

DR SARA'S 7 WAYS TO DE-STRESS

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Hit Your Pause Button with these 7 Simple, Effective De-stressors

Never underestimate the power of stress. Chronic stress can alter your body's biochemical machinations. It can create a domino effect of out-of-whack hormones. Ultimately those shifts alter your mood, add fat at your waistline, and make your life miserable.

Stress is the top reason behind most visits to the doctor, and it contributes to all the big causes of death, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer.

You need a certain amount of stress to keep you productive and engaged, but too much can become detrimental. What "too much" constitutes is subjective. Some folks thrive on a moderate level of stress while others crumple. While you and stress may never become besties, rather than allow it to wreck your life you can learn to harness and even thrive under life's most challenging situations.

In this ebook, I want to share with you my favorite ways to wrangle stress so it works for you, not against you. I'll also share the cutting edge research that shows these techniques are not just a good idea, but scientifically proven to improve your physiology.

Ready?

To your best health,

Dr. Sara

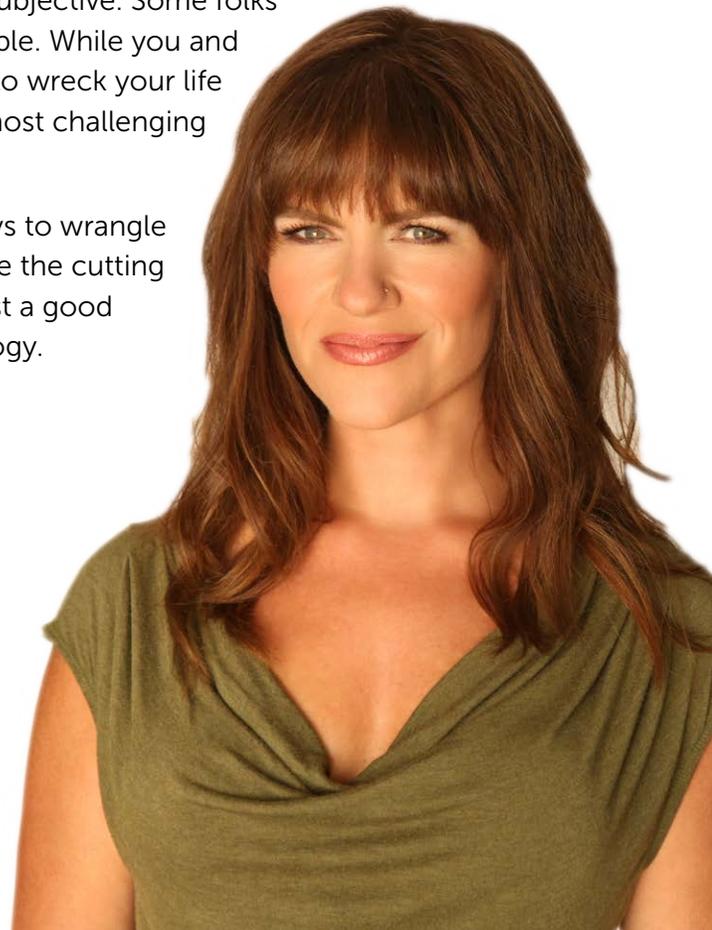


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Introduction

Stress and the Hormone Connection

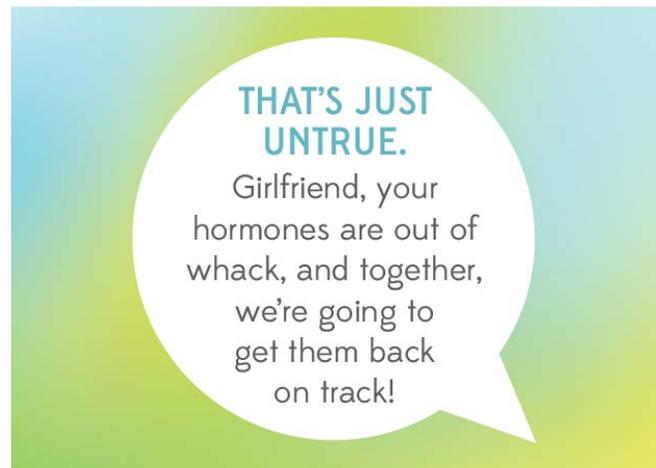
A number of hormones contribute to stress, and cortisol is a big player. I'll talk a lot in this book about this "stress hormone," which governs your hunger cravings, digestion, blood pressure, sleep/wake patterns, physical activity, and capacity to cope with stress.

Ironically, while stress raises cortisol, in later stages – when you're constantly "on" and carrying insurmountable stress levels – cortisol can swing too high *and* too low, and everything in between, sometimes within a matter of hours in the same day.

Neglecting chronic stress will eventually burn out your adrenal glands, which produce cortisol and the stress neurotransmitters epinephrine (also known as adrenaline) and norepinephrine. Cortisol levels become consistently low.

I call cortisol a Jekyll-and-Hyde hormone. Stress is unavoidable. By itself, it isn't necessarily bad. Under normal conditions, your body produces a brief surge of cortisol that becomes beneficial, protective, and, ideally, *infrequent*.

We're told that it's normal to feel tired, anxiety ridden, unsexy, fat, and cranky.



The stress reaction is an appropriate alarm; perhaps a friend has a medical emergency or your house was burglarized. Once you respond and cope with the situation, your cortisol should return to normal levels, similar to the rise and fall of a tide. When your cortisol is functioning properly and proportionally, so is your alarm system, and vice versa.

