

20 Ways to Eliminate Stress From Your Life

Taken from Zen Habits: zenhabits.net

You often see articles on ways to [unwind and relax after a stressful day](#), which I always find useful, but for me the most important advice would be to get to the source of the problem, and cut stress out before it even happens.

By careful editing of your life, and changing certain habits, you can eliminate most (not all) sources of stress in your life.

I don't believe that a stress-free life is possible. Stress is a response to challenges in life, and a life without challenges is too boring to contemplate. However, I do believe that most of the stress in our lives is unnecessary, and that it can be eliminated by taking some simple (and some not-so-simple) steps. It can't be accomplished overnight — I've been eliminating stressors in my life for awhile now, and I'm still not done. But I think it's a worthwhile goal.

Let's first take a look at an example — it's a little extreme, but it exemplifies the typical stressors in people's lives. Let's say Fred gets up in the morning, waking up late, and now has to rush to get ready. He's so rushed that he spills his coffee on his shirt and has to change, nicks himself shaving. He heads out the door and then has to go back in the house because he forgot his wallet. He gets in the car and realizes he forgot his keys.

Now he's on the way in to work and is in the middle of rush-hour traffic — and his temper starts to flare after someone cuts him off. He's honking at people, cursing, and arrives to work late and in a bad mood. He snaps at someone and is surly all morning. His desk is covered in piles of paper, and he can't find that report he needs to work on. His inbox is overflowing and his email notification is going off, and he sees he has 36 messages to respond to. He knows he's late on two projects and his boss isn't happy. He's got to finish 5 tasks before the 11 a.m. meeting, and he's got meetings all afternoon. You get the idea. His day does not go well, and he hits rush-hour traffic on the way home. He gets home late, exhausted, completely stressed, his mind still on his late and as-yet uncompleted projects, his still-full inbox and email inbox, and all the stuff piling up that he has to work on tomorrow. The house is a mess and he snaps at his family. His kids have not put things away exactly where he told them to put them away, so he begins to yell at them. He has a quick, greasy dinner in front of the TV and zones out before falling asleep late.

Again, this is a bit extreme, but you can see through this illustration some of the things that stress people out. There are many more, of course, and I won't cover all of them here.



Photo courtesy of [riot jane](#)

But these sources of stress can be eliminated with a little thought. Here's how:

- 1. Identify stressors.** This is the most important step of all, as identifying the things that stress you out in your life is the first step towards eliminating them. Take 10 minutes to think about what stresses you out during the day. What weekly occurrences stress you out? What people, activities, things cause stress in your life? Make a Top 10 list, and see which of them can be eliminated, and start to weed them out. For those that can't, find ways to make them less stressful.
- 2. Eliminate unnecessary commitments.** I did a post on editing your commitments before ... apply those concepts here. We all have many commitments in our life, starting with work but also including commitments related to kids, our spouses, things to do at home, other family, civic, side work, religious, hobbies, online activities and more. Consider each of them, the amount of stress they provide, and the value you get out of them. Edit brutally, and take steps today to remove the ones that stress you out the most.
- 3. Procrastination.** We all do this, of course. But allowing stuff to pile up will stress us out. Find ways to take care of stuff now (form a Do It Now habit) and keep your inbox and desk clear. See [20 Procrastination Hacks](#) for more ideas.
- 4. Disorganization.** We're all disorganized to some extent. Even if we've organized something, and created a great system for keeping it that way, things tend to move towards chaos over time. But disorganization stresses us out, in terms of visual clutter, and in making it difficult to find stuff we need. Take time to get things in your life organized, starting with [your desk](#) and [the papers in your home](#), and moving on to other areas.
- 5. Late.** Being late always stresses us out. We have to rush to get ready, rush to get there, and stress out the whole time about looking bad and being late. Learn the habit of being early, and this stress disappears. Make a conscious effort to start getting ready earlier, and to leave earlier. This also makes driving less stressful. Time yourself to see how long it actually takes to get ready, and how long it actually takes to get somewhere. You've probably been underestimating these times. Once you know these times, you can plan backwards so that you show up 10 minutes early each time. It's a good feeling.
- 6. Controlling.** We are not the Master of this Universe. I know we sometimes wish we were, but acting as if we are is a sure way to get stressed out. Trying to control situations and people cannot work, and only serves to increase our anxiety when it doesn't work. Learn to let go, and accept the way that other people do things, and accept what happens in different situations. The only thing you can control is yourself — work on that before you consider trying to control the world. Also learn to separate yourself from tasks and to delegate them. Learning to let go of our need to control others and the situations around us is a major step towards eliminating stress.

