

How to Fight Against Work Stress? Shaolin Monk Gives Tips

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Conditions associated with chronic stress include heart disease, stroke, depression, autoimmune diseases, and may predispose children to heart disease, mental illness, and impaired immune function later in life
- › Walter Gjergja is a Shaolin (pronounced Shau-lin) monk, philanthropist, and speaker who shared tips on how to fight stress that may be a part of your everyday routine. These include walking in nature and mindful exercise that offers movement of moderate intensity alongside conscious breathing
- › He also recommends eating well, cutting out the caffeine you use to boost your energy, and putting down your phone. Consider augmenting these strategies with journaling gratitude, Emotional Freedom Techniques, and certain essential oils
- › Vitamin deficiencies can contribute to a lack of resilience to stress, true adaptogenic herbs can help your body manage stress, and breathing techniques used by professionals and Navy SEALs can reduce stress in high-pressure situations

Stress has been a part of life in Western society for decades, but the prevalence and incidence of the condition rose dramatically in 2020. A Gallup poll in 2018 reported that 45% of people felt worried a lot and 22% felt angry a lot.¹

You can reduce your risk of health problems associated with the physiological and psychological response to perceived threats or challenges by addressing stress levels. Walter Gjergja, aka Shi Xing Mi, is a Shaolin (pronounced Shau-lin) monk, philanthropist,

and speaker who shared tips with the New York Post² on how to fight stress that may be a part of your everyday routine.

Rising Problems With Stress

The American Psychological Association Stress in America 2022³ report found many Americans were concerned for the future and struggling with inflation. In the report, 64% of respondents said they felt their rights were under attack, 45% said they didn't feel protected by the law in the U.S. and 38% said they were considering moving to another country.

Each of these conditions increases the experience of chronic stress, which is associated with depression.⁴ The American Psychological Association Stress in America 2023⁵ reported there was evidence that society was experiencing the psychological impact of a collective trauma and that it was not limited to the pandemic. Furthermore, long-term stress sustained during the pandemic has had a significant impact on well-being:⁶

"... [as] evidenced by an increase in chronic illnesses – especially among those between the ages of 35 and 44, which increased from 48% reported in 2019 to 58% in 2023. Adults ages 35 to 44 also experienced the highest increase in mental health diagnoses – from 31% reported in 2019 to 45% in 2023."

In 2023, Gallup reported that depression had reached a new high in the U.S., nearly 10 percentage points higher than recorded in 2015 and the highest since Gallup began measuring depression using the current data gathering tools in 2015.⁷

Health Problems Related to Stress

Stress has known associations and links with several health conditions, including **Takotsubo cardiomyopathy**, also known as "Broken heart syndrome." This is one health condition that has direct and immediate consequences from emotional or physical stress.⁸ The condition has symptoms similar to a heart attack, but the condition is typically temporary, and most people recover within two months.

Prolonged stress can have life-threatening consequences for adults, but research also shows it predisposes children to several health conditions later in life. **Adverse childhood experiences** can increase a child's risk for heart disease, cancer, mental illness, suicide, and impaired immune function.⁹ The data also show that it not only harms the child, but those effects can be passed to future generations.

More health implications related to stress include increasing your risk of **heart attack and stroke** by triggering overactivity in the amygdala.¹⁰ This is a part of the brain called the fear center that is located in the temporal lobe and activated by real and perceived threats.

During an interview with **Dr. David Hanscom** in 2021, we discussed his guide to thriving and surviving the COVID-19 pandemic. His process rested on reducing or resolving stress and anxiety, which therefore lowered levels of inflammatory cytokines and allowed your immune system to function more optimally.

Lowering stress levels and inflammation may also have a positive influence on the many diseases associated with inflammation, including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, autoimmune diseases, cancer and chronic liver and kidney disease. Let's dive into some of the simple strategies you can use that will help lower your stress levels and protect your health from the list of health conditions associated with stress and inflammation.

Taking Simple Steps Can Lower Stress and Protect Your Health

Gjergja notes¹¹ the following six simple steps can help significantly reduce your stress levels, which in turn can have significant benefits on your overall health. Remember that while you may not be able to control what happens, your response to it is under your control.

Gjergja proposes these six steps can help you navigate daily stressors and initiate calming influences and insights that may help lower your stress level. He says these can help change your habits that lead to stress and thereby cut stress and cultivate Zen.

1. Mindful exercise – Exercise is a powerful strategy that can help improve your physical and mental health. Researchers have been studying the benefits of exercise for decades, even to the point of recommending the time of day that has the most benefit.

A 2023 study¹² found that irrespective of how much physical activity you engage in, doing it during the morning hours lowered your risk of heart disease further than doing it at any other time during the day.

Gjergja believes that it's not just exercise that can help you relax but it's also important to be mindful during exercise and it's that mindfulness that is the key to reducing stress. "Choose workouts that offer plenty of movement but of moderate intensity. The flowing movements and conscious breathing of yoga, a slow and controlled tai chi routine, or cycling and swimming can offer a calming workout, a cortisol-cutting workout," he suggests.¹³

Tai chi is a form of exercise that meets this criterion and has been found to help reduce blood pressure and improve your heart health, maybe even more than aerobic activity. In the study,¹⁴ 22% who practiced tai chi had their blood pressure levels fall into the normal range as compared to 16% of those doing aerobics.¹⁵

2. Walking – Most people have some idea about the dangers of inactivity, but you might think that the alternative to a sedentary lifestyle is actively working out or a gym membership. However, it isn't always about aerobic activity, but rather related to the dangers of prolonged sitting. A paper in Health Psychology Review notes that decreasing sitting does not have to reduce productivity.¹⁶

"If nothing is done now, the high prevalence of sitting will continue to increase. We make a case for the standing position by demonstrating that spending more time upright can mitigate the physiological and psychological problems associated with excessive sitting without lowering task performance and productivity."