When Good Hormones Go Bad

Unfortunately, for many people, the alarm—*that cortisol surge*— never turns off. The pendulum, which is designed to gently sway, gets stuck on the "alarm" side. Far too many people struggle with symptoms of unrelenting stress and hyper-vigilance.

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For many women, cortisol runs the show. Out-of-whack cortisol levels take down other hormones like thyroid, testosterone, DHEA, progesterone, and insulin. You become a hot mess: angry, moody, bitchy, and cursing the scales as you diligently try to ditch those stubborn last few pounds.

Underlying your adrenal hormones is a sympathetic nervous system cranked up to 11, ramping up your stress hormones and putting you into constant fight-or-flight mode.



Balance becomes a key phrase with hormones, and it plays equally well with your nervous system. In normal conditions, your sympathetic nervous system works harmoniously with your parasympathetic nervous system.

When you experience something stressful, your sympathetic nervous system takes the lead to keep you focused and

alert. It should do that job and then chill out, but too often, your sympathetic nervous system stays in overdrive far beyond its welcome.

Our penchant for smartphones and our endless availability, overwork, multitasking, and perhaps our addiction to excess have led to a constantly dialed-up sympathetic nervous system.

You can't shut off your sympathetic nervous system, but you can find your "off" button and balance it with your parasympathetic nervous system, which puts you into rest and relaxation.

"The parasympathetic system is [where we go to rest and renew ourselves](#)," writes Biff Mithoefer. "It is the natural state of the nervous system, when we feel safe in our lives. It is where we can feel that our life is in balance."

Parasympathetic is where all the healing happens. Going there becomes a calm, healing place, and the seven strategies in this book all help you shift gears to parasympathetic dominance.

My Story

I've been there, and I know what to do. In my thirties, I was a textbook example of a chronically stressed woman. As a result, I experienced the collateral damage of high cortisol.

My situation might sound familiar. I sweated the small stuff, like traffic and laundry, even making my kids' lunches. I'd forget to pick up my kids from school, or I'd remember and would have been on time, really, if I could have found my keys. One cup of coffee made my heart beat like a jungle drum. I'd look forward to a glass of wine at the end of the day, but if one glass led to two, my sleep suffered.

Despite exercise and a healthy diet, my blood sugar was high, and my sugar cravings overwhelmed my self-control. My waist got thicker, and when the clerk at Whole Foods asked if I was pregnant (when I wasn't), I nearly went into a rage.



My stress-coping mechanisms were faltering. I discovered that my perception of stress was the true problem. In other words, *I'm responsible for manufacturing much of the stress I feel*. Everyone has demands and problems; when I stopped blaming external circumstances for how I felt and improved my mental flexibility, a whole new, hormonally supportive space opened for me.

That's what this book is about: Taking control of the driver's seat and regaining your health by managing stress levels. I said *managing*, not eliminating, since if you live on planet earth you're going to experience daily stressors.

Along the way from frazzled to fabulous, I discovered some cool strategies that can help you manage stress levels. Every one comes based in science, not woo-woo medicine. Copious research combined with years of empirical evidence validates everything I say. They aren't magic, but they help you dial down your cortisol levels and move the parasympathetic front and center.

How I've Organized This e-Book

I've written this e-book in two sections. In part one, I've provided an overview about breathing, mindfulness, yoga, meditation, and chanting as five tools to help you more deeply tap into your parasympathetic calm. I couldn't possibly do these subjects justice in a few pages, so I hope my brief descriptions inspire you to pursue them deeper.

Many patients begin with breathing. Along with that comes mindfulness as they become more present in their lives. Yoga, meditation, and chanting allow you to take breathing and mindfulness into practice. Certainly they overlap to certain degrees. When you meditate or do yoga, you become more mindful and focus on the breath.

Once you've understood these concepts, I've provided seven simple strategies to put these concepts into practice in part two. A little background will help you better deep-dive into these seven strategies, but feel free to jump ahead if you need a de-stressor right now.

Not everything I discuss might immediately resonate with you, and I'm certainly not asking you to tackle all seven strategies at once. (Please, don't: You'll simply become more stressed out.) Think of these strategies as tools, or pieces of a puzzle. Over time, you'll find the right pieces to help control stress, rebalance your hormones, and *relax*.



Part 1: Overview of My Top Five De-Stressing Tools

Breathing

"Just breathe," someone probably told you when you appeared stressed. That's sound advice. Your breath is your greatest state changer - and it's free. I recommend you learn how to do it, so you can turn off your sympathetic nervous system ("fight or flight") when you don't need it.

"The best way to calm down is so innate to our lives, we often take it for granted: Taking a breath," [writes Carolyn Gregoire in The Huffington Post](#). "Focusing on your own breathing can have a significant impact on your well-being and stress levels, and can even create physiological changes like lowering your blood pressure. But for many of us, when it comes to improving our health, changing our breathing somehow doesn't spring to mind as readily as changing our diet or exercise habits."

Let's change that. We take what we eat or how we exercise seriously, so why do we give short shift to something so fundamental like breathing?

If yoga or meditation appear a little too "out there" for patients, I suggest instead starting with the breath. Numerous breathing techniques exist, and you can utilize them whether you're stuck on the freeway or in the line from hell in a Whole Foods Market.

