

Experts' tips for dealing with stress

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By Terri Finch Hamilton | The Grand Rapids PressMLive.com

Bill Weitzel is stressing me out.

I'm here in his office at Catholic Charities West Michigan, where he's a therapist who counsels people in all kinds of turmoil. He's teaching a class this month on managing stress.

I'm trying to get some tips, notebook and pen poised for duty.

"Put your notebook down," Weitzel says.

Sorry, Bill — I have to write down the stuff you say.

"You need to put it down," he repeats gently. "I want you to put the tips of your first fingers against the tips of your thumbs."

But then I won't be able to ...



Katie Greene | The Grand Rapids Press

Reduce anxiety: Bill Weitzel, a behavioral health outpatient therapist at Catholic Charities West Michigan, says our thoughts and mind have a lot to do with physical stress.

Weitzel reaches over and takes my notebook and pen, setting them down on the table.

I can feel my blood pressure rising. He smiles reassuringly.

"Close your eyes, and put your fingertips against your thumbs," he says, demonstrating. "Now think of a place that relaxes you, a place that makes you happy."

Anyplace where I can have my notebook and pen back, I think. But I say, obligingly, "The beach."

Then, Weitzel starts describing my beach — the waves lapping, the balmy breeze, the blue sky, some other sensations I can't remember exactly because he wouldn't let me write them down. His calm voice is soothing. I imagine the sand between my toes and the warm sun on my face.

"Breathe," he says quietly.

I can do this little exercise anywhere, Weitzel says. Touching my fingertips to my thumb tips gets it going, he says, then my mind will follow.

Weitzel is a big believer in how our minds can help us control stress. He's a member of the Grand Rapids Center for Mindfulness, which teaches people how to use mindfulness to manage stress. Its programs are based on work at the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

"Your thoughts and your mind have a lot to do with physical stress," Weitzel says.

He knows a bit about stress.

A few years ago, he was laid off from his longtime career at Aquinas College.

"I had never been unemployed," he says. "I had panic attacks. The first time, I thought I was having a heart attack.

"We have a better understanding now of the way the brain works," he says. "How our thoughts and worries make chemical changes in our bodies."

He talks about exercising your mind to reduce stress.

“Bring your attention from all these crazy thoughts — all these thoughts rob you from being in the moment,” he says. “Bring your thoughts in. When they start to go back to your stress, pull them back in again.”

“The first time you do it, it’s flabby,” Weitzel says. “But do it more, and you strengthen your ability to focus. You strengthen that attention muscle.”

Pay attention

Weitzel touts “breath awareness.” Notice your breathing. Notice where the breath goes when it enters and leaves your body.

Don’t try to change it, he says, but it may change naturally as you observe it.

If your mind wanders away, gently bring your attention back to your breath. Do this for 15 to 20 minutes, he says.

Other experts in stress control echo Weitzel’s advice.



Cory Olsen | The Grand Rapids Press

Emotional-physical connection: Sue VerWys, a cardiovascular and stroke nurse and community nurse educator at Spectrum Health Healthier Communities, advocates brainstorming about your stressors and avoiding those you can.

“Deep breathing is extremely effective in reducing stress,” says Sue VerWys, a cardiovascular and stroke nurse and community nurse educator at Spectrum Health Healthier Communities. “Sit comfortably or lie down. Breathe in for four seconds through your nose, then breathe out six seconds through your mouth.”

“There’s a proven physiological change in your blood pressure,” she says. “I’ve taken a patient’s blood pressure, then had them breathe deeply. It’s not uncommon to take it again and have it be 20 points lower. Breathing has an amazing effect on the body.”

Stress takes a huge physical toll, VerWys says.

“More headaches, colds, sexual disorders,” she says. “Back pain. Digestive problems. Skin problems.”

Man. We’re a mess.

“Stress releases cortisol, a stress hormone,” she says.

Small increases of cortisol have some positive effects: a quick burst of energy, heightened memory, lower sensitivity to pain.

