Use your stress—don't be used by it!

These techniques can give you a burst of energy, a fresh outlook, or a way to wind down after a bad day.

Stress isn't always bad. Facing too few challenges can make life dull, deadening, and boring. But too much tension becomes overwhelming. The key to healthy lifestyle and effective stress management is the ability to pace yourself to minimize the strain of stress and maximize its benefits.

What does that mean? Shifting gears—a lot. We shift gears several times a day, or even several times an hour, in response to the kaleidoscope of situations we face. Sometimes we need to slow down, relax, and shift to a lower gear. Sometimes we need to rev up to meet a challenge. At other times we need to loosen up and release tension. Below are tips to help you:

- Loosen up when you're stuck in rush-hour traffic, waiting in line, or holding on the phone.
- Slow down when you're racing from one task to another.
- Rev up before a presentation or a meeting with new clients.

How to loosen up

- **Pretzel.** Imagine that your body is tied up in knots and only you know how to untie them. Begin with your toes and gradually move up the body, tensing and relaxing each set of muscles along the way. Imagine you're tightening the knots as you tense the muscles and undoing the knots as you relax the muscles and let go of the tension.
- Breathe into tension. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. As you become aware of any points of tension, "breathe into" that spot, allowing the breath to bring calm to the area and carry away tension as you exhale.
- **Self massage.** Reach across your body and massage the muscles of your neck and shoulder with long firm strokes. Knead any especially tight areas with firm motions. Then repeat the process on the other side. With both hands, massage the base of your skull with firm, circular strokes. Continue over the scalp and face, stopping to give special attention wherever you notice tension. Remember to massage and loosen the jaw.
- Shake a leg. Stand up and shake—one at a time—an arm, a leg, the other arm, the other leg, and your whole body. Take a deep breath and let yourself go limp all over.

How to rev up

- **Stretch and move.** Stand up and stretch. Arch your back and stretch your arms and fingers out wide. Hold that posture for awhile and then let go. Now move your body all around to get the blood pumping. Clap your hands. Do jumping jacks. Move!
- **Exhilaration break.** Imagine yourself somewhere exhilarating: standing on a cliff above the ocean, getting a standing ovation, cheering at an exciting football game, crossing the finish line at a race, laughing at a joke with friends, giving birth. Let the vividness of that vision charge up your batteries.
- **Pep talk.** Give yourself a pep talk. Use your best persuasive powers to motivate, encourage, cajole, support, cheer, or challenge yourself. Ask someone else to join you.
- **Stirring music.** Turn on some lively music like a march, a polka, or some rock 'n' roll. Start moving, dancing, bouncing, or marching. Sing along. Let the music pump you up and pull you along.
- **Body bracer.** Gently pat or tap all over your body in an energizing rhythm. Keep it up until you feel tingly all over and are charged up.
- Exercise. Vigorous exercise of any kind is a sure fire way to get revved up. Jumping jacks, running in place, or a brisk walk can produce a burst of energy.

How to slow down

- 10-second breathing. In a high-tension situation, when your mind or body is racing out of control, slow down your breathing to a 10-second cycle (six breaths a minute). Find a clock or watch with a second hand. Inhale for five seconds, exhale for five seconds. Repeat for two to five minutes.
- **60-second break.** Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Visualize yourself lounging on a sunny beach, watching the sunset, or relaxing in a bathtub, shower, or sauna. Feel the tension melt away.
- **5-minute vacation.** Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, then visualize your favorite vacation place or activity. Let your imagination carry you away to a special spot that's refreshing and relaxing.
- **Chest massage.** Relax your chest muscles and open up your breathing with a vigorous massage along the midline and across the chest below your collarbones.
- **Bother list.** Write down a list of all the worries, pressures, or concerns that are crowding your mind and demanding attention. Then destroy the list or tuck it into your wallet for later attention.
- **Peaceful focus.** Focus on something pleasant and beautiful in your immediate environment (a blade of grass, a painting, a color). Concentrate on the beauty you see and breathe it in. Allow that beauty to slow you down.