



From “Arrg!”

...to Ahhh.

Does the holiday madness leave you frazzled? Not only can stress turn you into the Grinch, it can make you gain weight. Here's how to beat stress... and maybe the bulge as well.

By Holly Pevzner

It turns out that a stressful event can slow down our metabolism—so much so that we could gain an extra 11 pounds over the course of a year, says a new study in *Biological Psychiatry*.

“We found that women who were stressed burned 104 fewer calories the next day than women who weren’t stressed,” says study co-author Martha A. Belury, Ph.D., R.D., nutrition professor at Ohio State University. Belury wasn’t even measuring huge life-changing stresses, but just everyday anxieties like caring for aging parents and kids. “The stressed women had a slower metabolism, higher levels of insulin, which contributes to fat storage, and higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol after a meal,” says Belury. (Women with a history of depression had even higher levels of cortisol post-meal than women without a similar history.) Cortisol increases our chances of gaining fat, in particular vis-

Cortisol increases our chances of gaining fat, in particular... the dangerous kind that sits in our midsection and surrounds our organs.

ceral fat, the dangerous kind that sits in our midsection and surrounds our organs. Visceral fat has a hand in raising cholesterol and insulin resistance, setting the stage for type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

While all of the women in the study ate the same meals, calorie-for-calorie, real life doesn’t work that way. In real life, many of us tend to pick junk food—and too much of it—when we’re stressed. “We turn to high-fat, high-sugar, high-calorie foods in times of stress because they’re delicious and they literally give us a temporary high by boosting endorphin and dopamine levels in the brain,” says Elizabeth Somer, R.D., author of *Eat Your Way to Happiness*.

And while we may feel better in the short-term after that hot-fudge brownie sundae, the better stress-busting choices are healthy foods. “Some of our nutrient needs increase when we’re stressed. If we get these nutrients instead of fat and sugar, we can calm the stress response and help stop the damage that stress causes,” says Somer. For instance, stress accelerates cellular aging that’s associated with heart disease, cancer and Alzheimer’s. However, a healthy diet puts the brakes on this process, according to brand-new research. So the big question remains: What should we eat to conquer cravings and beat stress? Read on:

7 Foods to Soothe Stress



Nuts. Stress depletes our B vitamin stores and snacking on nuts helps replenish them. “B vitamins keep our neurotransmitters in their happy place and help us handle the fight-or-flight stress response,” says Ellen Albertson, Ph.D., R.D., a psychologist in Burlington, Vermont, and founder of *smashyourscale.com*. The potassium in nuts is also key: Penn State researchers found that a couple servings of potassium-packed pistachios a day can lower blood pressure and reduce the strain stress puts on our heart.



Red Peppers. While oranges get all of the vitamin C hype, red peppers have about twice as much (95 vs. 50 mg per ½-cup serving). In a study in *Psychopharmacology*, people who took high doses of C before engaging in stress-inducing activities (oral presentation followed by solving math problems aloud) had lower blood pressure and recovered faster from the cortisol surge than those who got a placebo. “Diets loaded with vitamin-C-rich foods lower cortisol and help people cope,” says Elizabeth Somer, R.D.



Salmon. “To keep your wits about you when life gets hairy, you need omega-3s, especially DHA,” says Somer. In a study in *Brain, Behavior and Immunity*, people who took a daily omega-3 supplement (containing DHA and EPA) for 12 weeks reduced their anxiety by 20 percent compared to the placebo group. You won’t get the same mood boost from the omega-3s (ALA) in flax, walnuts and soy, though, so shoot for about 2 servings a week of wild salmon or other oily fish and/or talk to your doctor about DHA supplements.



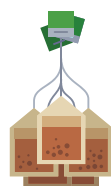
Spinach. This leafy-green veggie is rich in stress-busting magnesium. People with low magnesium levels (most of us, actually) are more likely to have elevated C-reactive protein levels—and research shows people with high CRP levels are more stressed and at a greater risk for depression. “Magnesium helps regulate cortisol and blood pressure too,” says Somer. And since magnesium gets flushed out of the body when you’re stressed, it’s crucial to get enough. Other solid magnesium sources: beans, brown rice.



Oatmeal. “Oatmeal is warm and comforting—and it also helps your brain generate the destressing neurotransmitter serotonin,” says Albertson. Research in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* shows carb-eaters felt calmer than those who shunned carbs. The carb-avoiders reported feeling more stressed. Any carb won’t do, however. Refined carbs (white bread and pasta) digest faster and spike blood sugar, messing with moods and stress. Complex carbs like oatmeal are digested more slowly and don’t spike blood sugar.



Dark Chocolate. If you crave chocolate when you’re on edge, have some. Research in the *Journal of Proteome Research* showed people who ate the equivalent of an average-size candy bar (about 1.4 ounces) daily for two weeks had lower cortisol and fight-or-flight hormone levels. To reap the feel-better rewards, choose chocolate that’s at least 70 percent cocoa. And remember: dark chocolate is a high-calorie food, so mind your portions.



Tea. A study from University College London discovered that tea drinkers destressed faster and had lower cortisol levels than those who drank a placebo. Although (caffeinated) black tea was used in the study, caffeine revs the stress response in many people, so stick to decaf and herbal teas. “Drinking herbal teas like chamomile, peppermint or ginger can be wonderfully soothing to the digestive tract, which can help with stress by calming the nervous system in your gut,” says Kathie Swift, M.S., R.D.N., author of *The Swift Diet*.

Take Action to Chill Out

Food aside, certain activities can curb your stress more than others. And the activities that work for you depend on your typical stress response. Do you withdraw, lash out or become anxious and agitated? Go with the flow below to find the right relief for you.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER • ILLUSTRATIONS BY TREMENDOUSNESS

ARE YOU QUICK TO SNAP AT PEOPLE?