7. **Multitasking.** Having multiple tasks going on at the same time might seem productive, but in actuality it slows us down from actually focusing on a task and completing it — and it stresses us out in the meantime. Learn to [single-task](#).
8. **Eliminate energy drains.** If you've analyzed your life (in Step 1) and found things that stress you out, you might have also noticed things that drain your energy. Certain things in our life just cause us to be more exhausted than others, with less value. Identify them, and cut them out. You'll have much more energy and much less stress. Happiness ensues.
9. **Avoid difficult people.** You know who they are. If you take a minute to think about it, you can identify all the people in your life — bosses, coworkers, customers, friends, family, etc. — who make your life more difficult. Now, you could confront them and do battle with them, but that will most certainly be difficult. Just cut them out of your life.
10. **Simplify life.** Simplifying, of course, is a [major theme](#) of Zen Habits. Simplify your routines, your commitments, your information intake, your cluttered rooms, the mass of stuff going on in your life ... and have less stress as a result. Start with [Edit Your Life](#) and then look through the [other simplicity articles](#).
11. **Unschedule.** Create more open periods of time in your life. It's not necessary to schedule every minute of our lives. Learn to [avoid meetings](#), keep wide open blocks of time where we either work on our important tasks or batch process the smaller ones. When someone asks to schedule a meeting, first try to get it done through email or phone ... if that doesn't work, avoid having it scheduled. Ask them to call you and see if you're free at that time. You will love having an open schedule.
12. **Slow down.** Instead of rushing through life, learn to [take things slow](#). Enjoy your food, enjoy the people around you, enjoy nature. This step alone can save tons of stress.
13. **Help others.** It may sound contradictory to add more tasks to your life by trying to help other people (you've got enough to do), but if you were to add anything to your life, this should be it. Helping others, whether volunteering for a charity organization or just making an effort to be compassionate towards people you meet, not only gives you a very good feeling, it somehow lowers your stress level. Of course, this doesn't work if you try to control others, or help others in a very rushed and frenetic way — learn to take it easy, enjoy yourself, and let things happen, as you work to make the lives of others better.
14. **Relax throughout the day.** It's important to take mini-breaks during your work day. Stop what you're doing, massage your shoulders and neck and head and hands and arms, get up and stretch, walk around, drink some water. Go outside and appreciate the fresh air and the beautiful sky. Talk to someone you like. Life doesn't have to be all about productivity. You should also avoid using online activity too much as your de-stressing activity — get away from the computer to relax.

15. **Quit work.** This one's drastic, and probably too drastic for most. But in most likelihood, your work is your absolute biggest stressor. Getting out of your 9-to-5, [automating your income](#), and finding something you truly love to do, that you're passionate about, will create a positive life and much less stressful one at that. Give it a little thought before dismissing it — there might be possibilities here you haven't considered.

16. **Simplify your to-do list.** I've written about this before, but attempting to do everything on your long to-do list will definitely stress you out. Learn to [simplify your to-do list down to the few essential tasks](#), and you will enjoy the process much more.

17. **Exercise.** This is common advice for stress relief, and that's because it works ... but it's also a stress prevention method. Exercising helps relieve the stress buildup, it gives you some quiet time to contemplate and relax, and just as importantly, it makes you more fit. A fitter person is better equipped to handle stress. Another important factor: being unhealthy can be a major stressor (especially once you have to go to the hospital), and exercise can help prevent that.

18. **Eat healthy.** This goes hand-in-hand with exercise as a stress prevention method, of course. Become healthier and a major source of stress will disappear. Also, I've found that greasy food, for me, puts me in a worse mood and can contribute to stress levels immediately.

19. **Be grateful.** This might not be as obvious as some of the others, but developing an attitude of gratitude (I sound like a preacher with that rhyme!) is a way of thinking positive, eliminating negative thinking from your life, and thereby reducing stress. Learn to be grateful for what you have, for the people in your life, and see it as a gift. With this sort of outlook on life, stress will go down and happiness will go up. That's a winning formula.

20. **Zen-like environment.** Take time to declutter your desk (as mentioned above) and even once you do that, continually edit your desk and working space, and the things in your home, until you've created a [simple, peaceful, Zen-like environment](#). It will be much less stressful to work in an environment like that than a more cluttered and distracting one.