

4 stress-relieving exercises to calm down, naturally

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When chronic fatigue syndrome left her constantly worn out— even after three grande Americanos a day— Lara Ann Riggio turned to energy-based exercises and finally found relief. Now, she works as a healing practitioner herself, helping individuals overcome chronic issues such as back pain, neuromuscular tension, joint discomfort, chronic headaches, insomnia, and anxiety.

Riggio, 40, uses a combination of Western exercise science and muscular-therapy techniques, as well as energy-based exercises, to help the body relax from a sympathetic nervous system response, the “fight, flight or freeze” reaction to stressors.

“All of the physiological responses that we feel when we feel stressed really come from that primal experience from years and years ago where we thought we might die,” Riggio, who’s based in New York City, said. “In our modern world, most of our stressors are not life-threatening. However, our body still has that response.”

Riggio’s techniques aim to remind the body that, even under stress, it is safe, and you can teach your body to have a different reaction. At her studio, The Lara Touch, and on her website, she offers several energy healing techniques, including tapping for stress relief, specific exercises designed to relieve stress on-the-go and essential oil therapy.

Tapping for stress relief is based on a technique called the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) and it stimulates meridian points used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The meridian system is thought to be the “energy highway” of the body— the way the circulatory system carries blood— where individual points correspond with organs or specific functions.

“We really get the same benefits of acupuncture but without the needles,” Riggio said. “If you tap [the points] as you’re actually talking about any stressful situation, you’re going to be helping your body actually digest that stress and go from a sympathetic state into a parasympathetic or restorative state while you’re actually experiencing the physiological response to stress. So you’re retraining your body on how to actually deal with it in a more relaxing manner.”

Riggio recommends the following exercises for stress relief:

Exercise “Ambien”/Head Hold

“This exercise is a great way to alleviate stress that may be preventing you from sleeping,” she said. Do this for three to five minutes when you get in bed.

When you have a fight-or-flight response to everyday stress, extra blood rushes to your limbs to power your escape or your fight. When you hold these points, you send a signal to bring blood back to your brain. This reverses the stress response, so you can relax. You are physically conveying the message to your nervous system that, despite the stress you endured during your day, there is no lion chasing you and no gun to your head now, no real threat to your survival, so you can relax and go to sleep. Doing this pose nightly can help to bring down your overall stress level over time.

Grounding Exercise

Use this after a long day of traveling to clear your head.

“When you have been off of the ground for a long period of time, you can experience physical symptoms such as brain fog, difficulty expressing your thoughts, lack of balance or a feeling of disconnect between your torso and your feet,” Riggio said.

To do this exercise, simply stop your feet on the ground and feel as though you are rooting your feet into the earth.

Do-Anywhere Easy Stress Reliever

Riggio recommends doing this anytime you feel stressed— even during a meeting— to sharpen your focus and control how you react to stressors.

“Doing this posture forces the brain into bilateral function, overriding a stress response and putting your body in a restive or parasympathetic state,” she said.

You can't always control what stressors come your way, but with this exercise, you can control how you react to them. This particular exercise is easy to do anywhere, as you are simply crossing your arms and legs in a specific posture. It alleviates stress because it gets your brain working bilaterally. When you are in a fight-or-flight state, your brain utilizes your more dominant side, right or left brain, to conserve energy. Doing this posture forces the brain into bilateral function overriding a stress response and putting your body in a restive or Parasympathetic state.

Standing Stretch

Do this after you've been sitting for a long period of time.

“It helps move any blocked energy that has pooled in your joints and elongates tight muscles,” Riggio said.

Essential Oils

Another technique is the use of essential oils on key acupressure points, which is thought to stimulate both mood and physical discomforts by connecting with the brain's memory and emotion center to boost oxygen flow and release emotional baggage that is encoded deep within cellular memory, Riggio said.

Kate Duff, 34, of New York City, first met Riggio a year ago when she was overexercising, overeating and taking both Xanax and Ambien to keep her going as her start-up company, 3FLOZ, grew.

“Really it was: Get the task done, work out and then try to go to sleep. [Those] were really the focuses of my day and people really needed to just stay out of my way,” Duff said of her attitude at the time. 3FLOZ is a retail company that sells travel-size beauty, grooming and wellness products at airports and online.

After her first appointment with Riggio, which included muscle testing and using trigger words to see what her body reacted to, Duff left with a set of essential oils and a coping technique. Riggio instructed her to say the words that triggered her stress while breathing in the oils, then saying a specific mantra sentence at the end.

“I know this sounds crazy, but if you do it, it really works,” Duff said. “It really does soothe whatever the angst or emotional feeling that's brought up by the [trigger] word.”

Now, Duff no longer lashes out and has lost her temper, a change her family and friends were happy to see. Plus, she's sleeping, eating and exercising in a healthier way.

“You can come see Lara, every day and you'd feel awesome, but really the whole point of it is that you have to do the work,” Duff said.

“That’s what I love about this for my clients,” Riggio said.” When you're feeling a little out of sorts you can do the exercise that you know really gives you that relief. How empowering is that?”

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