

A woman with long brown hair is lying on her back on a light-colored leather sofa. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans with a tear at the knee. Her hands are behind her head, and she is looking up towards the ceiling with a relaxed expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# 5 Ways to **Relieve** STRESS

*Susan Blackburn*

# 5 Ways to Relieve Stress

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## About the Author



Susan Blackburn, M.A., C.Psych. is a Registered Psychologist providing goal-oriented therapy to adult, couple, executive, entrepreneurial and professional clients in Ontario, Canada to enhance their relationships and the quality of their lives.

She is a published Author and guest Relationship Expert on radio and television. Susan's approach to therapy offers clients effective tools and strategies to overcome relationship challenges, communication issues, low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, stress, anxiety, depression, and other concerns.

Her solution focused style of therapy offers people the skills to increase happiness, build confidence, find life balance, communicate assertively, and create fulfilling relationships by coping in new ways, curating a high level of self care, and focusing on the positive.

Susan is the owner of Susan Blackburn Psychology a boutique therapy private practice located at Yonge and Eglinton in midtown Toronto, serving the local neighbourhood, all of Toronto, the GTA and across Ontario using virtual sessions to work with her clients from the comfort of their own home or office.

## Author's Note



There's little doubt that we're living in an interesting time. Technological advances are taking place at record speed, and most of us, 8.1 billion of us globally at the time of writing and counting, are regularly connected to one another online, around the world at any given moment.

As a society, we've found a way to stay in touch at every hour of the day, with all of the information we desire at our fingertips. Although we're particularly innovative on the one hand, on the other, more of us are struggling with our mental health than ever before.

It's debatable whether the stressful, anxious, and sometimes depressive symptoms we experience in such large numbers are because there are more of us on the planet, whether people are simply more open to discussion and admission surrounding such topics or if there's something about modern living that makes us susceptible to these challenges.

What we do know is that although it's decreasing, there is still a stigma around mental health. And, regardless of whether the sheer numbers and percentages are increasing or not, the levels of stress, and the mental and emotional wellbeing of far too many people is not nearly as good as it should be.

If you are one of these people, it is my hope that you will find some solace, insight, and hope within the pages of this book.

The information provided here is generic and not meant to replace formal medical or psychological treatment. As such, individuals with medical concerns should consult their physicians about the appropriateness of following any of the recommendations offered in this guide.

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# Stress

## What is Stress?

Stress is the feeling of being under too much pressure. It's an uncomfortable emotional, mental, and physical reaction activated by your brain's fight, flight or freeze response when you perceive that distressing events exceed your ability to cope.

In this state of stress your brain shuts down your ability to think clearly, and you are pushed out of your *window of tolerance*, which is the zone where you are able to function effectively and handle everyday activities and unexpected situations with ease.

Everyone's stress threshold or window of tolerance is different based on your life experiences and the current stressors in your life. If you frequently operate outside of your *window of tolerance*, this level of stress can affect your physical health and rewire your brain leaving you open to mental health concerns like depression and anxiety.

All stress isn't bad though. It's when stress becomes too high, for too long that it starts to take a toll. You need some stress in your life to function optimally, but not too much. Based on the *Goldilocks* principle of stress, both too little and too much stress is problematic. You need just the right amount of stress to keep you focused and engaged with life.

## What are the Symptoms of Stress?

In addition to mental, behavioral, and emotional symptoms, stress also creates physical symptoms because the stress response puts a strain on your digestive, circulatory, and respiratory systems and suppresses your immune system.

Symptoms of stress can vary widely, with some of the more common symptoms being:

- Ψ Nervous behaviors such as nail biting, hair pulling, pacing or fidgeting
- Ψ Procrastination and avoidance
- Ψ Increased drinking, drugs, smoking, vaping, and binge eating
- Ψ Forgetfulness and lack of organization
- Ψ Inability to focus or concentrate
- Ψ Poor judgment and decision making ability
- Ψ Pessimism and seeing the glass half full
- Ψ Frustration, agitation, or moodiness
- Ψ Feeling out of control and overwhelmed
- Ψ Trouble relaxing and calming your mind
- Ψ Feeling worthless, lonely, and bad about yourself
- Ψ Headaches and migraines
- Ψ Hair breakage and hair loss
- Ψ Frequent colds, flus, and other infections
- Ψ Upset stomach and digestive issues
- Ψ Clenched jaw and teeth grinding

