

7 Thoughtful Ways to Stress Less

by Colette Carlson

Let go a little to be happier and live better.

How many of you want to grow old faster? What, no takers?!

Well, did you know you accelerate your aging when you regularly experience stress or anxiety? Seriously, if you're too tired or too wired, take note of the seven strategies here to help you stress a little less:

1. Give up the daily guilt.

Let's get some perspective. Too many of us waste time feeling guilty that our life is out of balance, but you'll never feel balanced as long as you have goals and dreams. Why? There's always way too much to do, to learn, to accomplish.

If you're like me and have passion for your work, it's easy to lose yourself in your tasks and projects since they bring you joy. At a certain point, however, I have to consciously ditch work to spend time with friends and family (minus my phone).

Quit thinking you need to "touch" everything each day and look at how "balanced" your life is over a period of time, not a specific day of the week. Take this one step farther and realize that it's about being balanced over your lifetime. It all evens out.

2. Realize good is good enough.

Any other recovering perfectionists out there? Stop wasting time creating the "perfect" proposal, letter or marketing brochure, seeking the ideal gift for your nephew, the best comforter for your bedroom, or the supremely clean house. Stop at 80 percent and move on to the next task. Otherwise, hours of your life are wasted and nobody notices the difference but you. Get over yourself and take a step closer to acceptance.

3. Snooze, or lose.

Yeah, I can hear you stress puppies already: "I'll sleep when I'm dead." But the point is you will be dead sooner as a result. Exhaustion is not a badge of honor. Without sleep, you are worthless to yourself and those around you.

Staying up even one hour later to finish a task or watch *Grey's Anatomy* costs you more than your health. Try irritability, trouble retaining information, minor illness, poor judgment, increased mistakes and even weight gain. A *Harvard Business Review* study of 975 global managers determined that 45 percent of high-earning managers are too pooped to even speak to their spouse or partner after work. This is your wake-up call to get your ZZZ's.

4. Scale back on drive time.

When choosing a new doctor, dentist, hairdresser, whatever, find one as close to home as possible. Bonus: with gas so expensive, think of the savings! The same holds true when finding activities for any family members—stay local. Sure the ideal preschool, soccer club or SAT study group may be a longer commute, but add up all the drive time in advance and ask if it's really worth it before committing to rush-hour jams and

early alarm clocks.

Still determined? Set up carpools and recognize you don't have to be at every activity. Sure it's fun to participate, but your child will not turn into a serial killer if you miss a few games or performances.

5. Say no to others so you can say yes to you.

Are you turning down distractions disguised as opportunities? Are you being asked to join social sites that are leaving you no time to network with the people under your roof? Are you still knocking yourself out to host the annual Labor Day party when all you see is the labor ahead?

It's not selfish to say no to others when the intent is to clear some space to say yes to you. Life does go on even if you aren't involved in every activity, party or event. Look at it this way: Being missed makes you more interesting and appreciated when you do show up.

6. Power off.

The quickest way to gain downtime is to turn off the phone, TV and computer and *enjoy* the lack of distractions. I've spoken to people who feel anxious when their DVR is overloaded with recordings and they don't have the time to watch their shows. C'mon, do you really need to know who's getting kicked off the island or what has-been star can dance?

Some people say TV relaxes them, but I believe it's more of a habit than a way to lower stress. TV just numbs you, and when the show's over, your pressures resurface. Same with the computer. Sure, it's great to connect with old friends on Facebook, but do you really need to know what someone ate for dinner?

Rather than screen sucking, grab that unopened book from your shelf, call a good friend or grab a cup of your favorite beverage and reflect on your day.

7. Embrace the messiness.

Having been raised by not one but two neat freaks, my old mantra was: There is a place for everything and everything belongs in its place. When I was single, the television remote stayed in the same spot, my pillows were strategically placed, and the counter-tops were void of dishes.

Now that I share my life with a family, the opposite is true. My new mantra: A clean house doesn't define you; it confines you. Even with twice-monthly help, my house is usually messy—not dirty, but messy... big difference and one I'm learning to live with if I want to have a life outside of cleaning.

Embrace the messiness. It comes with the territory and means you're leading a busy, fulfilling life—not a Stepford existence.

And if all else fails, remember you're too blessed to be stressed! It's impossible to feel stress and be grateful at the same time. When you're on overwhelm, simply take a deep breath and count your blessings—works every time.