Deep Breathing and The Vagus Nerve

You'll see the vagus nerve mentioned many times throughout this e-book. That's because this nerve plays a keep component in your parasympathetic nervous system. In Latin, vagus means "wandering," and this makes sense when you consider your vagus nerve wanders from your brain stem to your colon.

"When you take a deep breath and relax and expand your diaphragm, your vagus nerve is stimulated, you instantly turn on the parasympathetic nervous system, your cortisol levels are reduced, and your brain heals," writes Dr. Mark Hyman in *The UltraMind Solution*.

Among its roles, your vagus nerve stimulates oxytocin, a hormone produced during orgasm and labor that can reduce stress levels. Oxytocin is that wonderful feeling you experience when you fall in love.

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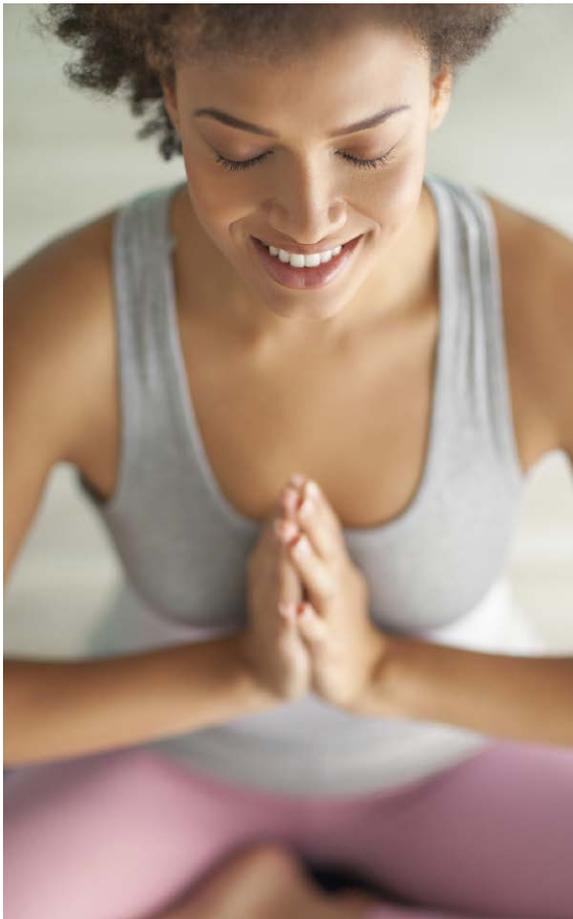
"The mere act of witnessing character, virtue, beauty, and truth tickles our vagus nerve, which stimulates oxytocin production and evokes in us, among other empathic behaviors, the desire to be better people living better lives," writes Mark Matousek in [this Huffington Post blog](#).

The vagus nerve also influences immunity via the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. One study found stimulating your vagus nerve stops your immune system from releasing [inflammatory markers](#).

"Vagus nerve acts as the mind-body connection, and it is the cabling behind your heart's emotions and gut instincts," writes [Bill A. Walker](#). "The key to manage your mind state and your anxiety levels lies on being able to activate the calming nervous pathways of your parasympathetic system."

Breathing is the easiest, most immediately way to activate your vagus nerve. Among the numerous breathing techniques, these are my favorites.

Diaphragmatic breathing



Used in yoga, meditation, and tai chi, this type of breathing entails bringing air deeply into your lower and upper lungs. "Deep breathing involves [slow and deep inhalation through the nose](#), usually to a count of 10, followed by slow and complete exhalation for a similar count," says the [National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine](#). "The process may be repeated 5 to 10 times, several times a day."

The relaxing and therapeutic form of breathing is also called abdominal breathing and has been shown to lower stress and cortisol and to raise melatonin. "Diaphragmatic breathing allows one to take normal breaths while maximizing the amount of oxygen that goes into the bloodstream," says the [University of Texas Counseling and Mental Health Center](#). "It is a way of interrupting the "Fight or Flight" response and triggering the body's normal relaxation response."

You can learn more about diaphragmatic breathing [here](#).

Paced Breathing

Studies show paced breathing – also called slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing – reduces central sympathetic activity and [facilitates the relaxation response](#). One study found paced breathing [reduced hot flashes 44 percent!](#)

To utilize paced breathing, breathe deeply 20 minutes twice per day with a five- second inhale, a 10-second hold, and a five-second exhale. I do this while driving, which is not how the researchers intended you to apply their methodology, but I'm a working mom who multitasks.

The “Take Five” Method

My friend Dr. Mark Hyman uses this breathing before meals or any time his clients need to unwind. The process couldn't be simpler. “Right now take a deep breath into your belly to the count of five, pause for one second, then breathe out slowly to the count of five,” Hyman writes in *The UltraMind Solution*. You'll do this five times. Check out his video [here](#).

The 4-7-8 Breath

Dr. Andrew Weil popularized this breathing technique. While you're doing this, keep your tongue on the soft tissue behind your upper teeth. Do four cycles in the morning and four in the evening. Especially if you struggle with anxiety or insomnia, this breathing technique can have a profound effect on your nervous system. Simply inhale for four breaths, count to seven as you hold, and exhale for eight breaths.



Mindfulness

"Mindfulness is one of the few things that is simultaneously trendy (we declared 2014 'the year of mindful living') and a centuries-old technique, helping with everything from [lowering stress to improving job performance](#)," writes Catherine Pearson in [The Huffington Post](#). "At its core, mindfulness is a very simple practice of cultivating awareness of the present moment without judgement. But knowing *how* to get started and when you're supposed to cram it in can seem downright daunting."

