



How to Laugh Off Stress

You can't avoid stress, but you can limit its damaging effects with these four fun techniques. BY MELISSA NACHATELO

STRESS IS NOT A JOKING matter. Its potentially harmful effects, like a weakened immune system, are responsible for nearly 90 percent of all doctor visits, according to the American Psychological Association. And a recent study published by the American Heart Association shows for the first time that mental stress constricts your blood vessels, which could lead to a heart attack or stroke.

Dealing with stress, however, does not need to be a somber affair. In fact, many experts prescribe a simple and perhaps surprising remedy for this problem—laughter.

Laughter boosts the activity of your immune system's natural killer cells and other defenses against infections, according to a 2001 study in *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*. It also appears to reduce the amount of hormones, like adrenaline and cortisol, that your body produces during times of stress. Repeated release of these hormones over time can weaken your immune system. Finally, laughing helps expand capillaries, increasing blood and oxygen flow throughout your body, says Michael Miller, M.D., director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland's Medical Center in Baltimore. This may help protect you against heart attacks and strokes by relaxing constricted blood vessels.

The next time stress starts to creep into your life, use these four easy techniques to lighten up, calm your body and mind, and keep the stress from taking control.

Get Some Perspective

Much of our stress comes from the way we perceive reality, says Loretta LaRoche, a stress-management consultant and adjunct faculty member of Harvard University's Mind/Body Institute in Cambridge, Mass. If we see small annoyances for what they

the fax machine breaks, instead of getting frustrated, imagine that the broken fax machine is a monster, gobbling up all the paper in the office. Exaggerating your predicament helps you differentiate a small annoyance from a life-threatening problem and allows you to find the humor in the situation.



really are—just small annoyances—we can protect ourselves from unnecessary stress.

To put a stressful situation into perspective, first try visualizing it getting completely out of control to an absurd degree, suggests Roz Trieber, owner of Humor and Health Associates, a stress management company in Owings Mills, Md. For instance, if you're at work and

Warning: Frequent laughter may lead to lowered stress levels, an enhanced sense of humor, and a positive outlook on life.

Another tactic is to write about the stressful situation with a funny slant, says Trieber. Start by simply writing about the problem. Then ask yourself: What's a simple solution to my situation, and what's the most ridiculous? Write about both. Your imagination is bound to push a laugh button. Putting your thoughts on paper also allows you to gain some distance from