

"THE ONLY THINGS I HAVE LEFT ON MY PLATE ARE MY JOB AND MY FAMILY. I'M 1,000 PERCENT BETTER THAN I WAS."

Rick Howard changed his body and his life. Read how at MensHealth.com/transform.



Having goals, and reaching those goals, is the healthy opposite of that. "Too often, we are adrift on the sea of life," says Dr. Rosch. Drop anchor.

Week 2: Hands off the Hot Buttons

Some men are perfect specimens of mental health. They calmly apply their considerable problem-solving abilities to the sources of their stress. Then there are the rest of us. The rest of us don't deal very well. According to one survey, 46 percent of stressed adults don't care what they eat, 57 percent stop exercising, and 53 percent lose sleep.

In short, we need a week (at least!) just to rid ourselves of our self-destructive old ways of coping. Consider these five: alcohol, junk food, television, the Internet, and tobacco. We reach for them out of habit, and that's exactly what they become: bad habits.

● Alcohol is obviously a risky way to self-medicate. But here's an interesting finding: Booze doesn't really take the edge off stress. Just the opposite: Stress takes the edge off alcohol, according to University of Chicago researchers. Although stress increases our desire to drink, those drinks make us feel sluggish, not high. You'll end up drinking more and enjoying it less.

● As for junk food, yes, the high-fat, high-carb content of so-called comfort foods actually does give short-term comfort by signaling the brain to stop the cascade of stress hormones. But in the long run, it will add stress to your

waistband. An Ohio State University study found that stress causes triglycerides to linger longer in the bloodstream, thus interfering with the body's normal metabolism of fats.

● And television? Go ahead, watch *My Name Is Earl*. Many studies have shown that laughter is stress medicine—even the anticipation of a good laugh lowers stress hormones in the blood. But don't watch 4 hours of old *Survivor* episodes beforehand. Same goes for hanging out in online casinos.

Those hours should be spent with your friends. Social ties are tied to lower stress, longer life, and quicker recovery from illness.

● Tobacco? The more you use, the greater your chances of impotence, and there is perhaps no calm more profound than the postcoital one. Why risk messing with that?

Psychologists group these maladaptive strategies under a fancy umbrella term: "avoidance coping." They're unhelpful for a very basic reason, says Charles S. Carver, Ph.D., a prominent stress researcher at the University of Miami. "When you pretend that things are not there, it doesn't really make them go away. You'll have to confront them and confront them and confront them."

Week 3: Stop Multitasking

"It's the death of people," says Jeff Davidson, author of 36 self-help books, including *The*

Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting Things Done. People think they have to accomplish multiple tasks simultaneously in order to be productive and profitable. "Just the opposite is true," he says. When Davidson gives speeches, he performs an onstage experiment: He takes two people from the audience and gives each 15 pennies, 15 paper clips, and a pen and paper. He tells one person to stack the pennies, link the paper clips, and draw 15 stars—in that order. He tells the other person to switch back and forth among the tasks. Guess who finishes first.

What Davidson calls "sharp attention" is possible only if you focus on one task at a time. "Breakthrough thinking doesn't happen when you're multitasking," he says, noting that our society's current fascination with "faster, better, more" adds to our stress in ways people couldn't have

imagined a generation ago. He agrees that some multitasking is inevitable. "But how often should it come on, and how long should it linger? Not often and not long." And for this week, not at all. Just cut the cord, take notes about what does and doesn't work, then reintroduce the multitasking only when it benefits you.

Week 4: Release the Demons

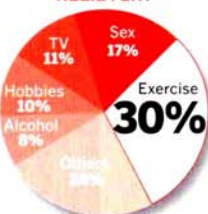
It's always the quiet ones, the men who bottle it up inside, who end up going on chain-saw massacres, right? Maybe quiet is the enemy.

In an experiment regarding "emotional disclosure," students suffering from post-traumatic stress at Temple University, in Philadelphia, were asked to write—longhand, not on computers—for 20 minutes a day. After only 3 days, those who repeatedly wrote about a single traumatic event showed fewer physical and mental signs of stress. Even 8 weeks later, they felt better and were sick less often than students who wrote about emotionally neutral events.

The results bowled over the clinical psychologists who conducted this recent research. "Knowing how hard it is for people to change, we were impressed that this could work," says Denise Sloan, Ph.D. But it does work, Sloan says, because "often, people who have survived trauma try not to think about those events. And the more you avoid something, the more intense and stressful it becomes. It's good to be expressive."

So sit down 3 nights this week and get it out there on paper, where it won't hurt you. It doesn't matter whether you're good at

WHAT'S YOUR MOST EFFECTIVE STRESS RELIEVER?



THE SIMPLE DE-STRESSOR: GET ORGANIZED

- 1. START SMALL.** Choose a room (office, kitchen, bedroom) and overhaul one unorganized area in it per week. Admire the results. "You need to have that self-confidence and belief that it'll be successful in order to avoid relapse," says Kenneth Nowack, Ph.D., chief research officer for Consulting Tools, in California.
- 2. IMAGINE YOU HAVE NOTHING ON YOUR PLATE.** Then answer this question: What do you want to accomplish this month? Schedule a small chunk of time each day, say 25 minutes, to chip away at the list. "If you allow things to just happen, they might not happen at all," says Mark Ellwood, president of Pace Productivity.
- 3. JUMPSTART YOUR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.** After reviewing an e-mail or phone message, act immediately. "If you can complete the task in 2 minutes, do it right away," says David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*. Remember that your "delete" key can be the best organizer of all.
- 4. BUY TIME.** "You have to decide that your time is worth something, then go ahead and allocate money toward buying more of it," says Ellwood. Pay somebody to handle your time sucks: cleaning the house, doing odd jobs, mowing the lawn, picking up dry cleaning. The less small stuff you sweat, the more big things you can handle. —DAVID SCHIPPER