To write or talk about mindfulness becomes so simple, doesn't it? Yet to actively practice it among life's franticness can become a challenge. The effort is worth it, since numerous studies show the benefits of mindfulness.

Those benefits include [reducing stress, improving mental and physical health](#) in multiple sclerosis, and helping [headaches](#). In nurses, mindfulness [improves resilience and sense of coherence](#). Another study found a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program could [decrease symptoms in women with cancer](#). Altogether, I counted [32 PubMed studies](#) about mindfulness.

The concept ultimately becomes subjective. Maybe mindfulness means focusing on your tea and not your laptop screen. Or perhaps you remain focused on one single obligation rather than multitasking. Being completely present with someone is one of the best ways to establish mindfulness: You connect more deeply with that person.

I find adding reminders in my office and house help me center and practice mindfulness. One thing you'll immediately find is how often your mind drifts into past regrets and future anxiety. Reminders help you bring the mind back into the present where it belongs.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

More than 25 years ago, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn promoted Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), based on ancient Buddhist concepts, as a form of natural medicine for addressing stress.

MBSR is extremely helpful if you have trouble quieting your mind during meditation: when a thought floats into your consciousness, you simply observe it, label it, and gently let it go, without getting caught up in it or feeling guilty about it.

For instance, while meditating, if you start thinking about your lunch, or what you'll say at tomorrow's meeting, you tell yourself something like "planning for the future," and let it go. As you become more proficient at this, you become less attached to your thoughts, and thus less reactive.

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In short, MBSR promotes awareness of the present moment with a compassionate, nonjudgmental stance, which over time leads to a shift in perception and response. MBSR increases activity in the part of the brain that governs learning and memory, while decreasing activity in the area responsible for worry and fear.

Not surprisingly, MBSR lowers cortisol, improves sleep, decreases worry, and reduces depression, anxiety, and distress in people with various stress-related health problems. Additionally, mindfulness was shown to reduce stress and abdominal fat in overweight and obese women.

For more information, check out Jon Kabat-Zinn's excellent book *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*.

Yoga

Like many concepts I discuss here, yoga has broad implications. "In the modern Western world, there's a plethora of styles to choose from," writes Rebecca Butler in Mind Body Green. "Some are faster and more athletic; some are softer and more gentle; others rely on great amounts of artificial heat with far slower movement. A really good rule of thumb is try out multiple styles. Usually one will resonate more than another, and sometimes that evolves as you evolve."



I encounter this in my own practice. Some newbies think yoga means gentle poses or stretching, whereas others imagine a vigorous, sweat-triggering workout. Yoga can be both these things, but to pigeonhole it limits its possibilities. What matters is how the practice plays out for you.

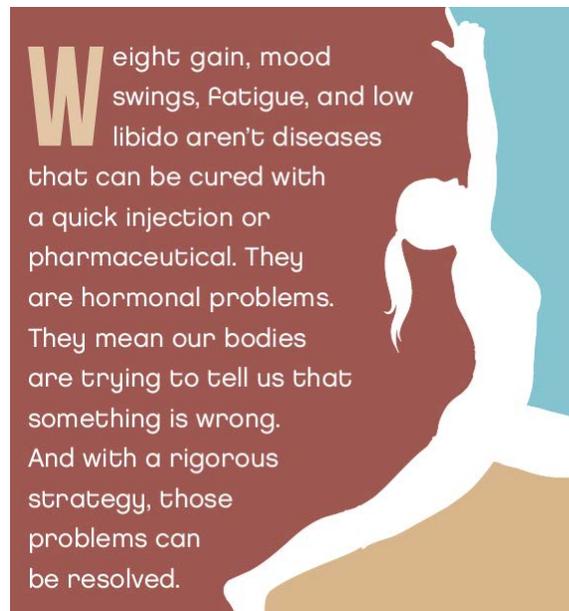
People practice yoga for various reasons—flexibility, weight loss, healing of one type or another—yet I believe that yoga is the best tonic for stress and getting your cortisol to a sweet spot.

I had a practical reason for beginning a regular yoga practice when I was in med school: I loved surgery. Although the many hours of surgical training meant I couldn't take very good care of myself, I wanted to stay healthy so I could learn as much as possible. And I wanted to stay focused during long cancer surgeries, when I held retractors inside women's bodies for hours on end, often in an awkward position.

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Yoga at 4 a.m.—it worked! My immune system improved; I didn't get sick; and I experienced minimal strain despite extended hours in the operating room.

Recent evidence from a group of medical students practicing yoga supports this experience. Data suggest that the benefit of yoga arises from not just the physical poses but also from yoga as an integrated philosophical package.



Yoga activates the parasympathetic and reduces stress. One recent study of college students doing yoga found that only the integrated-yoga students showed a decrease in cortisol. Yoga lowers cortisol in women with breast cancer and lowers blood sugar in healthy people. Another stress-related study concluded, "If yoga dampens or limits stress-related changes, then regular practice could have substantial health benefits."

Other studies confirm that yoga lowers blood pressure in healthy college kids and people with heart disease, as well as women with cancer. I could go on, but you get the point. We now have 312 randomized trials and counting showing yoga bestows numerous health benefits.

Beginning a Yoga Practice

Some asanas (or yoga poses) require you to put your feet above the level of your heart, even with your legs straight up against the wall. When you do these asanas, you activate your parasympathetic nervous system.