Your response to stress is to
LASH OUT!



"Often times, people react to stress with anger," says Ellen Albertson, Ph.D., R.D. "You may find yourself snapping at your kids or your spouse." If you respond in this manner, solitary activities are your best bet to recalibrate.

CAN YOU NOT STOP WORRYING?

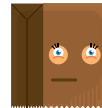
Your response to stress is to become
OVERANXIOUS



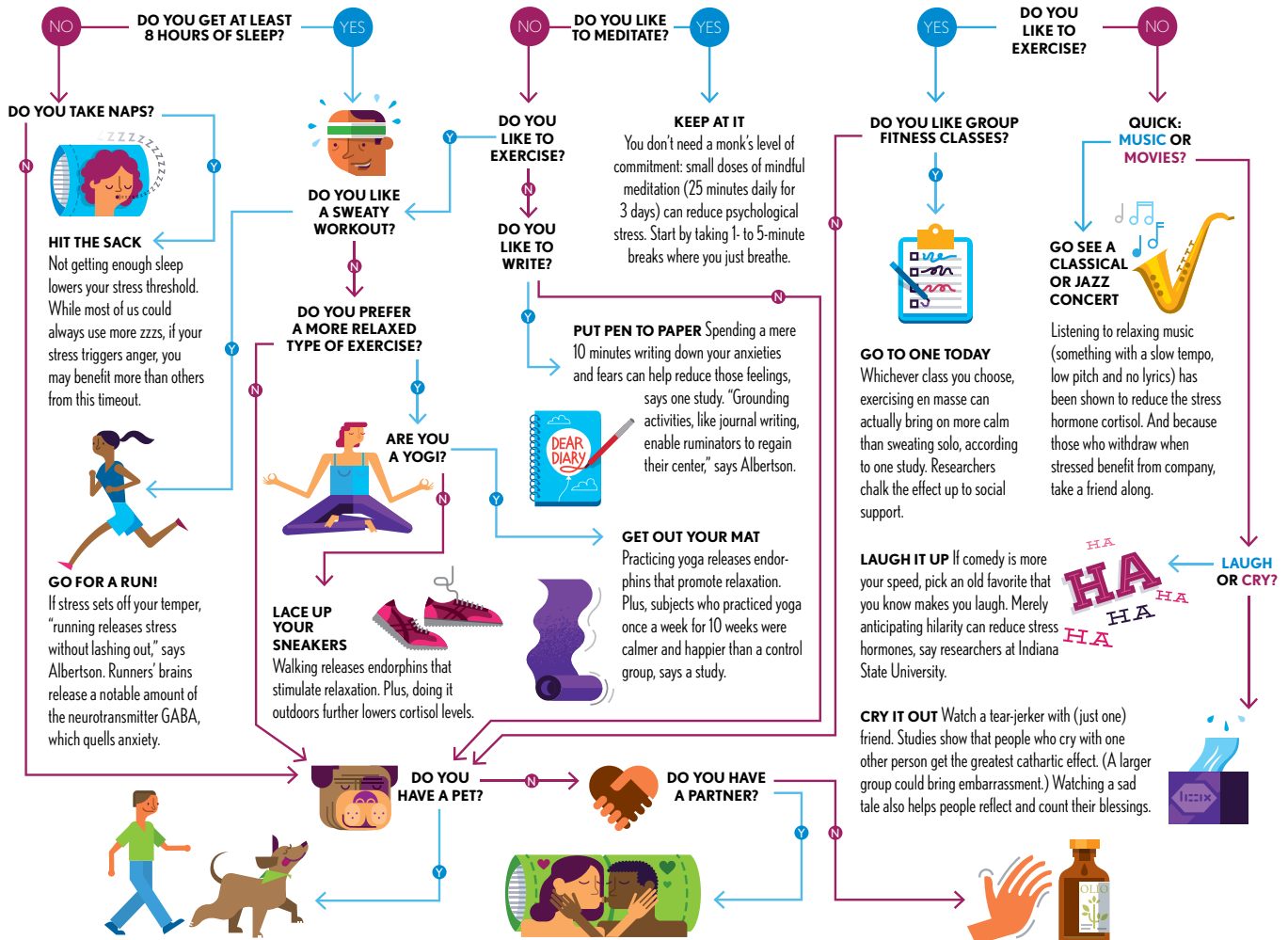
Those who react to stress with a belly full of knots often respond well to grounding activities that help them focus on the present moment rather than fast-forwarding to more things to be anxious about.

DO YOU PREFER TO BE ALONE?

Your response to stress is to
WITHDRAW



"When your natural reaction to stress is to hibernate, you want to do the opposite to relieve it," says Albertson. "Social isolation causes you to constantly think about what's stressing you out, worsening your stress."



SPEND TIME WITH YOUR FURRY FRIEND A pet is a one-size-fits-most stress-reliever: just 30 minutes of furry-friend bonding has been shown to decrease cortisol levels. "[It] generates the hormone oxytocin, which soothes lash-out and anxious types," says Albertson. "Plus, pets allow withdrawal types to get out of their shell."

GET FRISKY "Many people get stress relief from kissing, hugging and sex," says Albertson. "[It] generates oxytocin, a hormone that reduces stress and anxiety." Sex can also lower blood pressure—and research shows frequent intercourse can lead to cell growth in the hippocampus, the area of the brain that keeps stress under control.

TRY YOUR HAND AT MASSAGE "It is a fantastic stress buster because it allows the feel-good hormone oxytocin to flow," says Albertson. In one study people who got a Swedish massage at least once a week lowered their cortisol levels. The benefits were cumulative, meaning doing it often is better than once in a while. (P.S.: Self-massage works too.)