

# THRIVING

A JOURNAL OF WELL-BEING from  
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## Go, Go, Go...on a Break (It's Important!)

In today's "go, go, go" society, we idealize the pink Energizer Bunny® that beats his drum non-stop. As the battery commercial says, "He keeps going and going and..."

And so do we.

We work long hours, days and weeks without a break. Some employees don't even take advantage of their entire vacation time. Then we pack our non-work hours with more activities.

But taking breaks—whether for a short walk or a long vacation—helps you avoid burnout, improve mental health and reduce the likelihood of stress-related illnesses that sometimes accompanies the "don't stop 'til you drop" attitude. Breaks encourage the discovery of fresh perspectives and new ideas. They are a delicious reward for hard work, a pause that reinvigorates.

If you feel overwhelmed, depleted or under-energized, chances are it's time for you to take a break. These three practices help you renew, recharge and refresh.

### Get up and walk or stretch.

If you spend most of your day at a computer or stuck in one place, get up and move around for a few minutes several times a day. Try to stretch. Experts continually caution that sedentary people are at increased risk of developing health issues, such as heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Also, looking away from a computer screen for even one minute now and then can give your eyes—and mind—a much-needed break. According to the Mayo Clinic, although eye strain can be annoying, it usually isn't serious and can be relieved by resting your eyes.

On the other hand, if you are

running yourself ragged, chasing after kids or keeping up a hectic pace, carving out a half-hour for a nap or some rest and relaxation will do wonders for your body and soul. Even most athletes recognize the importance of resting after intense exercise. It's essential to high-level performance and allows the body to repair and strengthen itself.

### Take a day off.

When, or even better, *before* you start dreading getting up in the mornings, take a mental health day every now and then. Do whatever recharges you, whether that's browsing antiques stores, reading a book, going for an energizing hike or even having lunch with friends. The idea here is to take a break before you get sick, depressed or feel overwhelmed.

### Plan a vacation.

Whether you have one week or a month off a year, make sure to take every moment of it. Or if you decide that a "stay-cation" or "play-cation" is your best option, figure out in advance how to make the best of the time you will spend in and around your home or city.

According to Karen Matthews of the University of Pittsburgh's Mind-Body Center, "It is important to engage in multiple leisure activities, both as a way to enjoy life more, but also to potentially have a benefit on health and be a stress reliever."

It's up to you to discover when it's time to take a break from your job or whatever your regular routine is. Taking breaks—big or small—helps you remain motivated and excited about your life. You want to be the Energizer Bunny? Take time to recharge! \*

## 10 Ways to Cool Your Anger

*Left unchecked, anger can damage relationships, careers, even lives. Here are 10 simple ways to cool your anger before it gets out of control:*

- 1. Take several deep breaths.** Breathe in calmness and then release anger as you breathe out.
- 2. Do something physical.** Take a walk, go to the gym or walk some stairs. Not only is exercise healthy for your body, it'll do wonders for your mood.
- 3. Take a break.** Before you blow up, walk away from the situation to regroup and gather your thoughts.
- 4. Meditate or listen to some soothing music.** Rewiring your thought patterns toward something peaceful and relaxing can help defuse anger.
- 5. Be grateful.** Learn to find the lesson in every situation and be thankful for opportunities to grow as a person.
- 6. Write it out.** Journaling your thoughts helps you vent in a safe and positive way.
- 7. Count to 10.** This might sound simplistic, but it's an easy and quick way to take the edge off of volatile anger.
- 8. Refocus the negative energy** of anger into something more positive. Look for humor in the situation.
- 9. Learn to be assertive.** Learn what your needs are and how to make them clear to others in a way that is respectful of yourself and others, not pushy or demanding.
- 10. Seek professional help.** If you find you're angry a lot, recognize when anger might actually be a cry for help. \*

## A Letter From *Margaret Hood Black*



Summer is traditionally the time of the year that many of us take vacation. Or at least it used to be. It seems we are doing so less (with increasing numbers of workers skipping their vacations altogether). And given our super-fast-paced world, we may need it even more.

The front page article explores why it's important NOT to skip vacations — in fact, why it's important to take all manner of breaks. Then the back-page article brings home the message with a sobering look at the cumulative effects of consistent, persistent stress — and what you can do to avoid that.