The final pose of a yoga practice, called Savasana in Sanskrit, which means "corpse pose," is considered the most important, and most difficult, pose because here you integrate the key stress-relieving practices. While lying flat on your back, close your eyes, breathe deeply, and tune in to a clear state of mind and subtle shifts of energy in your body.

In other words, yoga can become a *huge* stress reliever. Yet the majority of western yoga practices are very yang: movement and stretching your muscles. These *move-move-move* sequences can resemble the striving type of energy we experience in other life areas.

My problem was that I got enough fierceness in how hard I push myself as a doctor, mother, wife, and author. I didn't need more fierceness on the yoga mat.

That's why yin yoga fit perfectly into my life. Slower paced and more meditative, this type of yoga applies moderate stress to connective tissue to improve circulation and flexibility.

Among its benefits include improved organ health, immunity, and emotional wellbeing.

In yin yoga, you hold asanas for three to five minutes or even longer. That might feel strange if you're used to doing vinyassa flow, where you constantly move for an hour or so.

"There are two things that make a yoga asana more yin," [writes Mithoefer](#). "First, the posture must allow muscles to relax. It is only when the muscles relax that we may access the deep yin parts of the body, the connective tissue. Perhaps most importantly, the asana must be done with an attitude of yin acceptance."

I recommend yin yoga for healing because it resets the nervous system more than other styles. It works on the connective tissue of our bodies, where injuries are healed through the actions of fibroblasts and our immune system, as well by unblocking the flow of prana or chi. Maintaining poses for five minutes or even longer can be more intense and rejuvenating, and have a more dramatic effect on injured muscles, tissues, and joints.

My favorite poses became the sacral releases, because I have had chronic issues with hypermobility in my left sacro-iliac joint. Many women have this problem and end up with back pain in vinyasa or Ashtanga classes.

Meditation

Meditation's definition is simple: Simply be in the moment. I've encountered numerous forms of meditation – 112, to be exact – but they all fall under three main categories:

- **Concentrative** – single-pointed attention on an object, sound, breath, or word. Transcendental Meditation, where you focus on a particular designated word for 20 minutes twice daily, is a great example of concentrative meditation.
- **Awareness** – rather than a specific focus, in awareness meditation you keep a mind that remains open with whatever arises. Zazen, a Zen practice described as insight into the nature of existence, is a great example of awareness meditation.
- **Expressive** – "The point of expressive meditation is to first release mental, physical and emotional tensions from the body and mind and then, sit in silence," [writes meditation teacher and bestselling author Pragito Dove](#). "By taking the lid off the proverbial pressure cooker and dumping out inner turmoil in a meditative context, we can then more easily access inner peace, clarity and our authentic self." Examples include laughter, dancing, and humming.

Meditation has become a well-researched practice. The first randomized controlled trial (RCT) found Transcendental Meditation could [decrease stress-related blood pressure](#) and increase coping mechanisms in young people with hypertension. Meditation has been shown to contribute to a [more positive cognitive-stress cycle](#), meaning that you feel you have more control, appraise challenges more realistically, and feel more balanced.

Like yoga, finding a meditation practice that works for you probably requires some trial and error. I encourage you to study different practices and to find something that you can commit to. In the busyness of your day, you might become tempted to blow off meditation. That's why I say it requires commitment. I truly believe if you block off that time and practice it, you'll become more relaxed, mindfulness, and present.

Chanting

"I frequently find myself fidgeting during meditation," a patient once told me. "I just need to be doing *something* other than sit there." I wanted to reply that for restless, type-A folks like herself, nothing benefits her more than simply sitting and observing her mind.

But I got what she was saying. Perhaps you prefer something more active than mindfulness meditation or deep breathing. Chanting is great for those who love to sing. Don't think about the words; just learn them by heart and use them often.

Chanting [lights up particular regions of the brain](#), such as the hippocampus (your memory region). It deactivates the vigilance centers, such as the amygdala, and increases blood flow in the brain. Among studies, one found chanting [improves lung function](#).

Chanting also activates the parasympathetic. "Vocal chanting is particularly effective because the palate and the human ear function as blueprints for the [body's nervous system](#)," writes Russill Paul, author of *The Yoga of Sound: Tapping the Hidden Power of Music and Chant*.

Paul notes vocal sound production affects the vagus nerve I discussed earlier, as chanting utilizes deep respiration to release emotional toxicity and generate energy. Mantra chanting "[helps induce the 'relaxation' response](#), causing reduction of heart beat, brain waves and respiration," says Jonathan Goldman. If you need something a little more actively engaging than meditation, chanting might become your ticket.



My Favorite Chants

- **Sat nam** – Sat means “truth,” and Nam means “name.”
- **Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu** – this mantra loosely means “May all beings everywhere be happy and free, and may the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and to that freedom for all.”
- **Gayatri Mantra** – The Gayatri mantra is not just a means of worship but is [an object of worship in itself](#), and in Ayurvedic medicine you receive healing if you even listen to it. One study compared the Gayatri Mantra with poem chanting. Researchers found improved performance with both forms, yet the Gayatri Mantra [scored significantly higher in the female group](#).
- **OM** – Pronounced “ah-oo-um,” scholars believe this sound was the [first, original vibration of the universe](#). Chanting the sound OM brings us into harmonic resonance with the universe. Om is thought to vibrate at 432 Hertz, the natural musical pitch of the Universe, as opposed to 440 Hertz, which is the frequency of most modern music. Decreasing your frequency to coincide with that of the Universe stills the fluctuations of the mind, allowing you to practice yoga through sound. OM is an idyllic way to begin and end a yoga or [mediation practice](#), and also comes in handy when you just need to chill out. “Traditionally, Aum represents and has the capacity to [progressively open up the practitioner](#) to the ever-present formless and timeless reality, the background radiation of the cosmos that echoes the Big Bang,” writes Axel. One study found people who chanted “Om” [increased mental alertness](#) and, evidenced by reduced heart rate, became more physiologically relaxed. For [seven ways to use “Om,”](#) check out this article.
- **Mantra for the Chakras** – Traditional Hatha Yoga states there are cleansing bija mantras associated with the chakras, which run from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. “Emotions, physical health, and mental clarity affect how well each chakra can filter energy,” says the website Ar-Yoga. “This in turn dictates how pure the energy is that’s emitted from different regions of the body.”

