



Tips for Dealing with Day-to-Day Stress and Anxiety

By Fiona McDonnell
Senior Research Associate
Duke Eye Center
Durham, NC, USA
August 2021

Daily stress is not uncommon and can come from many places - deadlines that need to be met, conflicts with others, too many things to do and not enough time in the day, emails to be answered and people who need your help. Needless to say, this can all add up and become very overwhelming, but there are some things you can easily do at your computer or throughout the day to help.

1. Recognise when you are feeling anxious or stressed.

Often we don't realise how overwhelmed we are feeling until after it's all over. Learning to recognise the feelings of stress and anxiety is the first step to helping yourself manage them. Do you forget to eat or drink? Do you get short tempered? Do you pick at your nails, fingers, hair or at things on your desk in front of you?

2. Implement small things to help you stop when you recognise the overwhelming feelings.

A post-it note or stickers somewhere on your computer or desk reminding you to take a pause can often be helpful. If this is not something you can do, then a phone app or other reminder on your phone can be useful to achieve this also.

3. Take 5 minutes to breathe.

When you're feeling overwhelmed, one of the things that can feel impossible is to take a pause and breathe. But this may be one of the most helpful things you can do (and realistically 5 minutes is not going to make that much of a difference!) Box breathing is one of the easiest ways to help reset your body and mind; inhale for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, exhale for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, and then repeat increasing to a count of 5, then a count of 6 and so on.

4. Make a list (or lists)

Again, this can seem like a waste of time when you are feeling overwhelmed, but making a list and prioritising things that need to be done will help you focus on what is urgent, and what can wait. Your email can be a great way to keep track of things that need to be responded to or action items (pinning them to the top of your inbox or creating tasks from emails). Or if you need to put pen to paper, bullet journaling is a fantastic way to organise your day, your week and your month!

5. Use technology to help you.

We live in a world with computers, smartphones, and apps that can be used to help. Whether it's helping to stay organised - by scheduling your entire day with blocks for writing, experiments, and exercise or other hobbies, or helping you to decompress and focus on what you need to - apps such as Calm or Headspace can be used in stressful times, or daily to help with breathing and meditation. Forest is a great app for helping you to focus and take time away from your phone (whether this is focusing on work, or focusing on decompressing). You will find something to fit your needs and help you meet your goals.

6. Set boundaries.

I know this is hard for many of us to do, but learning to set boundaries and say no to things is important. If you have too much on your plate already, then saying no is OK. Alternatively, if you must say yes (or feel like you have to say yes), then set a time frame that you think is reasonable to do the task or project.

7. Ask for help

Ask your lab mates, friends or other colleagues to help you out. Even if all they do is listen, it can be great to just get things off your chest or hear others thoughts on your projects, writing or whatever else you have going on.

Other suggestions to cope with anxiety or stress:

If you are getting overwhelmed with writing projects and cannot get them done in the lab at your desk, take a work from home day and either set up at home, or go to a cafe (being pandemically responsible of course) and get the work done there!

If you are someone who fidgets, use one of the many tools to help this, stress balls, fidget cubes, fidget spinners, they even have some great fidget jewellery that can be worn discreetly if you don't want others to notice.

Make sure to stay hydrated, and eat regularly as your body and brain need fuel to keep on top of everything!