



chapter 1

forget perfect

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think positive

We can sabotage the positive ways in which we begin and end each day when we let negative thoughts gain control of our minds. Negatives attract negatives, and negative thinking can cause chronic, dangerously high levels of stress. To downshift the speed and the stress in our lives, we must ratchet down our tendencies to expect the worst or beat ourselves up for things we did or didn't do.

The ordinary stress in our daily lives can be exacerbated by negative thinking and can lead to high levels of hostility, according to a study published by the *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine*. Positive thinking, on the other hand, can benefit our physical health, reported researchers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The study suggests that people with positive attitudes have less risk of developing heart disease and have lower levels of stress hormones.

dear diva

"I often obsess about situations I find stressful, and I'm exhausted and tense so much of the time. How can I make healthy changes?"

secrets from the de-stress diva

Our thoughts color our perceptions and our experiences in life. If there is one thing that we can focus on 99 percent of the time, it is our thoughts. If we are able to focus, we will readily "see" the hundreds of thoughts that arise each day. Here is a simple, yet insightful, way to become aware of your thoughts. It will help you understand your behavior, increase your energy level, and improve your ability to enjoy relationships.

Thought Exercise

Carry around a notepad and write down your thoughts every fifteen to thirty minutes for two full days, from the moment you wake up until just before you fall asleep. You will be amazed at

what comes up. Once you identify where your thoughts take you and how they dictate your feelings toward yourself and others, you will have a perfect place to start making changes. Don't be like most people and try to change your thinking process without understanding your own thought patterns.

Here are a few examples of how different individuals express their thought patterns:

The “Yes, but” pattern. This response comes from people who “listen” to what you're saying but, more often than not, will insert a “yes, but” reason why they can't do something.

The “Maybe, we'll see” pattern. People who find it difficult to make a decision react in this way. Perhaps they are afraid to make “wrong” decisions, and thus choose not to decide or to delay their answers.

The “Sitting on the fence” pattern. This pattern of thinking may be the result of people not taking the time to sit quietly and get in touch with themselves. Once individuals can identify and understand their values, they can analyze the pros and cons of every action or decision. Then they can assess how the ramifications of each choice would measure up to their core values. Suddenly, they will know the right answer.

The “That won't work because” pattern. People with this pattern think that if they or other people have previously tried and failed at something, there is no reason why it would work this time. They don't realize that some ideas are too advanced for their time, or that a person's thoughts and confidence level or even a slight change in implementation may bring about a positive outcome.

The “Everything is a drama” pattern. Certain people complain about all the drama, even though drama is what they bring to every task. They will become tired of the drama only when they stop playing dramatic characters in their lives or with specific people or situations. Sometimes we think that being involved in a drama is the only “safe” way to express our emotions, even if these have nothing to do with the situation at hand.

Our thoughts create our world: our lives, our relationships with ourselves and with others. Be the positive change you want to see in your life. An optimistic and calm spirit will shine brightly from within a person, as well as outward to others. We each have the ability to bring sunshine and positive energy to the world.

Meditation

One of the fastest ways to get rid of, or at least minimize, obsessive thoughts or “stuck” thinking patterns is to meditate. Once you have been consistently meditating a little each day for a week, you will be able to create a quiet space in your mind within a minute or less. Remember to be kind to yourself and to honor your thoughts, but don't get downhearted or depressed by them.

Here's a quick, easy meditative technique:

1. Sit up straight in a chair or on the floor.
2. Close your eyes and be mindful of your breathing: breathing in . . . breathing out.
3. When good or bad thoughts come up, simply thank them for appearing and let them go for now.
4. Return to your focus on breathing.

This meditative state will help you to *stop* your obsessive thoughts, long enough to get a grip on your emotions or perhaps a new perspective on the situation.

Aromatherapy

1. When you feel your thoughts taking over and you lack focus, write down the thoughts that are preventing you from moving forward. Just get them out of your head by writing them down.
2. Use this lotion formula to massage into your hands:
 - Add six drops sandalwood essential oil to four teaspoons olive oil.
 - Rub a few drops of this mixture into your hands, up to your forearms.
 - Now breathe in and focus on moving forward with inspiration.

3. Think of a positive statement or mantra and repeat it to yourself until you feel the focus and the motivation to move forward.

Gratitude

One universal law says, “That which we focus on and give attention to appears.” You may want to share a gratitude statement that I often use: “I appreciate the beauty all around me and am grateful for what I *do* have.”

Food

Artichokes contain high levels of B vitamins, and these vitamins help to increase our energy and mental alertness. Both qualities are necessary for us to maintain a cheerful, optimistic attitude.