Check out this page for [an explanation of these seven chakras](#) and the video “Chakra Beatbox” from MC Yogi.



Using a Mantra without Vocal Chanting

If chanting aloud isn't your thing but you want to center your mind with a mantra, consider Mala Beads. Similar to rosary beads, [Mala beads](#) – also called Buddhist beads or Buddhist prayer beads – are 108-bead strands used to keep count during mantra meditations. Mala beads have been used in Buddhism and Hinduism for centuries.

Here's how to use Mala beads:

- Clarify your intention and choose a mantra.
- Find a quiet place and sit quietly.
- Close your eyes and observe the speed and depth of your natural breath. Begin to breathe deeply and bring your focus and attention onto your mantra or affirmation.
- Hang the first mala bead gently on the middle or ring finger of your right hand. Place your thumb on the guru bead and recite your mantra.
- At the end of the mantra push the mala bead away with your thumb and move onto the next bead for another round.
- Continue until you reach a count on 7, 21, 27, or 108.

To learn more about using Mala Beads, check out [this short video](#).

Part 2: Seven Strategies to Put these Concepts into Action

Now that you understand how to activate the parasympathetic and create calm, I want to share seven strategies to put this plan into action.

Strategy #1: Take a Hot Detox Bath

It's 10 p.m. Your kids are asleep (you hope), you're wiped out after a grueling day at the office, and you need to unwind so you can be asleep by 11.

Now, think about what the average stressed-out, hyper-alert person does in this situation. They veg out on the couch watching *Sex and the City* reruns while polishing off a pint of Haagen-Dazs, feeling bad they lack Samantha's sex drive (not to mention that body) and worrying about an early-morning managerial quarterly review tomorrow.

Or they turn on the evening news, which is never good, so those stress hormones stay elevated. Either scenario guarantees a crappy night's sleep.

Jacked-up cortisol levels before bed becomes a surefire way to toss and turn when you should be sleeping. Cortisol should be highest in the morning and gradually taper throughout the day, becoming lowest at night. If you can't sleep or feel wired and tired at night, cortisol probably isn't getting the message to simmer down.

One of my favorite strategies to relax your sympathetic nervous system and lower cortisol is a hot bath. Women with thin skin or who are highly sensitive will especially benefit from this strategy.



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At the end of a long day, nothing helps you decompress quite like a hot bath. I recommend fitting one into your schedule 15 – 30 minutes before bed. If you reply, “But Dr. Sara, I’m still answering emails at that time,” I’m going to do an intervention and *insist* you take a hot bath.

A few add-ins can make your bath especially therapeutic. Put away the Mr. Bubble (seriously, you’re not still using that, are you?) or Calgon and make your bath detoxifying with magnesium- and sulfur-rich Epsom salts.

Magnesium is your *ahhhh* mineral, and researchers estimate up to 80% of us are deficient in this calming mineral. Studies connect magnesium deficiencies with [increased stress](#), and I often find once patients supplement with this mineral they feel more relaxed and calmer.

I also add baking soda, which alkalinizes your body and promotes an ideal pH for healing and detoxifying. Calming oils also soothe frazzled nerves and chill out your sympathetic nervous system.

One study in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* looked at whether lavender oil aromatherapy could reduce stress and pain of needle insertion in 30 volunteers. One group received lavender oil; the other did not. Researchers found [lavender significantly decreased stress levels](#) and significantly reduced the pain intensity of needle insertion.



Among the many benefits of a hot bath include:

- Improved circulation
- Lower blood pressure
- Enhanced heart rate variability
- Reduced amount of toxins (you’re sweating them out!)
- Improved blood sugar
- Increased heart rate, which serves as a form of passive exercise

Especially in Eastern culture, baths have long been used as therapeutic and even medicinal. Many studies look at saunas, but you can achieve a similar experience in your own bathtub while getting the benefits of magnesium and essential oils.

One study in the *Japanese Heart Journal* found repeated sauna therapy could [protect against oxidative stress](#).

Another in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* found among its numerous benefits, far-infrared sauna treatments could [improve chronic pain](#), chronic fatigue syndrome, depression, and congestive heart failure, and in this study, Type 2 diabetes.

Create a ritual that works for you. Maybe you'll center your breathing as you bathe, or read a motivating book. A cup of chamomile tea can help you further unwind and prepare for sleep. Steer clear of caffeine (obviously) and alcohol. A glass of pinot noir might sound soothing with your hot bath, but that alcohol's effects will kick in about 3 a.m., waking up your deep sleep.