Important to relax

Experts say it’s important that your body relaxes after a stressful event so the body’s functions can return to normal. But in today’s high-stress culture, the body’s stress response is activated so often, the body often doesn’t get a chance to return to normal.

Too much cortisol is bad, resulting in higher blood pressure, lowered immunity, impaired cognitive performance and a decrease in muscle tissue.

“What are your symptoms of stress?” VerWys asks. “Nausea, diarrhea? Hyperventilation? Forgetting things, difficulty making decisions? Anxiety, nervousness, depression?”

Um, yes.

“Brainstorm about what your stressors are,” she says. “Is it anything you can avoid?”

“Some things you just have to accept,” she says. “Then, it’s a matter of attitude.”

“It’s a crazy life, and it keeps on getting crazier,” says Mishelle Bakewell, community outreach manager at Metro Health Hospital, where she coordinates workplace classes on stress management.

“Everybody has stress. It doesn’t matter if you have a job, a beautiful home, if you appear to have everything,” she says. “Some days, the sky is falling.”

She knows. Bakewell lost her husband, a brother and a nephew, all of whom died in the past 14 months.

“I just wanted to be alone,” she says. “People were really worried about me. I just had to feel the grief. Then, I was able to move on. I exercised a lot. I have a dog I had to walk twice a day.

“I give thanks for the things I do have and focus on the good memories,” she says.

Keep a gratitude journal, she advises, to remind you of what you have going for you.

She concedes that, on some stressed days, it’s a stretch to feel grateful.

“I remember days when I wrote down I was grateful for Chapstick or Bazooka bubble gum,” Bakewell says with a laugh. “It’s easy to forget sometimes there are good things in your life.”

Other tips from the experts:

- “Exercise is huge,” VerWys says. “It releases tension in the body.
- “When you walk, pretend that with each step, you’re stomping on a problem. As you walk, you’re leaving it behind.”
- “The gold standard? Talking to somebody,” VerWys says. “We were just talking the other day about how every person should be assigned a therapist at birth.
- “It might not change the stress, but it changes how you feel about it.”

- “If you really want to make a change, set small, reachable goals and have a plan for reaching them,” VerWys says. “Break it down into small steps. Maybe decide to spend 10 minutes alone every day. Take two bubble baths this week. Do deep breathing four times this week.”

- Bakewell swears by yoga.

“Just try it once,” she says. “It helps you take the focus from the outside world to your breathing. Instead of trying to wrap your head around all that’s going on in your life, you can leave your stress at the door.”

When you leave, she says, the peace stays with you for a couple of days.

You can use the techniques you learn in yoga class outside of class, she says — at your desk. In the car. In traffic.

- Visualization. VerWys loves this. Get a relaxation tape and play it. A soothing voice might take you on an imaginary walk through the woods, tell you to put your stress and worries in a box and lock the box.

“It doesn’t change the fact that you have stress,” VerWys says. “But it lets you set it aside for a little while, so it’s not constant.”

- “Go for a 20-minute walk,” Bakewell says. “Almost always, you’ll come back feeling in a better place.”

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RESOURCES

Managing stress

Learn to manage stress and overcome anxiety at a six-week class offered by therapist Bill Weitzel of Catholic Charities West Michigan. The group meets for six sessions beginning Wednesday, 6:30-8 p.m. at First (Park) Congregational Church, 10 E. Park Place NE, at Fulton Street and Ransom Avenue. Cost is \$90, or \$30 for recent or current military veterans. To register, call Weitzel at 456-1443 or email wweitzel@ccwestmi.org.

Mindfulness workshop

Elana Rosenbaum, an instructor at the Stress Management Center at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, will talk on “Mindfulness Practices for the Helping Professions,” at a workshop Jan. 24, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Wege Conference Center at Cathedral Square, 360 S. Division Ave. Cost is \$75; \$45 for students. For more information, call 361-3660 or visit grandrapidscenter-formindfulness.com. Sponsored by GVSU Kirkhof College of Nursing and Catholic Charities West Michigan.