## Quick Facts about Stress

- Ψ Research shows that women are more likely to experience physical symptoms of stress and men are more likely to escape from stress by repressing or compartmentalizing it
- Ψ The stress response mobilizes you to take action, but if you are often unable to take action in a way that brings you relief, your nervous system can get stuck in the 'on' position potentially compromising your health over time
- Ψ It increases your risk for Type 2 diabetes
- Ψ Stress can be managed by seeking support from others, exercising, relaxing, deep breathing, laughing, taking breaks and vacations, and learning new ways of coping
- Ψ Studies have found that forgiveness disrupts the link between stress and mental health
- Ψ Making stress relief a priority benefits your health and happiness exponentially

## Factors that Increase the Risk of Having Stress

- Ψ Inadequate social support from family, friends, and community
- Ψ Reliance on recreational drugs, pain medication, alcohol, tobacco, and unhealthy food
- Ψ Having an excessive number of commitments and responsibilities

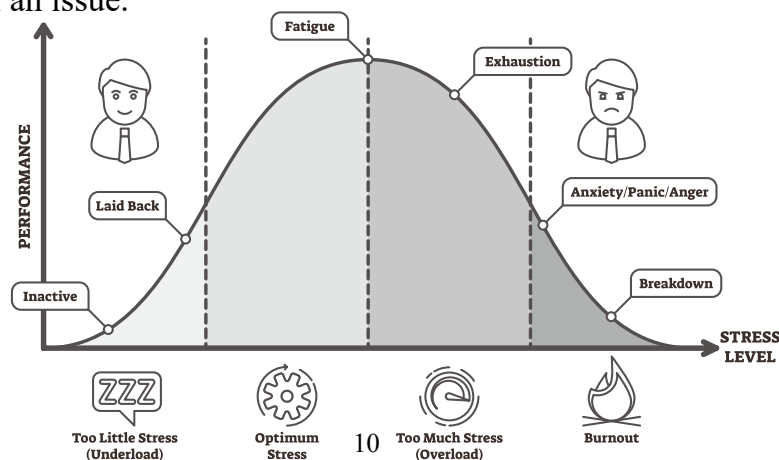
## Treatment for Stress

Learning to recognize your symptoms of stress as early as possible is key.

Getting more sleep, relaxing, and taking breaks, eating a more balanced and nutritious diet, reducing your personal and professional commitments, and engaging in regular exercise may be enough to turn things around if you're experiencing symptoms of stress.

If making these lifestyle changes doesn't help, explore the possibility of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness meditation or other helpful therapies with your family doctor or therapist to manage your stress and any associated mental health concerns.

This *stress curve info graphic* shows where stress is helpful versus where it becomes increasingly more of an issue.