Bath Isn't For You? Try These Alternatives

- Sauna
- Far infrared sauna
- Steam bath
- Jacuzzi

Dr. Sara's Bath Time Recipe

- Bath water as hot as you can handle
- 2 – 3 cups Epsom salt
- Add 20 drops of sandalwood like frankincense or lavender
- 1 cup of baking soda

Strategy #2: Try the Saddle Pose

One of my favorite yin yoga poses is the [Saddle pose](#). Some mornings, I'll get into Saddle poses for 10 breaths, and some mornings, I'll hold it for 10 minutes, but it always feels like I've hit the reset button on my low back architecture.

The saddle pose creates a deep opening in the sacral-lumbar arch, stretches your hips flexors and quadriceps, and if you drop backwards, stimulates your thyroid.

Start by sitting on your heels. A blanket can help improve ankle comfort. Lean back pressing your hands against the floor, creating an arch to your lower back. See my illustration so you're doing it correctly.

Variations include the Sphinx pose, which is less demanding on the lower back, and the Half Saddle where you straighten one leg.

One simple pose can change your breath and help balance hormones. I encourage you to find a yoga practice that works for you, keeping in mind your goal to reduce stress levels. Take some classes, try a few DVDs, or [visit my page](#) to learn simple, effective poses.

Strategy #3: Have a Dark Chocolate Meditation

You've no doubt heard about the health benefits of dark chocolate. Patients who appear uninterested in yoga or meditation or deep breathing suddenly become fascinated by this technique.

One study looked at how excess cortisol affected parameters of metabolic syndrome, including hypertension, insulin resistance and dyslipidemia.



Overweight and obese females ate either 20 grams of polyphenol-rich dark chocolate (DC) or a placebo DC with negligible amounts of polyphenols. The polyphenol-rich group had [improved glucose metabolism](#), lipid profiles, and blood pressure, whereas the placebo group had *increased* insulin and cortisol levels.

Studies also confirm dark chocolate can lower cortisol. One found 40 grams per day for two weeks [lowered urine cortisol levels](#). Even if Nestlé sponsored the study, it's pretty impressive.

Quality and quantity both matter. Go to the best chocolate store nearby, buying the darkest (at least 80% cacao), organic, lowest-sugar chocolate you can find, and eat it mindfully.

Especially if you have hormonal imbalances, your impulse might be to devour that chocolate. You don't even taste it, and before you know, you've consumed that whole bar.

The key with this strategy is no chewing! Simply stay completely mindful and feel the chocolate slowly melt on your tongue.

If you're a type A, your mind will drift to the endless tasks you need to accomplish. *Why am I spending 10 minutes letting chocolate melt in my mouth? You might think. This is silly. I could be doing...*

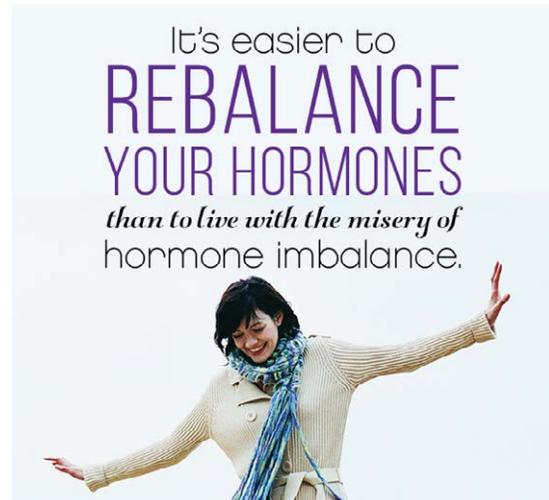
Stay with it, gradually easing your thoughts back to the chocolate. You'll carry that mindfulness and slowing-down calmness into other areas of your life.

Strategy #4: Find Your Inner Balance with Heart Math

HeartMath methodology is based on the fact that the time between each beat of your heart varies according to emotional arousal or *heart-rate variability*.

Loss of variability is a sign of inner emotional stress and waning adaptive suppleness, as well as of heart disease. If a patient rolls her eyes at my prescription of yoga or meditation, I whip out my emWave, which is smaller than a smartphone.

This isn't something manufacturers brainstormed to sell you a new product. HeartMath training has been shown to lower cortisol by 23 percent. Stanford Medical School, the U.S. Military, and corporations such as Hewlett-Packard use HeartMath for helping employees rebalance mentally and emotionally.



The Inner Balance™ Heart Math sensor works by taking a pulse reading from your earlobe (via a small clip-on sensor that connects to your iPhone, iPad, or iPod touch) and instantly developing a customized breathing sequence for you to follow, based on your heart rhythms.

When you use this device for just a few minutes every day, you transform feelings of anxiety, stress, and frustration into peace, ease, and clarity.

Studies show that synchronizing your breathing with your heart rhythms while focusing on positive emotions improves relaxation, builds resilience, and reduces the negative effects of stress.

Inner Balance™ has also been shown to:

- Increase your ability to think clearly, be more intuitive, and make better decisions - especially under pressure
- Improve health and increase resilience and well-being
- Decrease stress and burnout in chaotic and changing environments
- Maximize creativity and innovation
- Boost energy and positive mood

You can also use the Inner Balance™ journal to track your feelings and help determine what created that stress or anxiety.

You can download the Inner Balance app free at iTunes. To get the maximum benefits, you'll ideally want to practice 10-20 minutes each day. You can buy the inner balance ear clip [in my store](#).

