



'Tis the season for joy and wonder, but if you're like many Americans, you're probably experiencing something else too. Between the demands of gift buying, food preparation, and decorating for the holidays, many also experience a heightened level of stress. Little things can help you reclaim joy and keep stress at bay. Practice these "mini-relaxations" to find your center even when events or people around you seem out of your control:

Give yourself a time-out. Every once in a while, treat yourself to something positive and pleasurable. Take ten minutes extra in the shower or bath, walk around the block, or spend time with a friend.

Breathe deeply. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Count down from 10 to 0, taking a complete breath—one inhalation and one exhalation—with each count.

Take a vacation. Imagine yourself at your happy place, a sunny beach. Focus on smells (suntan lotion, ocean air), sounds (waves breaking), and sensations (sea breezes).

Practice gratitude. Stuck in traffic? Instead of ruminating on what you need to get done, think about what you're grateful for, no matter how small. Just ten minutes a week can make a difference.

Use your senses. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Smell the chai tea steeping in your cup. Listen to the giggles of children at the playground. Watch birds flocking at the park. Taste the spices in the pumpkin bread. Recognizing details in your daily activities forces you to slow down.

Release pent-up stress hormones. Adrenaline and cortisol surge when you're feeling under the gun, but you need to release these stress-related chemicals to avoid the negative effects on your body such as muscle tension, headaches, and sleeplessness. Try tensing and releasing your muscles and make plenty of time for exercise.