

Three reasons why you feel stressed when trying to relax – and what you can do about it

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Have you ever tried to relax, only to find yourself overwhelmed with feeling stressed and having negative thoughts? Turns out a lot of us experience this – which is why some have coined it “stresslaxing”.

Even though stresslaxation is a new term, it describes relaxation-induced anxiety which has been studied for years. This is shown to happen to between 30% and 50% of people when they try to do relaxing things, causing symptoms of stress (such as rapid heart beat or sweating).

It’s paradoxical, given people who experience stresslaxation may need to do something relaxing to de-stress. This can turn into a destructive, vicious cycle where they can’t alleviate the stress they’re experiencing – which could result in having more negative emotions and panic attacks.

Not everyone will experience stresslaxation. Some research even suggests people who have anxiety may be more prone to it. But here are just a few of the other reasons why it happens – and what you can do to get over it.

1. You’re denying you’re stressed

Pretending that a problem doesn’t exist – also known as denial – is one of the least effective coping strategies for stress. In the case of stresslaxing, this might be denying you’re stressed to begin with.

Short periods of denial can actually help us adapt to change. For example, denial can help a person cope with their emotions after experiencing the death of someone close. But when denial is used frequently to deal with daily stressors, it can leave people feeling perpetually stuck in a rut.

When you’re in denial, your body continues sending stress signals in order to prompt you to take action and resolve your problems. This is why attempting (and failing) to relax instead of actually addressing the causes of your stress can make you feel more stressed out.

Here’s how to fix this:

- **Acknowledge that the stress symptoms can be helpful.** Your body is trying to alert you that a problem needs fixing, so it's activating all its physiological resources to help you do this. For example, an increased heart rate helps your body carry more oxygenated blood to your brain, so that your brain can come up with a solution quickly to the problems that are causing you stress.
- **Write down your deepest thoughts and feelings associated with your stress.** This will help you understand the source of your stress so you can tackle it. For example, there's little point in doing meditation daily to de-stress if the cause of your stress is being overworked. In this case, actually speaking with a manager or colleague to adjust your workload would do more to help relieve your stress than relaxing activities might.
- **Think outside the box.** When we're stressed, we might only think certain activities (such as meditation or exercise) can help us relax. But speaking to friends or family, or using an app or online resource, might be a better way to address your stress and help you feel better.

2. You're worrying about what other people will say

Most of us have something we're passionate about – whether that's our work or even a hobby. But the reason you're motivated to do these things is important.

Some people pursue their passion because they want to – whether that's to improve themselves or learn a new skill. But others may only pursue their passion because they want recognition from other people. People with certain personality types may be more prone to obsessing over their passion. Others may simply follow a certain pursuit to get praise from their colleagues or even to prove their worth to friends or family.

The problem with pursuing a passion for the wrong reason is that it can cause a person to push themselves to the limit – which could mean working despite being sick, or not taking time off to de-stress. This can make it difficult and stressful to relax – like you're wasting time that could be spent pursuing your passion when you try doing relaxing things. You might even be worried that people will think badly of you for taking time off. Ultimately, this can negatively affect wellbeing.



Try writing your thoughts down. [Yavdat/Shutterstock](#)

For people who feel like this, taking a short “mental break” from what you’re passionate about may be helpful. The break doesn’t have to be long, nor does it have to involve doing something you necessarily see as relaxing. But taking even short breaks may help you to eventually feel that it’s okay to take time away from your passion every now and again to de-stress and relax.

3. You can’t make up your mind

When making a decision, some people can’t help but explore all possible options available to them – known as maximising thoughts. This can even happen when trying to pick something relaxing to do. Even after picking something, you may instead think about the other options, wondering if something else would’ve helped you feel more relaxed. So instead of relaxing your mind, you’re stressing yourself even more.

Unfortunately, maximising leads to self-blame regret, no matter what option we choose. It’s also sometimes associated with lower wellbeing.

For a person who has a habit of maximising, they may be thinking of all the other things they have to do that day instead of actually relaxing – which may lead to feelings of stress.

Here’s how to work through this:

- **Limit the number of decisions you need to make** on the day you want to do something relaxing. Or even plan when you’re going

to do something relaxing (such as watching a movie or meditating) and how long you're going to do it for. This may make it easier to relax when the time comes as you'll know you aren't putting other things off.

- **Remember why you're trying to relax.** Your health is important, so remembering this may help you feel less stressed while trying to do a relaxing activity.

On the bright side, even if relaxation causes anxiety, it can still have a positive effect on mental health – and may even help you grow as a person. The most crucial thing is finding a relaxing activity you enjoy. Whether that's cooking, gardening or even running, it's important that it helps you switch off from your day's stress.

Author



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Jolanta Burke

Senior Lecturer, Centre for Positive Psychology and Health, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences

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