Strategy #5: Try Alternate Nostril Breathing

In Sanskrit, it's called Nadi Shodhana, or alternate-nostril breathing (A.N.D.), and yogis have been performing it for thousands of years.

Only recently have Westerners learned that breathing unilaterally through the right nostril activates the sympathetic nervous system and left hemisphere of the brain, and that unilaterally breathing through the left nostril activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the relaxation response) and right hemisphere of the brain.

A.N.D. does four things:

- Lowers your pulse
- Reduces your blood pressure
- Raises the efficiency of your breathing
- Raises your ability to solve problems

The technique involves sitting on the floor and covering one nostril while breathing through the other. Cover your right nostril with your right thumb, and inhale through your left nostril while counting slowly to 10. Then hold your breath for a count of 10.

Notice the sensations in your lower lungs and soft belly, particularly as you reach the higher numbers. Sit up straight, but keep your core soft. Move your right ring finger to cover your left nostril, release your thumb to uncover your right nostril, and exhale through your right nostril for a slow count to 10. Then inhale through your right nostril, and hold for a count to 10.

Is the [movement of air](#) through the right nostril as smooth as it was through the left? Move your thumb back to cover your right nostril and exhale through your left. Repeat for three more rounds.

It works. One study in the *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research* evaluated A.N.D. on the parasympathetic nervous system in healthy young adult males. Researchers concluded A.N.D. [influences the parasympathetic nervous system significantly](#).

Do this in traffic, on line at the grocery store, whenever you need a serenity boost. You might get a funny stare if you do A.N.D. in public, but your parasympathetic will thank you.

Strategy #6: Hip Hop Chant

Chanting needn't become solemn or serious. If the chants I mentioned earlier don't resonate with you, check out the work of [MC Yogi](#), who combines sacred chanting with a modern hip-hop twist.

The Beastie Boys also have two chant songs on their album *Ill Communication*. "Shambala" combines Tibetan Buddhist chants, while "Bodhisattva Vow" becomes their variation of a vow Mahayana Buddhists take to attain complete enlightenment.



Strategy #7: Take Deep Balloon Breaths

Another of my favorite breathing techniques is deep balloon breaths, where you take a deep breath into your lower belly and let it expand, exhale, and let the belly return toward spine.

Balloon breaths involve:

- 10 breaths
- About a five-second inhale
- A five-second exhale

Imagine your breath as an inflated balloon. With your inhale, you take in a little air, and as you exhale, you expel that stress.

Like alternate-nostril breathing, you can do balloon breathing sitting in traffic or anywhere you need a quick serenity boost. You might want to create a reminder – sticky notes throughout your home or a red bracelet – so that you breathe, period. That alone can take down your cortisol levels and leave you feeling calm in even the most hectic situation.

Conclusion

The first step to reducing stress is to acknowledge it exists and get in the driver's seat. If you had asked me in my mid-30s, I certainly would have admitted I was stressed, but that stress felt so out of control that I couldn't even begin to imagine how to harness it.

Thankfully, I've discovered an arsenal of techniques that helps me taper down my sympathetic and find bliss even in the most chaotic moments. The techniques I've discussed here are among my favorites to de-stress and create calm.

I say create, because you have the ability to harness your emotions and change direction. If you feel a nagging, persistent stress, try one of these techniques and see if you don't feel better.

For more techniques, be sure you're on my newsletter list by signing up at SaraGottfriedMD.com.

Think of these as a sampler platter. Every one proves powerful, but ultimately I want you to learn what works best for you in order to reset cortisol and dial down your sympathetic nervous system. With these techniques, I often remind patients that you're only minutes away from creating more bliss and joy as you ease away tension.

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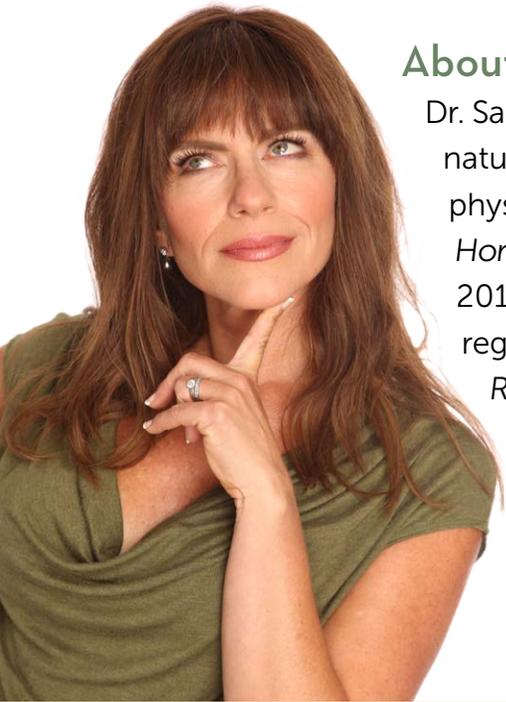
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About Dr. Sara

Dr. Sara Gottfried, M.D. teaches women how to balance their hormones naturally so they can rock their mission. She is a Harvard-educated physician, speaker and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Hormone Cure* (check out the new paperback from Simon & Schuster, 2014). She is board-certified in Obstetrics and Gynecology, and is regularly featured in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Redbook*, *O Magazine*, and *Yoga Journal*. Known for effortlessly blending the seriousness of women's health with playfulness and humor, Dr. Sara's mission is to help women lose weight, feel great, and be vital from their cells to their soul. Work with her online by joining her semi-annual detox for 21 days! Learn more at www.saragottfriedmd.com.

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