Be calm under pressure



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Jo Maughan shares 13 top tips to help you approach the year end in a calmer state of mind

Key Points

What is the issue?

Year-end can be stressful. As a professional, you need to be able to stay calm under pressure so you can hit those deadlines.

What does it mean to me?

Learn practical, in-the-moment tools to manage your stress and stay calm. Practise them yourself, then pass them onto your team.

What can I take away?

13 easy-to-action tips to reduce your stress and feel calmer.

November and December can be frantically busy as you try to get everything done before the year-end. Even if yours isn't December, you're still spinning plates – finishing your year's deliverables; working on that objective you'd forgotten about; going to all the Christmas things at the kids' schools; and that's before you've even thought about Christmas Day…

Want to feel calmer at this busy time of year? Want to handle your stress better than you did last year? Yes? Read on for my best stress management tips.

1. Conscious pause

When you finish a task, don't rush onto the next thing straight away. Instead, close your eyes lightly. Pause for a few seconds. Take three breaths in and out. Slowly and consciously. Then open your eyes. You're now ready to go again, from a centred place. Do this every time you finish a task.

2. Start that thing again

What did you once do to manage your stress that you've let slide? Remember? Putting your mobile in a drawer at 8pm? Being in bed by 10.30pm? Reading Hilary Mantel before you turn out the light? Recommit and start that thing again today.

3. Challenge your thoughts

Did you know that it's your unnoticed thoughts that cause you to feel stressed? Challenge your thoughts and your stress will reduce. Yes, but how? Specifically, tune into your thoughts and write them down. For example: 'I don't have time. I'll make a mistake. My boss will be cross. I'll get sacked. I won't be able to pay the mortgage. I'll be out on the streets.' Next: apply the Facts, Opinions, Guesses test to each thought. Be like a tax lawyer when you do this. Very literally challenge and dissect each thought. Ask if it is a fact, a guess or an opinion? Is it actually true? For

example, is it actually true that you don’t have time? What does this actually mean? No, it’s not a fact. You *think* you don’t have *enough* time, which is an opinion. Is it true you’ll make a mistake? No, it’s a guess because you’re predicting the future. Get the idea? By challenging your thoughts in this way, you’ll start to see them for what they are: just thoughts, not facts. And if they’re not facts, you can choose not to believe them. Then they’ll lose their power, and you’ll feel calmer. (If you want to know more about how your mind causes your stress and what to do about it, I recommend *The Chimp Paradox* by Professor Steve Peters.)

4. Consciously calm weekends

This weekend, if work pops into your mind, notice it. Then, imagine the thought floating away from you on the breeze, or running away from you down river. (Or use any other ‘away from’ image you like.) Tell yourself: ‘I don’t have to engage with this thought. It’s just a thought. I choose to let it go.’ In this way, you’ll stay ‘present’ to the weekend moment you’re in, rather than getting caught up in work.

5. Turn off notifications

If you’re constantly checking your phone, you’re constantly being bombarded with new incoming information, which means more things to think about or do, and therefore more stress. Help yourself out by turning off all alerts, buzzes and beeps. And train yourself to look at your phone less. I’ve turned off all my email notifications, including the icon badge, so I only know I’ve got new emails when I choose to go in to check. I’m training myself to do this only three times per day.

6. Get out into nature

A short walk outside, where all you do is focus on what’s around you, is hugely calming. Pay attention to what’s about you: hear the robin chirp, look at the greyish-green leaves on the oak tree, feel the cool breeze on your cheeks, smell the earthy soil. Take it all in through your senses. And as you do, consciously breathe in and out. On the out breath, imagine letting go of your stress.

7. Get rid of the cortisol and adrenaline in your body

When you’re stressed, your body produces cortisol for that fight/flight/freeze reaction and adrenaline to keep you going. The thing is, when you finish that urgent

task, hit that deadline or leave that big meeting, the chemicals are still there unless you get rid of them. And if you don't get rid of them, you're already primed to feel stressed again when your next stress trigger comes along. The answer is to actively get rid of these chemicals by, for example, going for a run or a fast walk; shouting while playing loud music; kicking the tyres of your Audi; and swearing and hitting the cushions of your oh-so-stylish ochre sofa. My point is – let out the chemicals and your built-up emotions in a way that feels okay for you. I like to push hard against a door until I feel my body relax.

8. Mindfulness

Practising mindfulness may seem like a bit of a fad but it really works. I do five to ten minutes of mindful breathing each morning and feel the benefit. Perhaps you're thinking you don't have time to learn it? Well, here's the thing: you don't need to go on a course and there's no 'proper' way to do it.

Here's a short mindfulness exercise for you to try. Sit quietly and close your eyes; breath in and out, being aware of each breath. Go 'inside' yourself and notice how you're feeling and what you're thinking; just notice and 'be with' yourself, however you are. Continue to be with yourself in this quiet way: breathing. If you notice yourself getting distracted by thoughts, say to yourself, 'There's a thought. I can let it pass,' and refocus your attention on your breath. Just before you're ready to finish, make a choice about what you'll choose to do or how you'll choose to be in the next moments of your day. For example, I choose not to check my emails until 11am, I choose to stop worrying about what I can't control, or I choose to pop outside for a quick walk. Open your eyes and implement your choice.

9. Get enough sleep

You know how much sleep you need to start the day feeling like you can handle whatever your demanding client throws at you. No excuses – commit to when you'll go to bed each weekday night and do it. For me, it's before 11pm. Start the wind-down 20 or 30 minutes before you want to go to sleep.

10. Be grateful

I have an orange notebook in which I write three things that I'm grateful for each morning, such as my warm and cosy home, my husband Bill, and the blackbirds that

live in my garden. I take a few minutes to enjoy writing down my three things and to really appreciate them. I re-read them and smile to myself. This practice reduces stress because when you're feeling grateful, your mind isn't able to think about anything else, such as the things that are stressing you.

11. Let go of how you think things should be

Are you someone who thinks you know how things should be? Do you moan about how your colleagues in finance didn't do what you wanted, when you wanted? How the client should have got back to you by now so you can finish their advice or tax return? It's the gap between how you think things should be and how they actually are that causes stress. Let go of the should, accept what is, and there's no gap for the stress to creep into.

Now, I'm not advocating putting up with something that's not okay by you. What I'm advocating is not letting yourself stress about the gap between your preferences and reality. Instead, breathe; say to yourself, 'it is as it is', and decide your next step.

12. Take a micro break

You've been sitting at your computer for the last hour. If you could see yourself, you'd see that your shoulders are rounded, your eyes are straining, and concentration shows in the vertical creases between your eyebrows. Your energy is flagging, and you're thinking: 'I should just push on through and finish this.' This is the time to take a micro break: stand up, stretch and take a quick walk round your desk. Why? Because research shows that changing your physical position changes how you feel: you'll sit back down feeling re-energised. Research also shows that the average person can typically only concentrate for 20 to 25 minutes.

13. Laugh

I bet you know that laughing causes feel-good endorphins to course around your body? Lesser known is that the same part of the brain lights up whether you're genuinely laughing or faking it. So when you're feeling stressed, watch a funny video on YouTube to make yourself laugh. My go-to video is Chewbacca Mom.