



reduce stress each time we voice appreciation for the daily wonders: the capacity to see, taste, and smell; the presence of loved ones; the warmth of shelter and clothing; the ability to learn, to read, to laugh, to cry. The list has no end.

### Remember, We Are Not Alone

One of God's first pronouncements in Genesis (2:18) is: "It is not good for a human being to be alone." We all need the company of others. Loneliness and isolation can exacerbate stress. Judaism teaches us that we are never alone. No matter how separate we feel at a given moment, we can turn our hearts toward *Ribono shel olam* (the Master of the universe), the power beneath and beyond, yet so near to us; the source of all life. Judaism also encourages us to study and pray with others, to find spiritual fellowship. It is very valuable to have friends who can remind us of our priorities in times of tension and worry. We can draw close to others who share our values and seek out opportunities for common moments of serenity through music, prayer, and learning.

### Celebrate the Sabbath

The most perfect response to stress is the Sabbath. Here is one day out of seven devoted to the practice of peace, a day when we can let go of control and cultivate faith and patience. We let go of changing the world and concentrate on acceptance and harmony. It is a day of sensual delight, good food, beautiful clothing, friendship, and song. It is a day without negativity, without anger, without judgment, without resentment, disappointment, or expectation. Sabbath is a day to simply be present, which is the antidote to craving and discontent. Our Sabbath could mean refraining from shopping, or watching television, or working,

or speaking ill of others, or using the computer, or planning, or driving, or writing, or smoking, or cooking. We would let go of the things we do that change the world so we could just be with what is. Or it could mean doing something special, going to synagogue, reading the Torah, singing, lighting the Sabbath candles and saying the blessing over wine and *challah*, getting dressed up for the Sabbath, blessing the children, or taking a Sabbath walk.

Most of all, the Sabbath is a chance to have one day out of seven that is a little simpler and to find, in that simplicity, great peace.

### Take Heart

Let us remember that stress is a part of life. Sometimes it is a crucial warning sign to protect us from danger. Sometimes it is call to action, to rethink and redesign our lives and priorities, or to respond to injustice. And, sometimes it is a burden and a drain on our health and well-being. However, facing the habit of stress can lead us to new insights and modes of being.

Don't rush to take on the suggestions offered here as a new "to do" list. Rather let us use our understanding to deepen our self-acceptance and our sense of belonging. Let us remember to breathe, allowing each breath to fill us with blessing, joy, and peace.



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## Stress

There are thousands of times in our speed-driven, information-overloaded world when our bodies are primed to fight or flee. The vast majority of these moments are false alarms. In truth, we are not under attack. But our bodies don't know this. They produce physical symptoms that do not find release in fighting or fleeing, but instead exert a negative effect on our mental and physical health. We call this stress.

Jewish life without worry? It seems impossible - and certainly uncharacteristic of a particular Jewish cultural stereotype. However, when we explore the sources of Jewish spirituality, we find a deep wisdom that can act as an antidote to stress and worry.

## Just Breathe

Often, the first and best thing to do as soon as we become aware of our stress is to take a deep breath and then gradually bring our attention to the breath as it enters and leaves our body. At the same time, we can practice allowing any anxious thoughts or agitated sensations simply to arise and pass away. The Torah tells us in Genesis 2:7 that God "breathed the breath of life" into Adam. The words for breath in Hebrew

The words for breath in Hebrew all correspond to aspects of the human soul: *neshamah* (life breath), *ruach* (spirit), *nefesh* (soul). Simply noticing our breathing can return us to the present moment, dissolve tension, and free us from the fear of what is to be.

A Hebrew prayer says: "My God, the *neshamah* [life breath; the soul] that you have given me is pure." Focusing on our breath reminds us that life is a gift bestowed upon us in every moment. It is a miracle that our breath enters and departs and reenters without our planning and directing it. If we practice sitting in silence every day for a few minutes and simply direct our attention to our breathing, we will be more apt to remember the breath in a moment of crisis and stress. We can always return to the seat of the *neshamah* - the soul breath - and find a source of regularity and stability amid the demands of our lives.

## Change Our Perspective

Stress is often accompanied by contraction of both mind and body. Being overwhelmed by too many demands creates tightness in the shoulders, or clutching in the chest that then constricts breathing. Knots in the stomach often accompany thoughts of gloom and doom. We shut down. We focus solely on our individual predicaments. Our vision gets very narrow.

It may help to speak gently to ourselves at these moments and remind ourselves that we are doing our best, that we are only human, that we are part of a reality that is much greater and wiser than we can imagine. The psalmist contemplates creation in amazement and exclaims (Psalm 92:6):

"How awesome is Your creation!" Spending time in nature reminds us that we are part of something much more glorious than we can comprehend. It fills us with life, faith, and serenity.

Other people can expand their minds beyond the constrictions of stress by reciting a prayer or a sacred phrase. The closing blessing of the daily Hebrew prayer, the *Amidah*, is a powerful evocation of serenity. It begins with these words: "Grant peace, goodness, and blessing in the world." This simple prayer allows us to open to the healing love that is always present but from which we are blocked when we are overwhelmed or agitated. Sometimes we might choose to alter our perception, and thereby our mood, by visualizing our own particular problem from a distance of time or space and posing the question to ourselves: "How important will this be tomorrow or next week or next year? How important would this be if this were my last year on earth?"

Perhaps the most effective way to relieve stress and shift our perspective is humor. How many times has a funny line at the right moment opened up the horizon like parting a curtain?

## Practice Gratitude

There is a Jewish tradition of beginning every day with the Hebrew prayer *Modeh* (masculine) / *Modah* (feminine) *Ani*, which means "I am thankful." One of the primary themes of Jewish prayer is gratitude. The psalms are filled with the poetry of praise and thanksgiving crowned with the most beautiful word of all: *Halleluyah*. *Halleluyah* expresses praise and the joy at being alive. We promote well-being and happiness and