



FOUR EFFECTIVE BEDTIME STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING STRESS

Stress affects half of all Americans, with women, younger adults, and people with lower incomes reporting the highest levels, according to the 2014 Stress in America survey by the American Psychological Association. Additionally, 42% of adults don't think they are effectively managing their stress, and 40% say they lie awake at night because of stress.

Stress is one of the top contributors to insomnia, which impacts around 30% of US adults at any given time. If you've experienced a nerve-wracked night, it's not too hard to understand why: high levels of stress makes it hard to mentally wind down, and it makes it difficult to physically relax before and during sleep as well.



The relationship between stress and sleep works both ways, too. Missing out on rest compounds stress and affects physical and mental health over time, which can create a cycle that exacerbates both problems. Recently, a study published in the journal *Sleep* found that how a person responds to stress may impact the development of insomnia. Having a few relaxation techniques in your mental toolkit can be helpful for those times when stress rears its head and keeps you up. Here are four practices you can explore if you need help getting some quality shut-eye.

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Mindfulness meditation involves taking time to be aware of your physical body and thoughts and accepting rather than judging those thoughts and feelings. There are a variety of health benefits associated with mindfulness, and one of those is improved sleep. One 2015 study found that people in a mindfulness training program improved on sleep, depression, and fatigue measures over six weeks, compared to people in a sleep hygiene education program.

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced independently. The steps are simple: take a seat, pay attention to the breath, and when your attention wanders, return. Following a guided meditation can also be helpful for beginners.

If you prefer instructor-led learning, several universities and therapists provide mindfulness training programs based on the practice of meditation and mind-body awareness, aimed at reducing stress or for specific concerns like insomnia. (Find more helpful resources [here](#).)



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DEEP BREATHING

Since breathing is typically an autonomic function, it's easy to overlook its role in relaxation. However, considerable evidence shows that depth and pace of breathing can affect things like heart rate and blood pressure. Certain breathing techniques involving deeper, slower breaths can be practiced for inducing relaxation.

- + **Diaphragmatic Breathing:** This technique is easy to try: sitting or lying down, inhale through your nose, counting to ten and focusing on drawing breath from your abdomen rather than your chest. Exhale slowly through your nose at the same pace, counting to ten. Complete the cycle five to ten times, repeating as often as needed. Research has found that even a single session of deep, slow breathing can reduce blood pressure and heart rate.
- + **4-7-8 Breath:** This technique was developed for inducing sleep and relaxation by Andrew Weil, based in yoga breathing principles. To try it: place the tip of your tongue behind your upper teeth. Exhale fully through your mouth, making a “whooshing” sound. Close your mouth, and inhale through your nose to a count of four. Hold your breathe for a count of seven. Exhale through your mouth making the whoosh sound for a count of eight. Repeat three more times.

LISTEN TO MUSIC

Have you ever noticed how certain songs can make you feel relaxed? It's not just in your head—music really can help you calm down and fight stress. Music-based therapy is a professional clinical practice involving trained therapists, backed by significant research.

Music relaxation techniques have been shown to reduce stress and pain as well as insomnia symptoms. Listening to soothing music (Pachabel's Canon in D in one study) may have a preventative effect against stress, and according to research, music may even be more effective the progressive muscle relaxation at anxiety and insomnia relief. A study of college students found that listening to classical music at night improved sleep and decreased depression compared to either audiobooks or nothing.

When choosing music relax to at home, it's best to pick instrumentals with a calming pace, including classical, light jazz, and stringed tunes as well as nature soundtracks, depending on what you personally find most appealing. Lay back, turn out the lights, and focus on the melody and beat of the music.

MINDFUL MOVEMENT

Meditative movements like those found in yoga and tai chi can be helpful way to reduce stress. A recent review published in September looked at several studies involving meditative movement interventions, finding that these practices improved sleep. Type was not important, but practicing three days a week or more was.

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese tradition combining series of slow, focused movements with deep breathing. It's a very low impact form of exercise requiring no equipment, suitable for doing alone or in a group. Another 2015 research review found small but consistent evidence that tai chi helps subjective sleep quality for older adults. Follow along with a guided video or attend a class in your area.



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Yoga has been studied as an insomnia intervention, for cancer survivors, in elderly individuals, and in pregnant women, showing positive results. Typically the studies involve regular daytime practices, though yoga can also be utilized at night for relaxation, with poses like forward bends, child's pose, legs-up-the-wall and savasana for gentle stretching and stress relief. Many yoga resources are available free online, and classes are also abundant in most cities.

Since relaxation can be an individual thing, testing out different programs and even different instructors can be helpful. But remember, as with most strategies, results can take time to see and most studies find benefits over a span of several weeks to months.

Finding a healthy stress relief method that works for you and practicing it regularly can make a significant difference when life throws you curveballs. Coping strategies that help you process stress and induce relaxation offer a positive way to manage problems and work to prevent its negative effects, including insomnia.

Source: Mindful