we'll miss if we don't watch? News reporters typically scan several counties each day to tell us all about the stupidest, meanest, laziest, weirdest people they can find. Once that list is exhausted, they move on to fires and natural disasters. We can ask ourselves; do we feel more rested after the thirty-minute broadcast is over?

Spend less than you earn and control credit cards. Financial simplicity is about prioritizing and spending according to our values. Years ago, Kim Johnson and his wife ran up a shocking \$7,000 balance on their credit cards. After working very hard to pay off that huge amount, they determined they would only use a credit card for trips and to not allow balances to carry over from one month to the next. Ken said, "The mental freedom and rest we have experienced since those dreadful days of debt is priceless. If you can't control credit cards, cut them up."

Reject materialism. We are bombarded with sales pitches to purchase items we don't really need. TV commercials make you feel like a Neanderthal if you don't have the latest whatever. And how could you even think about going outside in an outfit that makes the wrong

fashion statement. Scandalous! The less we expose ourselves to commercial propaganda the better. Simplicity tells us to enjoy what Graham Hill calls "the luxury of less."² Jesus told us clearly, "*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions*" (Luke 12:15, NIV). Richard Foster counsels, "The inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions."³

Take a regular vacation from technology. Smart phones and other wonders of technology have revolutionized communication in amazing ways. We have access to the world at our fingertips. As valuable as these tools are, we can become mesmerized by the virtual world on our smart phones or computers.

Life is becoming techno-centered rather than people- and real-life centered. Too many individuals substitute virtual relationships for face-to-face conversations. So, monitor how technology might be compromising your quest for simplicity. Observe its influence and be willing to take vacations from gadgets in order to keep perspective and balance. Give the electronics a rest periodically in order to optimize your rest of mind and soul.



Slow down. Take a deep breath and schedule less in your day. Walk and talk slower. Eat a lot slower. Every time we gulp our food in order to get to the next appointment or activity, we reinforce our adherence to the hectic, mindless rat race that surrounds us. Eating slowly, taking small bites, chewing deliberately, and savoring the smells and tastes builds a bulwark, brick by gastro-intestinal brick, against society's crazy pace. It is a huge vote for sanity and relishing life's pleasures.

Consider downsizing. Rather than working your head off to maintain your current lifestyle, consider taking your activities and possessions down a notch or two. Smaller house? Smaller car? Smaller TV? Smaller wardrobe? Fewer trips to the golf course? Fewer times eating out? Simpler vacations?

Take delight in simple things. Resist the need to experience large, loud, manufactured events in order to be fulfilled. Rediscover the marvels of nature or the pleasure of family games.

Set boundaries. Make a list of what's most important to you and then set firm boundaries to protect what's on it. It is our duty to say "no" when our limits are being encroached upon.

Consider this list of priorities:

- a. Relationship with God and spiritual growth
- b. Emotional energy. When our emotional reserves are depleted or overdrawn, everything else in life is compromised. We should never have to apologize for choices that keep us emotionally healthy.
- c. Mental breaks and stimulation
- d. Physical rest and exercise
- e. Family time
- f. Work
- g. Fun and play

Always ask, "Will this simplify my life or complicate it further?" John Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, sums up well the spirit of simple living, "Voluntary simplicity means going fewer places in one day rather than more, seeing less so I can see more, doing less so I can do more, acquiring less so I can have more."⁴

The apostle Paul also gives us some excellent counsel on having an inner attitude of simplicity when he writes, "*I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little*" (Phil. 4:11-12, *The Message*).



2. Deep Breathing

Each of your lungs is like an upside-down tree with lots of branches called bronchi and tiny leaves called alveoli. When you suck in air, the alveoli expand like tiny balloons. Each balloon is surrounded by very small blood vessels, called capillaries, which draw in oxygen and dump off carbon-dioxide. Every red blood cell travels through the lungs on every trip around the body, making this life-giving oxygen/carbon dioxide exchange.^{5,6}

Breathing is powered in part by a muscle – the diaphragm – that separates the chest from the abdominal cavity. When you inhale, the diaphragm is flexing downward pushing your abdomen out and expanding the chest. When the diaphragm relaxes it moves upward expelling the carbon dioxide, opening room for the next inhalation.⁷

Stress tenses up the diaphragm and interferes with its natural movement, limiting its range. To compensate, we “chest breathe,” using our chest and shoulder muscles to expand the rib cage and draw in air. This produces a much shallower, inefficient breath that actually increases tension.⁸

The antidote is a period of deep breathing, which re-establishes a healthy pattern. You can do deep breathing while lying down, sitting, or standing. If you are sitting or standing, keep your back straight and head erect.