# *5* Quick Tips to Relieve Stress

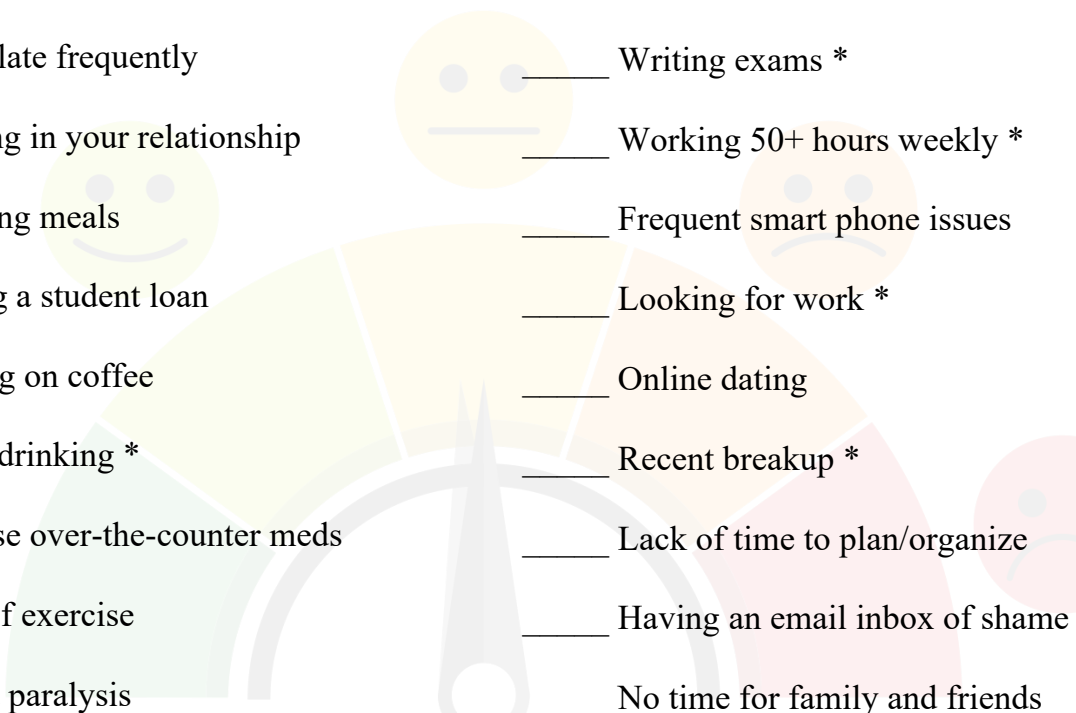
## Monitor Your Stress Levels

Tracking your stress levels can alert you far in advance of you being at risk, giving you the opportunity to be more mindful and focus your efforts on bringing your stress down.

A simple checklist will help you to recognize patterns, zero in on issues and be proactive.

Becoming aware of your stress symptoms as early as possible is very important.

The higher up on the scale you score, the greater your need is to make daily relaxation and other activities that promote a healthy overall lifestyle a priority.

A background graphic of a semi-circular gauge with a needle pointing to the 12 o'clock position. The gauge is divided into four colored segments: green (bottom-left, 0-4), yellow (top-left, 5-10), orange (top-right, 11-15), and red (bottom-right, 16-20). Each segment contains a stylized face with a corresponding expression: green has a happy face, yellow has a neutral face, orange has a sad face, and red has a very sad face.

_____ Poor sleep	_____ Long commute in heavy traffic
_____ Being late frequently	_____ Writing exams *
_____ Arguing in your relationship	_____ Working 50+ hours weekly *
_____ Skipping meals	_____ Frequent smart phone issues
_____ Having a student loan	_____ Looking for work *
_____ Relying on coffee	_____ Online dating
_____ Binge drinking *	_____ Recent breakup *
_____ Overuse over-the-counter meds	_____ Lack of time to plan/organize
_____ Lack of exercise	_____ Having an email inbox of shame
_____ Errand paralysis	_____ No time for family and friends

**1-4 items:** low-moderate risk (higher if any of these includes an asterisk \* above) – take a preventative approach to stress management and minimize stressors

**5-10 items:** moderate to high risk – increase your level of stress management to place you back in the low-moderate category

**11-20 items:** high to very high risk – reduce stressors, prioritize relaxation, get more sleep, focus on exercise and nutrition, connect with others for support – consider reaching out to a physician or therapist for professional help

## Morning Routine

Adopt a morning routine that will start your day off on a positive note and fuel your mind and body for healthy and productive interactions for the rest of your day.



Other ideas include:

- Ψ Make your bed
- Ψ Listen to music
- Ψ Reflect on inspirational quotes
- Ψ Do affirmations
- Ψ Go for a run
- Ψ Tai chi
- Ψ Breakfast smoothie
- Ψ Set a positive intention for the day
- Ψ Read a book
- Ψ Listen to a podcast
- Ψ Do deep breathing exercises
- Ψ Leave early
- Ψ Focus on having a great day
- Ψ Random acts of kindness

## Adult Coloring

Adult coloring is an excellent way to relax, take a break, relieve stress and if you love to color it's an opportunity to have some fun. There are several adult coloring pages online, like <http://www.supercoloring.com/sections/coloring-pages> where you can print pages out or even color digitally online.

Adult coloring books can be found easily in a bookstore and/or you can even color this page!



## Complimentary Alternative Therapies

Complimentary Alternative Therapies are health treatments that are non-standard (i.e. alternative to typical approaches) in Western medical and psychological practice, but are complimentary to these practices, often with a more holistic approach.

