

Stress-busting techniques lead to healthier behaviors

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Learning new ways to manage stress can naturally lead to a healthier lifestyle and greater well-being, new research suggests.

People who developed and practiced strategies for coping with worry and rumination were found to sleep better, drink less alcohol and eat healthier food, analysis of several studies from around the world has shown.

Worry is often concerned with feared future events, while rumination is continuously thinking about stressors encountered in the past. Both are common coping responses to stress.

The research team was aiming to establish whether reducing these responses could improve physical health and health behaviors—actions people take that affect their health in both positive and negative ways, like exercising and healthy eating, or smoking and excessive alcohol intake.

Lead author Dane McCarrick, a postgraduate researcher in Leeds' School of Psychology, said, "This new research provides the first synthesis of experimental evidence testing the most effective methods at reducing worry and rumination within the context of health.

"The review provides fresh evidence for the link between stress and adverse health outcomes and highlights the importance of finding time to switch off and manage worry."

Wide-ranging review

Stress is known to impact physical health, and can increase blood pressure, heart rate and cardiovascular activity, lower the immune system, affect hormone levels and produce physical symptoms, including pain and nausea.

The research team used data from 5,000 participants across 36 different studies to examine how psychological interventions for worry and

rumination impacted mental and physical health and health behaviors over a period of time.

The results were compared with control groups who received no intervention.

Interventions included:

- Psychological detachment—switching off from situations that trigger [stress](#)
- Action plans, such as postponing worry until an allocated time
- Stress management
- Mindfulness and relaxation
- Talking therapies: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy
- Pain management

The results showed that all intervention types had a significant, positive effect on health behaviors, with the exception of pain management strategies.

Delivery methods and settings, such as professionally-led or group therapy were also assessed.

The team found that levels of worry and rumination were lower in the intervention group compared with the control group, with larger effects produced when interventions were administered by a healthcare professional. Action planning, psychological detachment and CBT produced significant effects on worry, while mindfulness, psychological detachment, CBT and pain management produced significant results for rumination.

The researchers also noted a correlation between lower levels of worry and rumination, and improved health behaviors.

And they found no difference in effect among any sub-groups, suggesting that these techniques are likely to work for most people.

Lasting consequences

The research, jointly conducted by Mr. McCarrick, Dr. Andrew Prestwich, Dr. Arianna Prudenzi and Professor Daryl O'Connor, is titled Health effects of psychological interventions for worry and rumination: A meta-analysis. The paper appears in the *Health Psychology* journal.

Mr McCarrick said, "Our data suggest that there are ways in which we can look after our mental health—by reducing worry and rumination—that can also have lasting consequences for a range of health behaviors, such as sleep hygiene and alcohol dependency.

"This is particularly pertinent given other studies have recently shown that both worry and rumination can be exacerbated by the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, so the evidence-based psychological techniques highlighted by this research are especially timely."

More information: Dane McCarrick et al, Health effects of psychological interventions for worry and rumination: A meta-analysis., *Health Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/hea0000985](https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000985)

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