Gjergja told the New York Post that the No. 1 way to combat stress is to "lace it up and walk it out." And he warns, that being outside is crucial to reaping those benefits.¹⁷

"Even a quick 15-minute stroll is a powerful stress reliever, triggering the release of endorphins and regulating cortisol to keep your hormones in check and your mind healthy. A daily dose of natural light will regulate your circadian rhythm, keep your neurotransmitters and hormones in balance and boost your mood by stimulating vitamin D production."

3. Spending time in nature – Gjergja stresses that being outside is a "surefire way to calm the chaos of the mind and cut the stress of work."¹⁸ Alongside the restorative powers of fresh air to your **physical health**, there are also benefits to your mental health.

In a 2014 paper,¹⁹ researchers evaluated the literature, finding that being close to green space can help lower stress levels and reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression. Children who interact with nature have fewer symptoms of attention deficit and people who move to areas with more greenery benefit from sustained improvement in mental health.

4. Eat well – Food is a foundational pillar of your overall health and reducing stress may be as easy as improving your gut microbiota. After four weeks on a psychobiotic diet²⁰ that contained fruits and vegetables high in prebiotic fiber alongside **fermented foods**, participants expressed a reduction in perceived stress. And the closer the participant held to the diet, the better the improvement.

Gjergja points out²¹ that when we're stressed, the snacks we are picking up are not typically healthy. Comfort foods are usually high in unhealthy fat and sugar, which can trigger stress hormones. He points out the importance of playing the long game rather than trying to experience instant gratification.

5. Cut out caffeine – All too often, you may seek out caffeine drinks to get a quick fix for not getting enough sleep the night before. "For your mental well-being, stick to

water and opt for a balanced and nutritious diet, no matter how tempting coffee and candy may be: the short-term comfort will inevitably be followed by feeling even worse," Gjergja cautions.²²

While there are some health benefits to drinking **black coffee** without the additives, the concern is when you use that caffeine to stay awake because you're sleep-deprived. **Sleep deprivation** has disastrous effects on your health and getting enough quality sleep might be the single most effective thing you can do to support your brain and body.

- 6. Put down your phone** — There are a variety of reasons why putting your cell phone down can have significant benefits on your health. Gjergja notes that scrolling through social media may heighten your feelings of inadequacy and raise your stress levels. He suggests pausing your notifications or putting your phone away while you're at work to be more productive and present, which are "two qualities proven to reduce work-related stress."²³

Another reason you may want to put your phone down is **exposure to radiofrequency energy** that can exceed federal safety limits if it's not kept a certain distance from your body. There is a little-known warning hidden within your cell phone manual that warns you to always keep the device from 0.19 inches to 0.59 inches in from your head and body to avoid exceeding the safety limit. This means you can't carry it in your hands.

The radiofrequency electromagnetic fields from cell phones have been associated with stress and anxiety and may interfere with spatial memory performance.²⁴

Five Additional Strategies That May Lower Your Stress Level

I'd like to briefly share five additional strategies that you can use to help lower your stress level. Use the links that are included for more information about these strategies.

- 1. Journaling gratitude** — Gratitude has distinct neurobiological correlates that can change your brain in areas that are associated with value judgment and moral

cognition. In one example,²⁵ 92 adults with advanced cancer engaged in mindful gratitude journaling or routine journaling. After seven days, those who kept a gratitude journal had significant improvements and **anxiety, depression** and spiritual well-being.

"Grateful people tend to recover faster from trauma and injury," neuroscientist Glenn Fox told The Pulse.²⁶ "They tend to have better and closer personal relationships and may even just have improved health overall." When he tried to find gratitude after losing his mother, what he experienced wasn't a quick fix or an immediate route to happiness, but a way to make his grief more manageable in the moment.

2. Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) — I have long promoted Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) as an effective way of reducing stress by helping you to reprogram your body's reaction. Stress is unavoidable in everyday life, but how you react to it influences your overall health.

EFT is not the same as mindfulness but works best for targeted stress relief. EFT is a short-term strategy you can use to overcome an emotional trauma while mindfulness and meditation are lifelong endeavors.

3. Breathing — You might think it is as simple as breathing in and breathing out, but did you know breathing influences your stress levels?

There are many breathing techniques that can help reduce stress, such as the 4-7-8 breathing exercise taught by Dr. Andrew Weil, a controlled breathing method taught by Patrick McKeown or **box breathing** used by the Navy SEALs to help reduce stress in high-pressure situations. Test them for yourself and decide which one works best for you.

4. Vitamins and herbs — Nutritional deficiencies can have a significant effect on your resilience to stress. Using magnesium and vitamin B6 has been demonstrated to improve perceived stress levels in 264 human subjects who had low magnesium levels to begin with. Another option is an adaptogenic herb — **Ashwagandha** — that

helps your body manage and adapt to stress by balancing your immune system, metabolism and hormonal systems.

It has been used in ancient Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine for thousands of years as a true adaptogenic that is not a stimulant in disguise. This means in the morning it might give your exercise a boost but at nighttime, it can help you get a good night's rest. Data has also shown that ashwagandha can reduce stress, depression and anxiety.

5. Essential oil – If you enjoy the scent of essential oils, then **orange essential oil** may help reduce your stress and your pain levels. Orange essential oil has also been useful to boost your mood and support a healthy weight. Orange essential oil can also be used for massage or aromatherapy as a powerful way to relieve pain.

Sources and References

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