There are many complimentary, alternative therapies that can help you to relieve stress.

Check with your family physician or naturopathic doctor before implementing any of these alternative therapies.



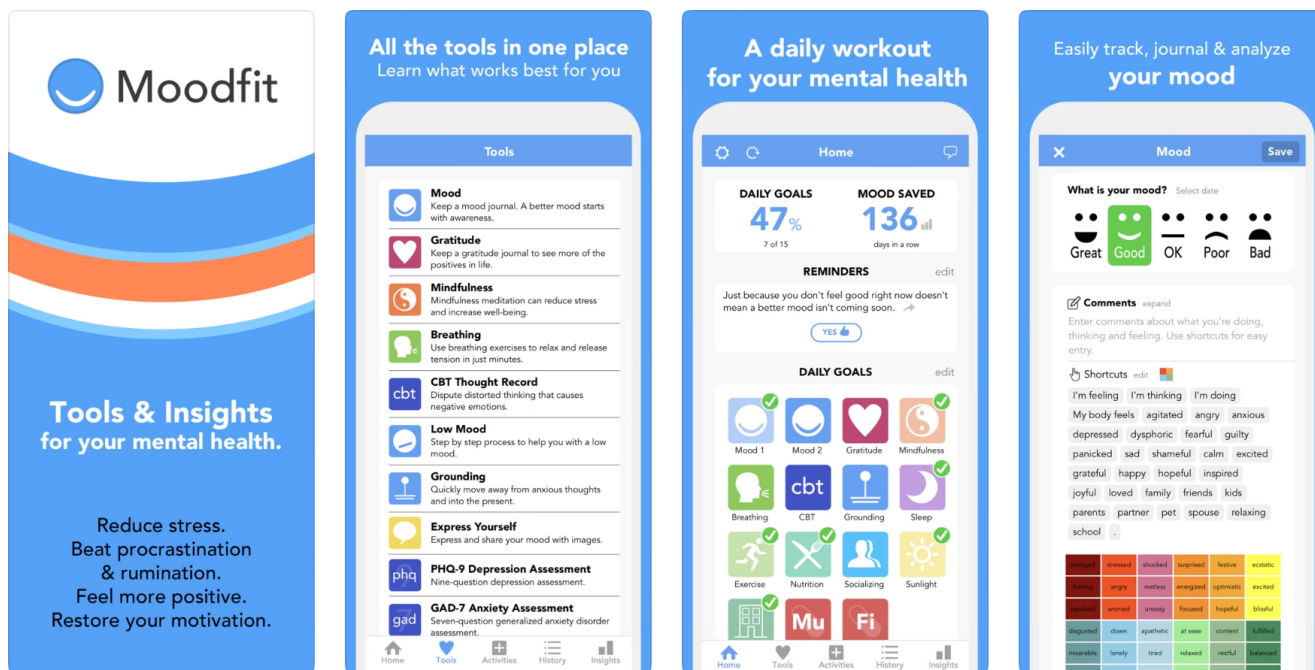
## Stress Relief Apps

There are many outstanding smartphone apps available on both android and apple devices that have been created to reduce stress and promote relaxation.

Moodfit is grounded in science through its use of evidence-based treatments where clinically validated research has shown the practices used within the app to be effective.

Most stress management apps, like Moodfit, can be downloaded for free. After a trial period of using these apps, you will have the option to continue using the free version, upgrade to a premium version or make in-app purchases.

For Moodfit specifically, the breathing section has a free 5-minute long exhale, deep breathing exercise that is proven to activate the sympathetic nervous system and promote relaxation. Other free aspects of Moodfit are the daily mood tracker and the gratitude journal that prompts you to savor everything that you are grateful for.



[Moodfit](#) uses mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) principles such as thought records and meditation to relieve symptoms of stress and allows you to track your mood, health, thoughts, and goals.

## Stress Management Plan



Keep track of your stress relief progress by using this checklist as a baseline to identify where your current level of stress is before implementing your plan.

