

Putting your mental health in order

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Experts suggest steps to de-stress and find a more balanced life.

(HealthDay)—Living without stress may seem nearly impossible these days. Technology beckons at all hours for you to read just one more tweet or text. Politics are polarizing. Costs are rising, but salaries not so much.

That makes it all the more vital to find some balance in your life, [mental health](#) experts say.

"We're stuck in a continuing worry cycle by staying glued to the 24-hour news cycle," said Karol Ward, a New York City psychotherapist, author and member of the National Association of Social Workers. "We fear if we're not plugged in, we'll miss something. This leaves us in a constantly adrenalized state," she explained.

"Over time, this causes adrenal fatigue and [sleep disruptions](#), which have a whole spiraling effect as we then caffeinate during the day to try to stay awake," she said. "Constant stress and worry take us out of the natural rhythm of our bodies, and we lose the ability to gauge when we're really tired and need to rest."

Other experts agree. "Stress makes us fatigued and can cause physical complications," said Shawn McClintock, an assistant professor of [psychiatry](#) at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. "Stress leaves you more vulnerable to depression and anxiety. And, it can cause us to age quicker. Stress can also cause difficulty in relationships."

The first step on the path toward getting your mental health in order is to "get some sort of movement," Ward said. "Get out in the sunshine. Walk the dog. Go swimming. Figure out how your body wants to move—don't tell yourself you have to run five miles today."

McClintock added that yoga can be a great way to relieve stress, and he also recommended [paying attention](#) to your diet. "Eat more [fruits and vegetables](#) and things that are good for you like [green tea](#) and yogurt," he said.

Both Ward and McClintock strongly advocated "unplugging" sometimes, too.

"It's important to have time where you turn off that connection," McClintock said. "If you're at the beach, take the Bluetooth out of your ear and *be* with the beach."

To Ward, three things are crucial: calm, clarity and community.

Calm comes from taking a break: "Find pockets in the day to practice

whatever allows you to calm down," she suggested. Take time to exercise. Or, if time is short, she said, five minutes of deep breathing can be very calming. She recommends breathing slowly in and out, and squeezing each finger as you're doing so. "It's about slowing down," she noted, "and catching your breath causes your whole system to slow down."

For clarity, Ward recommended choosing the time of day when you think most clearly and then taking the time to prioritize the things you have to do. She said this should include identifying three things that would help you if you just took them off your to-do list. And, she said, try to remember how you got through stressful times in the past.

McClintock called this "giving yourself a personal timeout." He said to do things you love to do—listen to music, take up a hobby, spend time really talking to a loved one— instead of just going over what needs to be done that day. Journaling can be helpful, too, he said.

Ward also recommended connecting with a community, whether it's your family, friends, church group or even an online community. "Identify who you can get support from for these things that are stressing you and tap into that resource," she said.

If you're having a particularly hard time, perhaps because of a job loss or other financial difficulty, Ward warned not to pretend it's not happening. Instead, "be in reality about what your life is about right now, and share that you're struggling with people who care about you," she said. But also consider whether something needs to change.

"Take time to reevaluate what's going on," Ward said. "Be really honest with yourself, but not critical. For example, the reality is that jobs are short right now, but is there anything I'm doing that might be contributing?"

And, though mental health experts often recommend following your passion and not staying in a job you don't love, Ward said that "there are times when we can follow our passion and there are times we need to stay put, at least for now." So, if you'd been planning on quitting your job in finance to go back to school to get a teaching degree, but your spouse just got laid off, she said you need to consider the mental health consequences.

"If being what you want will create anxiety for you and your family, it may not be the right time," she said. "That doesn't mean it won't happen down the road, just that now isn't the time."

The most important thing to remember, McClintock said, is that "stress will always be around." He suggested making a list of the stress-relieving techniques that you've found helpful so that when you start to feel anxious, you can easily turn to your own list for calming ideas.

More information: Mental Health America has more about [maintaining good mental health](#).

To learn more about achieving balance in your life, read [one woman's story](#).

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