

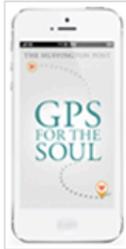
Less Stress, More Living

Stress-Relief Tools: Do These Old-Fashioned Remedies Really Work?

The Huffington Post | By Kate Bratskeir  

Posted: 04/09/2013 12:09 am EDT

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Chances are, if you searched your office building, you'd find a dusty, old stress ball.

These round little numbers are ubiquitous among corporate "freebies," almost taunting the drained office worker who'd rather chuck one at the boss than use it to de-compress. But before you launch yours at the corner window office, consider its original use: There are actually some real [stress-relieving](#) properties to the ball. And there are other, old-fashioned remedies that might be worth reviving, too.

We asked [Dr. David Posen](#), stress expert and author of "[Is Work Killing You?: A Doctor's Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress](#)," and [Dr. Kathleen Hall](#), stress expert and CEO and founder of both [The Stress Institute](#) and the [Mindful Living Network](#), to help decipher which of these tactics really work -- and which don't.

But first, a little [background on stress](#): Our stress reaction is mediated by hormones like [adrenaline](#), noradrenaline and cortisol -- all of which provide us with immediate energy to fight or run away from danger. "This goes back to caveman days," Posen says, and the fight-or-flight response is encoded within us.

But *these* days, most of our stressors are psychological rather than physical -- think a narcissistic boss instead of a wild animal. "You've got all this stress energy -- your body is in a state of high alert, but there's nowhere for it to go," Posen says. "When you're stressed, your body tightens up -- so a physical release helps to let go of some of that energy," Hall adds.

So, stress balls, swinging pendulums and a good old-fashioned cry -- could these be solutions? Here are the verdicts:

Squeezing A Stress Ball

It's true -- this classic stress-buster *can* actually work. When we're stressed out, our bodies tense up and we physically clench. The stress ball prompts you to squeeze and release, which can leave you feeling less tense than you started. "The benefit of squeezing is that it releases some kind of energy -- it also induces you to relax," Posen says. Still, there are better ways to get stress energy out -- namely exercise. "I'm not knockin' stress balls," Posen says, "but in terms of getting the real benefit long-term, you need something more than just squeezing your hand."

Letting Yourself Have A Cry

For many people, feeling overwhelmed means tears start building up inside. But instead of holding them back, letting the wet ones flow might be the ticket to getting back to balance. "Anything that gets the emotions out is helpful," Posen says. "Crying can be very cathartic." Even more, some sources suggest crying could [help to rid the stress hormones](#) from your body, [which show up in the exerted tears](#).

'Letting Loose' On The Dance Floor

Getting down with your bad self is a "wonderful" way to release energy when you're stressed, Posen says, because it "uses a lot of muscles and it's also playful." You'll be reaping the benefits of endorphins, which are produced both when you move *and* when you're enjoying yourself.

"Play is so stress-reducing because you become child-like again," Hall adds. What's more, she says, dancing typically involves music. And that means you'll profit from the mood-boosting and [stress-relieving](#) properties of that as well.

Talking It Out

"Ventilation -- talking about how you feel and getting it off your chest -- is very helpful for people," Posen says. A good-old venting session can help to get the emotion out, dissipating some of that stress energy. Having social support and a place to verbally unload is cathartic, he explains. Hall agrees: Venting is a great way to get that stress energy out, but even better if you can do it in person. "When you meet face-to-face, you produce a lot of oxytocin -- an amazing hormone that calms you down."

And you might consider adding Mom to your speed-dial if she isn't there already: [Research shows that hearing mom's voice](#) can soothe you just as it did when you were a kid.

Shouting It Out

Posen doesn't see much of a distinction between talking it out versus shouting it out. Plus, "you gotta be careful about where and how you scream," he says (and if you have to plan your shouting time, well, that might be an additional stressor). But hey -- if you're really looking to yell, there are organized ways to go about it: Consider a tantrum yoga class. [Hemalayaa](#), the creator of tantrum yoga, encourages her students to release stress by yelling, chest-pounding and laughing. "I believe we are emotional beings and there are times we need to express in order to let go of emotion, especially old stuff that is sitting in there, festering. Otherwise it gets stuck in our bodies and could turn into stress, disease, etc.," [she told ABC News](#).

A Good, Old-Fashioned Time Out

More than just for scolding's sake, we put our kids in time-out to help them regroup and recompose. We can (and should) do the same for ourselves when on the verge of some kind of Benjamin Button retrogression. Taking a break from whatever you're doing (and what's likely causing you to stress in the first place) can help you collect yourself and [actually become more productive](#). Think you don't have time? [Just a 20-second mini-break could be all you need](#).

Breaking Something

Over the last year or so, we've seen news of [rage rooms cropping up](#). The theory goes that physical destruction can help relieve aggression: People can sign up for some time to smash a room to pieces. Sure, this might help exert some pent-up stress energy, but Posen says there are "so many better ways of draining stress energy without doing damage."

Writing An Angry Letter That Won't Be Seen Again

The process of writing down your angry (or stressful) thoughts can be cathartic, and a good outlet for frustration. "You don't have to worry about your handwriting or spelling or grammar -- just write furiously," Posen says. The key is ensuring this letter won't be read again: by you *or* the person you might be directing it at. "Don't reread it," he advises, since "all you're doing is swallowing your stress all over again." May we suggest a shredder?

Taking A Deep Breath

"Take a deep breath" is a phrase that's almost become cliché; it's often the last thing you want to hear when you're feeling heated. But practicing breathing when you're worked up is a solid way to transition your stress response into a relaxation response. "When we're stressed, we actually breathe less oxygen in our lungs," Hall explains. So when you prompt yourself to breathe, "You're actually feeding the brain and the liver and the lungs. Breathing changes the homeostasis of the body and signals it to relax."

Posen says he often quotes [Eli Bay](#), who said: "If you breathe as if you are relaxed, your body will become relaxed." Once you learn a few exercises that work for you, you can revisit them time and again when you're feeling the stress (start with [a few of these](#) if [you've never](#) tried [breath work](#) before).

Watching The Pendulum (Collision Balls) Swing

You've been mesmerized by this device before. "Anything that has to do with rhythm or water -- watching something -- is very soothing," Posen points out. Choose to walk a path with a babbling brook or stare at a fish tank for a little too long. While these might not calm you down in true moments of fury, they can help put your mind at ease. "This doesn't necessarily drain off stress energy, but there's an element of distraction. It calms the body," says Posen.

Exercising

There's a reason this stress-relief practice is such a popular one. "Exercising can increase your mental function," Posen explains, so not only are you breaking a sweat, you're gaining some mental clarity. Plus, exercise just makes us feel *good*, and you can thank endorphins -- chemicals the body releases that give us that happy, can-do-anything feeling -- for that. And research shows that exercising more could actually help to keep [stress hormone levels down](#) in kids.