One of the great de-stressors not mentioned in that article is love, especially the romantic type. When you take time out for romance, you're not only getting a good break from the go-go-go of your life, fulfilling the recommendations of the page 1 and page 4 articles — you're also getting a good dose of loving feelings, which magnifies the recharge! It also keeps your relationship well-oiled and avoids the stress of a difficult relationship. Take the quiz to assess how well you are tending that romance. And be sure to check the Top 10 for ways to reduce anger, another big stress producer.

Finally, the page 3 article can help whenever you are faced with major life trauma — through natural disaster, death or significant loss. Of course, please don't hesitate to call, if you need help moving through those experiences.

## How Well Are You Nurturing Your Romance?

A romantic relationship is like a beautiful, vibrant garden that requires regular watering, nutrients and sunshine to keep it alive and healthy.

You wouldn't expect your garden to grow and thrive without taking the proper steps to nurture it. The same is true of your relationship. Without ongoing care and attention to your romance, your relationship may ultimately wither on the vine.

Take the following quiz to find out how well you are nurturing your romance. It contains 10 excellent ways to help love relationships grow and thrive. Grade yourself on each of the following statements according to how frequently it pertains to you and your relationship. You can then interpret your results at the end of the questions.



Very frequently 10 points  
Often 8 points  
Occasionally 4 points  
Rarely or never 0 points

1. You hug, cuddle and say "I love you" to your spouse or lover.
2. You compliment your loved one with true and honest statements.
3. You surprise your partner with romantic gestures, such as unexpected cooked meals, special notes, trips or date nights.
4. You enjoy sexual intimacy with your partner. You're as much a willing giver as you are an appreciative receiver.
5. You make your romantic relationship a major priority in your life, as opposed to other distractions such as TV, sports, chores or other obligations.
6. You understand and acknowledge your lover's needs and wants, and show interest in his or her feelings and desires.
7. You listen deeply to your partner, recognizing that truly "hearing" what's inside the other person's heart is one of the most romantic gestures of all.
8. You treat your partner with respect, even during disagreements.
9. Along with being intimate partners, you and your loved one are good friends, companions, co-creators, fun pals and spiritual equals.
10. You communicate openly and honestly with your loved one.

**80 to 100 points:** Congratulations! You understand that love is about creating an equal and balanced happy relationship with your partner, one in which both of you learn and grow together.

**60 to 79 points:** Although you might have a few weeds in your garden of love, you are doing an adequate job of nurturing your relationship. But you could use some pointers, such as that in order to have a wonderful partner, you have to be one.

**0 to 59 points:** You may want to re-evaluate your relationship to determine if it's really the right one for you. Unless you make some changes, your relationship may be in danger of drying up. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like to explore how to reinvigorate your relationship. \*

# Starting Over: Tips to Finding Grace in Difficult Times

**N**atural disaster. Divorce. Death of a loved one. Job loss. Career change.

There's not one of us who has escaped major change in our lives. And whether you bring on that change yourself or circumstances beyond your control are thrust upon you, starting over is never easy.

In fact, major life change can bring with it extreme heartache, debilitating stress and despair.

But you *can* do it. You have the means within yourself to recuperate and grow from any life-altering situation. Truly.

If you or a loved one is facing an experience that requires "starting over," keep the following points in mind. They'll help you get through a very difficult time with greater peace-of-mind and grace.



## Take time to let go.

Starting over often happens due to traumatic events. Even when you initiate the change that requires starting over, grief is natural. Take the necessary time to grieve your losses. Your time frame for mourning may be different than someone else's, so be true to your own needs.

## Be gentle with yourself.

If ever there was a time to love and nurture yourself, it would be now. Go easy and be sweet with yourself. Take rest when you need it. Say no to anything but the essential, and use that extra time to sleep, walk in nature, visit with supportive friends. Just be. It *will* get better.

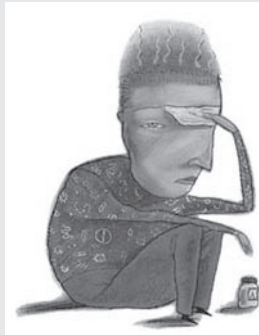
## One step at a time.