Here's what one session of deep breathing would involve:

- ◆ Become aware of your breathing, something we normally take for granted.
- ◆ Breathe slowly and deeply in and out through your nostrils rather than your mouth. This serves to cleanse the air somewhat and adds warmth and moisture.⁹
- ◆ Notice what is happening with your chest and stomach. On each inhalation your stomach should rise first and then your chest. For the exhalation, the chest should come down first and the stomach last. This gets your diaphragm fully involved. It may take some practice. You can rest one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest to make the movement more conspicuous.
- ◆ Count each inhalation and exhalation up to ten. For example, inhale (one), exhale (two), inhale (three), exhale (four), etc. If you lose count, start again at one. It may be helpful to maintain the count for the full breath such as “o-o-o-n-n-e” for the inhalation and “t-w-o-o-o” for the exhalation.¹⁰
- ◆ Repeat several times a day, especially when stressed. It will be a gift to every part of your mind and body. We usually focus primarily on the inhalation as we take in oxygen from the atmosphere. To increase your awareness of your breathing, focus instead on the exhalation. Plants thrive on carbon dioxide, so picture yourself as doing your part to help the grass and trees in your backyard grow! At times make the exhalation even longer than the inhalation to force out more carbon dioxide and make room for an even larger draft of oxygen.¹¹



3. Progressive Relaxation

Stress typically causes a tensing of the muscles. You can release that tension by progressively tightening your muscles beyond normal and then relaxing them, one muscle group at a time.

The following exercise should be done for at least five to ten minutes each day, especially when subjected to stress:¹²

- ◆ Sit or lie down comfortably with your arms at your sides.
- ◆ Do at least one cycle of deep breathing.
- ◆ Tighten your fists and arms. Hold for seven seconds and release. Let your arms dangle. Shake them out.
- ◆ After ten seconds, move on to the next body part. Sequentially tighten and relax the following, one at a time: forehead, eyes, jaw and neck, shoulders and chest, stomach, your sit muscles, right leg and foot (extend outward), left leg and foot. Hold each for seven seconds, release, then wait ten seconds.
- ◆ Is there any tension left? If so, repeat for that body part. You can use this technique any time of the day. As you become more adept, you can vary the exercise by doing it a bit more quickly such as holding for five seconds and releasing for five.



4. Contemplation

Contemplation is defined by The American Heritage Dictionary as, “To ponder or consider thoughtfully.”¹³ One of the most helpful ways to do that is to make time on a regular basis for a period of quiet reflection.

Focused contemplation requires commitment, but it is relatively easy to do. It can take as little as five to ten minutes a day, but can, of course, be longer. It is usually done while sitting comfortably, with good posture, on a chair or cushion away from distractions as much as possible. Early morning is often the best time.

The following is a typical contemplation process, but there are variations.

Calm yourself. Progressive relaxation works very well in this regard.

Be fully present in the moment. Tune your awareness in to what is happening now. The goal here is to draw the mind away from distracting thoughts about the past or the future, be they positive or negative. A helpful way to do that is to pay careful attention to your breathing. Take one or two minutes to do some deep breathing here. It relaxes you, focuses your attention, and prepares your mind for calm reflection.

Choose the content of your contemplation. Many people find the Bible to be a particularly fruitful source for focusing their thoughts. Its grand themes and practical wisdom are ideal for capturing our attention and renewing our spirit.



The Scriptures themselves provide guidance regarding some of the spiritual themes you might choose, underlined in the following examples:

“Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love” (Ps. 48:9, NIV).

“I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways” (Ps. 119:15, NIV).

“Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds” (Ps. 119:27, NIV).

“My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises” (Ps. 119:148, NIV).

If the Scripture verse you chose is rather long, take a small portion of it for contemplation such as, *My peace I give to you (John 14:27);*

Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3); Don't be afraid (John 6:20); You are worth more than many sparrows (Luke 12:7), etc. You can also summarize the verse into a brief phrase and personalize it such as, Jesus is my friend (see Luke 5:20).

You are not studying so much as simply reflecting. The goal is not scholarly analysis but absorption. Mentally repeat the verse or your paraphrase and let its meaning soak into your thoughts. Listen for any impressions or applications that the Holy Spirit may present. You can also try to imagine a scene from Scripture. Make it come alive. Imagine that you are an onsite observer. Call upon your senses to recreate the event. What is there to see, hear, feel, smell, and taste? You can also become one of the characters in the scene and see it through their eyes.



Bring your thoughts back into focus. The Lord counsels us in Scripture, *“Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10, NKJV)*. The biggest challenge is the “be still” part. Our minds are usually so preoccupied with the busyness of the day that it can be hard for them to calm down and zero in on a particular subject. That requires patience and gentle retraining.

You can count on your mind meandering all over the place, especially at first. It is important not to react to these distractions or to judge them in any way.¹⁴ Let them simply float in and out of your mind like the clouds passing overhead. Gently but firmly bring your thoughts back to the content you have chosen.

Our minds are trained by life to be scattered multitaskers, so be patient with yourself. Some days it will be harder to rein your thoughts in than others. Gradually it should get easier as your mind catches on. If a particular thought won't go away, take a moment, write it down, and then focus back on your breathing first and then your content.

It is the distracting thoughts that bombard us throughout the day that cause so many of our negative feelings. Putting these life-sapping

thoughts aside through contemplation, even for just five to ten minutes a day, allows our minds to rest and heal, and that healing will eventually spill over to affect our entire outlook and overall well-being.

Jesus set an example for us when he called a time out in his ministry so he and his disciples could recoup mentally and physically.

“And He said to them, ‘Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.’ For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves” (Mark 6:31-21, NKJV).

We are holistic beings, and it is essential that we also regularly call a time out in our busy lives to deepen our shallow breathing, relax our tense muscles, and lift our harried minds above the stresses of the day by contemplating spiritual themes.

Rest, in all its various forms, is an essential element of abundant living. It balances the hectic pace of modern life and provides the mental, physical, and spiritual renewal we need in order to thrive.



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