Recent research suggests that inflammation is the origin of all degenerative diseases, such as heart disease, arthritis, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, and so forth. Nature’s inflammation fighters come in the guise of fruits. Papayas, pineapples, and kiwifruit contain large amounts of the anti-inflammatory enzyme bromelain, which can lessen the inflammatory process.

daily aspiration “I love and accept myself just the way I am.”



2 do you see the glass as half-full or half-empty?

The Wharton School of Business reports that a positive attitude can increase productivity on the job and can inspire more congenial responses from managers and coworkers. “Feelings drive performance,” the research study concluded.

dear diva

"My thoughts sometimes make me so nervous and irritable. How can I avoid being so anxious and over the top?"

secrets from the de-stress diva

I often say it's all in the attitude. I founded the Self-Esteem Council with four other incredible women, and we work with high school students. One course in our five-month program teaches students that it's not so much what happens to us, but how we handle what comes our way. We all know of people who have beaten the odds in a number of situations. In fact, some of our favorite inspirational movies are in this category: *Rudy*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Stand by Me*. (By the way, all of these films are based on real-life stories.)

My dad once told me that his mom never minded making the beds of her nine children. Why? Because she was so grateful that they were not in them, which meant that her children were healthy and either in school or playing. I often remembered that "attitude of gratitude" in relation to my own three children, when their bedrooms appeared as if a hurricane, a whirlwind, and an earthquake had all hit at once. I merely shut the door and said to myself, Thank you, God . . . they're healthy.

Attitudes of Gratitude

Here are some other attitudes of gratitude I often keep in mind.

I'm grateful for:

- Hearing my friends or family members answer the phone because I know they are still alive.
- The chore of washing and blow-drying my hair because I'm fortunate to have hair.
- Listening to the birds sing early in the morning because I know that my hearing is still sharp.
- Spending the money to fill up my gas tank because I have a safe car to drive.
- Sneezing when I'm near dust because I know that my immune system is doing its job.

- Having too much to do on some days because I know that my life is not boring.
- Not understanding new software programs because it gives my brain a run for its money and allows me to stay alert and agile, while always learning something new.

Let It Go

Every time you feel stressed or overwhelmed, write down your thoughts at that moment. Look at them and then *let them go!* Watch the thoughts leave your mind as if whisked away to the heavens by a breeze. Now, focus on calm and positive thoughts. You are laying the groundwork to establish a positive attitude.

Breathe

Take in a deep breath and then exhale. With your outward breath, visualize and feel your negative thoughts, angry emotions, resentment, and so on, flowing out. Then consciously breathe in peaceful words, such as *calm*, *loving*, and *safe*. Once you can truly feel this calm, loving space, then continue to breathe out the negative emotions or attitudes and breathe in the corresponding opposite emotions. In other words, you will breathe out anger and breathe in calmness; breathe out resentment and breathe in forgiveness; breathe out blame and breathe in personal responsibility; and so forth.

Sing

Select your theme song. Is there a song that makes you feel happier and more centered whenever you sing it? Years ago, my theme song was “I Am Woman.” Today, my theme song is “Perfect Day” by Hoku.

Keep a song handy on your iPod, CD, or MP3 player that empowers you when you sing it at the top of your lungs.

Read Success Stories

A great way to keep your motivation up and your attitude positive is to read stories about successful people and businesses and how they may have gone bust one or more times before making it.

Decaf Your Coffee or Better Yet . . .

Even decaffeinated coffee has some caffeine in it. Plus, most coffees are decaffeinated through the use of methylene chloride, a chemical that interferes with the blood's ability to deliver oxygen. This obviously makes the heart work harder to supply oxygen to all of the cells. Make sure that the caffeine has been removed from your decaffeinated coffee with a water-processing method.

Or, you could switch to teas that are high in antioxidants, such as white, green, or roobius teas. Or, gradually change to a caffeine-free herbal coffee, Teeccino. I like the taste of Almond Amaretto, so I started with $\frac{3}{4}$ cup organic coffee and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Almond Amaretto Teeccino; the second week I used $\frac{1}{2}$ cup coffee and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Teeccino; the third week I used $\frac{3}{4}$ cup Teeccino and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup coffee; and by the fourth week I was drinking a full cup of Teeccino. I still use the same amount of soymilk that I would have with my regular organic coffee.

