

● Ask America's Ultimate Experts

“Help! I can't relax!”

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths—now open your eyes and read the expert tips that'll help you relax for good!

1 Unwind in minutes!

Kick off your heels!

“The nerves in your feet constantly send messages to your brain,” notes expert Kathleen Hall, Ph.D. “Wearing the same shoes every day dulls the bottoms of your feet, muddying those messages and preventing you from relaxing. So it's good to vary your footwear.” Or just kick off your shoes! “Sensory differences—walking on grass, then carpet, then tile—help us relax,” says Hall. Shoe-only zone? Squeeze a stress ball—your hands are also full of “feelers” that send relaxing thoughts to your brain.

Make a friendly face-to-face date!

Think you need to embrace someone to get the feel-good benefits of the “hugging-hormone” oxytocin? No! “Face-to-face contact with a friend or loved one releases oxytocin,” confirms Hall. Bonus: “When we're stressed, our arteries tighten by 35%, but the minute you start laughing with friends, they open up by 22%!”

Tense away stress!

Feeling overwhelmed? “Pretend you're a rag doll,” urges psychologist Susan Albers, Psy.D., and let all your muscles loosen. “Now tighten every muscle in your body, hold for a few seconds and relax.” The contrast between tensing your body and completely letting go helps you relax faster, she explains.

Dab vanilla on your neck!

To get your morning off to a Zen start, dab a bit of vanilla essential oil on your neck as you get out of the shower, says Hall. Vanilla's link to pleasant childhood memories makes you feel secure. Why dab it on your neck? The heat from your pulse is a natural diffuser. “In traffic, I rub my hand on my neck and breathe in the calming scent.”



2 Creative ways to create calm!

Listen to the animals!

Our brains are hard-wired to tune into the songs of nature, notes Hall. “They're so relaxing—I listen to recordings of whales, and when it gets colder outside, I love the sound of a crackling fireplace.” Indeed, soothing sounds playing in the background creates an oasis of calm for your brain called “involuntary attention”—a kind of mental time-out, as you switch out of the high-alert mode needed to pay close attention to everyday stressors like work meetings and traffic jams.

Tip! “The sound of purring cats is so calming,” says Hall. It's also therapeutic: The frequency at which cats purr may even speed healing, research suggests. Just plug in whatever you find soothing like “whale song” or “cats purr” on YouTube.com.

Gaze at a serenity shelf!

“Making your space yours helps you relax,” says Hall. Her advice: “Years ago, I put pictures of my grandmothers, a megaphone from my high school cheerleading days and a few other knickknacks on a shelf in my closet. Every time I get dressed in the morning, it reminds me of who I was, helping me feel calm and confident.”



3 Fill up on soothing snacks!

Go for vitamin B6!

What do bananas and sweet potato chips have in common? They're full of tension-taming vitamin B6, says psychologist Jennifer Abel.

Chew on chocolate-covered blueberries!

A more accurate name for blueberries, according to Hall? “Brain berries!” she declares. “They grow neurons, and in one recent British study, people experienced a 15% mood boost and felt more relaxed after eating them.”

And chocolate is proven to deliver even more mood benefits. Find them at gourmet and natural-food stores and at Trader Joe's.

Pile on the pistachios!

Pistachios are rich in magnesium, which helps regulate levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. “Plus, they keep your blood sugar in check, which helps curb stress eating,” notes Albers. “I also like that they have shells. You have to open them up slowly, helping you relax and stay mindful about what you're doing.” Other relaxing nuts? Almonds and pecans, which are rich in the stress-busting antioxidant vitamin E.

Play a video game!
In one recent study, 85% of women said they felt more in control and relaxed after playing a video game for five to 10 minutes!



—Kristina Mastrocola

Our expert panel



Kathleen Hall, Ph.D., is the founder of The Stress Institute and The Mindful Living Network. She's been a guest expert on several television programs, including *The Today Show* and *The Dr. Oz Show*.



Susan Albers, Psy.D., author of *50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*, is a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic Family Health Center.



Psychologist **Jennifer Abel, Ph.D.**, who specializes in treating panic, worry and OCD, is the author of *Active Relaxation: How to Increase Productivity and Achieve Balance by Decreasing Stress and Anxiety*.