Starting over can feel overwhelming at first, so pay attention to one step at a time. For example, if your home has been devastated by fire or another disaster, take care of your immediate housing needs and safety first before you turn to the bigger question of where to live in the long run.

## Take consistent baby steps.

You will make more progress (and it will feel easier) if you focus on accomplishing regular, small tasks rather than large ones now and then. Doing

so will also help you move through the times when you feel so overwhelmed that you can't seem to do anything. Acknowledge each and every step as an accomplishment. Each and every one *is*.



## Accept the change.

Whatever has happened has simply "happened." It just is. Try to avoid "what if" scenarios or feeling guilty or creating stories to explain why it happened. Hard as it might seem to do, acceptance helps you embrace the process of starting over.

## Make an attitude adjustment.

Starting over *can* be as easy as changing your mind or your attitude. Instead of being fearful of change and what lies ahead, embrace the potential that change makes possible. Try to view the change as adventurous, perhaps even exhilarating. You may well learn to celebrate change rather than trying to avoid it.

## Set realistic deadlines.

When it comes to the tasks required of starting over, it's helpful to set deadlines for yourself. But give yourself ample time to accomplish them. For example, you might set a date to attend a support group to help you deal with the pain of loss.

## Learn new skills if necessary.

Starting over might mean having to learn some new skills. If you lost your job, you might need or want to go back to school. If you lost a longtime spouse, you might have to learn how to date again. Be open to learning. It's a positive way to start over and have some fun at the same time.

## Create a support team.

Don't be afraid to ask friends or family members for help, or attend support groups. And know when to seek help from professionals. Consider advice from books as well, such as James M. Kramon's *Starting Out or Starting Over: An Expert's Checklists for Life's Major Decisions*. Such resources can be invaluable to the starting-over process.

Like it or not, change is inevitable. When you learn to accept, embrace and grow from the change, starting over might even begin to seem like a good thing. ✧



# Stress and Illness: What's The Connection?

**B**elieve it or not, stress may not be the villain it's made out to be. In small, short-term doses, stress can give an athlete the competitive edge or a public speaker the enthusiasm to project his or her voice well. It can actually boost the immune system.

But chronic stress over time—the kind commonly encountered in daily life, such as work overload, financial difficulties, marital problems—can have significant negative effects on nearly every system of the body, suppressing the immune system and ultimately manifesting as an illness.

The danger occurs when stress becomes persistent and consistent, a way of life. Chronic stress raises the risk of viral infection and diabetes. It can trigger severe problems for asthmatics, lead to gastrointestinal issues and cause high blood pressure, which brings an increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

To get a handle on this silent adversary, you need to first recognize that you are chronically stressed.

Here are four kinds of warning signs:

**1. Cognitive symptoms** include problems with memory, an inability to focus, or feeling worried

or negative all the time.

**2. Emotional symptoms** can include feeling moody, lonely, overwhelmed, unhappy or depressed.

**3. Physical symptoms** might include: constant aches and pains, nausea, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat.



**4. Behavioral symptoms** might range from severe changes in sleeping or eating patterns to turning to bad coping habits, such as smoking or drinking.

Your ability to successfully navigate stress depends on factors such as quality of relationships, general outlook on life, emotional intelligence and genetics. But the

impact of stress accumulates. Just because you appear to tolerate stress well now doesn't mean it won't sneak up on you later.

Besides exercise, sleep and healthy eating, here are a few other ways to help protect your health.

**Seek activities or projects that make you feel good.** For some, it's taking a bath, for others it's racing three-wheelers. Determine what's important to you and create a lifestyle that embraces and supports increased ease in your life.

**Go for empowered thinking.** While you can't necessarily control a system, another person's behavior or others' impressions of you, you are always in control of your thoughts, actions, values and choices.

**Enjoy yourself more.** Find the places, people and circumstances that authentically bring you delight, and insist on giving them a place in your life. Increasing joy can add years to your life.

A little bit of stress isn't necessarily bad. But when it's constant and negative, our minds and bodies can pay a hefty price. Prevention is not only the best medicine, it's also more fun! ✨

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Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides couple, individual and group therapy. In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area).  
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