- Ψ \_\_\_ Nail biting, hair pulling, pacing or fidgeting
- Ψ \_\_\_ Procrastination and avoidance
- Ψ \_\_\_ Increased drinking, drugs, smoking, vaping and binge eating
- Ψ \_\_\_ Forgetfulness and lack of organization
- Ψ \_\_\_ Inability to focus or concentrate
- Ψ \_\_\_ Poor judgment and decision making ability
- Ψ \_\_\_ Pessimism and seeing the glass half full
- Ψ \_\_\_ Frustration, agitation or moodiness
- Ψ \_\_\_ Feeling out of control and overwhelmed
- Ψ \_\_\_ Trouble relaxing and calming your mind
- Ψ \_\_\_ Feeling worthless, lonely and bad about yourself
- Ψ \_\_\_ Headaches and migraines
- Ψ \_\_\_ Hair breakage and hair loss
- Ψ \_\_\_ Frequent colds, flus and other infections
- Ψ \_\_\_ Upset stomach and digestive issues
- Ψ \_\_\_ Clenched jaw and teeth grinding

Once you've completed the checklist above, use a notebook to create and write down your own personal stress management plan.

Start by writing out some of the stress relief suggestions in this guide that appeal to you.

Then, choose 3 things that you can realistically commit to doing as part of your plan. You'll have a better chance of sticking with it if you select things that you like.

For example, you might decide to:

- 1) Wake up earlier every day so that you have time to eat a healthy breakfast
- 2) Find a tai chi video on YouTube and follow along 2-3 times a week
- 3) Get together with friends every Sunday to do some adult coloring

Or, another example could be:

- 1) Decrease your coffee intake by 1 cup (e.g. start having 2 cups daily instead of 3)
- 2) Schedule an appointment with a massage therapist and make it a regular part of your life
- 3) Download Sanvello or another stress relief app to use daily

There are many different combinations you can put together for your list of 3 stress reducing actions. Be creative and come up with something that will suit your schedule and personality.

If you try an activity or set of 3, and it doesn't feel right, try something else until it works.



After using your plan for 14-days, complete the checklist below and compare it to your baseline on the previous page to see if there's been any improvement or if you need to adjust your plan for greater benefit.

- Ψ \_\_\_ Nail biting, hair pulling, pacing or fidgeting
- Ψ \_\_\_ Procrastination and avoidance
- Ψ \_\_\_ Increased drinking, drugs, smoking, vaping and binge eating
- Ψ \_\_\_ Forgetfulness and lack of organization
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- Ψ \_\_\_ Upset stomach and digestive issues
- Ψ \_\_\_ Clenched jaw and teeth grinding

\* Use your notebook to write this checklist out to track your progress past the first 14-days.

Other indicators of progress include waking up in the morning looking forward to the day ahead, being able ease your worries with simple strategies like writing down a plan of action to tackle your concerns, feeling anxious before an important presentation or related event, but feeling happy and relieved when it's over, and no longer dreading the weekend to arrive so that you can put a stop to a stressful week.

Experiencing these positive signs reflects an ideal level of anticipation and recovery from every day stressors, which indicates that the stress in your life is in balance. If not, no worries. As long as you are feeling less stress than before you are making progress. Keep going!



Lastly, the **Stress Scan** app is a helpful tool that tracks stress levels by scientifically analyzing your heart rate to identify stress patterns that you can make changes to.

## Conclusion



To be human is to experience your share of stress, sadness and fear, but also tranquility, happiness, inspiration, and the entire spectrum of emotions both beyond and between.

At times, stress may take you down into the valleys of life when you'd rather be up on the peaks enjoying the view. When you're up, but especially when you're down, be kind and compassionate with yourself, stay in the present, use your coping skills, and trust that this too shall pass.

As I write this, I'm reminded of the importance of being kind and compassionate not only with yourself, but also with others, as a powerful antidote to stress.

Most people are carrying a heavy burden, usually completely unseen. You just never know exactly what someone may be dealing with. This is true for you also. The people around you, even those closest to you, frequently have no clue just how stressed and on edge you may be.

So, when you are struggling and in distress, it is my wish that the simple tools offered here will help you to regain your joie de vivre and peace of mind.

The information provided here is generic and not meant to replace formal medical or psychological treatment. As such, individuals with medical concerns should consult their physicians about the appropriateness of following any of the recommendations offered within these pages.



*“Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest taken between two deep breaths.”*

– Etty Hillesum

Susan Blackburn Psychology

*Effective change strategies to become the happiest person you know.*

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