Royal Jelly

Royal jelly is known to enhance energy and immunity and is rich in vitamins and collagen. It's used to feed queen bees. When a queen bee is fed the same exact diet as the worker bees, the queen lives for only seven to eight weeks, the same life span as the worker bees. In the perfect balance of nature, queen bees are fed only royal jelly, and they live for five to seven years. Just make sure that you're not allergic to bee venom because you may also be sensitive to other substances made by bees.

daily aspiration "I will keep my attitude and thoughts positive as I move through the day and encounter people, places, and things."

3 be careful of the superwoman urge

The book *The Superman Syndrome: Why the Information Age Threatens Your Future and What You Can Do about It*, by Robert Kamm, focuses on the dangers of thinking that today's 24/7 technology can make you turn into a 24/7 superhero. The book reports on studies showing that 70 percent of people who work in offices during the week also work on weekends.

dear diva

"There's so much I have to do that if I don't do it, I know it won't get done . . . or worse, won't get done properly."

secrets from the de-stress diva

What would *really* happen if you didn't do it all? Plus, why are you taking all the responsibility to do everything? I want you to first ask yourself, "What need am I fulfilling by being the Supermom or the Superdad?" Do you need to be seen, heard, or applauded? Do you need to be better than someone else, or do you feel that you're not good enough? (It's the same thing, really.)

Identify and understand why you need to go to extremes to be great in every area of your life. For Supermoms and Superdads, does that mean you have to take your children to every possible extracurricular activity and bake cookies afterward?

Make a List

Make a list with "Positive Energy" at the top of one column and "Draining Energy" at the top of another column. List all of the activities you perform, aligning them beneath the heading that categorizes them. If your answer is "I don't know," list that activity in the "Draining Energy" column.

Next comes the difficult part. I want you to stop doing one of the activities listed in the "Draining Energy" column. I don't

care how you stop it, but stop doing it. This is where creativity comes in. In most cases, all you have to do is accept the fact that you are willing to let this activity go. When you do, an idea will spring up in your mind that gives you information or a choice, including the option to delegate the activity to someone else or to completely change course.

For example, one of my clients was a stay-at-home mom who enjoyed her four children and their activities very much. She found, however, that she was overcommitted with the children's activities. One day she was really strapped for time because she had to bake chocolate chip cookies for one of her children's classroom parties. I asked her what was it about the chocolate chip cookies that made her tense. She said that she just didn't have time to take the kids to school, do some errands, bake, and come back to the school. I asked her why she wanted to bake the cookies, and she said, "Because I always have." I asked whether her child or the kids in the classroom would care if the cookies were store-bought from a bakery or made from scratch. Her response: "I don't think they'll know any difference." When she heard herself say those words, the Supermom lightbulb switched on. As it turned out, she was baking the cookies to fit her idea of what a good mother did, not for the children's taste buds. She soon realized that what was really important was her attendance at the school party and her love for her child.

Ask yourself this question frequently as you go about your normal day: What responsibilities do I take on that prevent others from participating or taking personal responsibility for doing things themselves? The best way to help children and adults gain self-confidence is to allow them to personally take responsibility for doing things. That's a very healthy way to learn at any age.

Yoga

"Our nervous and endocrine systems can be thrown off by chronic stress. The more you can, keep your hormones stable," said Sierra Bender, the creator of the popular Boot Camp for Goddesses

workshops. Yoga is one way to help restore balance to your body and promote vibrant health and sustained energy. Yoga exercises for beginners or for those with advanced skills can be found on the Internet, at local yoga classes, or in books at the library.

Nature

Go outside and focus on nature for five minutes. Notice how the trees, the leaves, the branches, the birds, the sunlight, and the wind work in harmony without stress. So much of nature's beauty and peace comes from our mindfully "seeing" how nature is in harmony with its surroundings, even with man-made homes, buildings, roads, or walls in the vicinity.

Aromatherapy

1. Add four drops of lavender essential oil to eight tablespoons of water and pour this mixture into a spray bottle.
2. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and think of a calming word. As you breathe out, mist your face.
3. Keep breathing with your eyes shut, and spend a few minutes focusing on what you need to do. Prioritize your schedule, while being mindful not to overdo it. Don't be a Supermom. Downshift into a more fulfilling, less stressful role, and the people around you will notice and appreciate it.

daily aspiration "I love and accept myself just the way I am."

4 has your stress thermostat reached “overwhelmed”?

Often, the feeling of being overwhelmed will stifle our actions and thoughts and prevent us from moving forward. Most people who feel overwhelmed spend a great deal of time spinning their wheels as they overthink their situation, or they feel guilty for not making progress in their lives. A major symptom of feeling overwhelmed is procrastination. I don't believe that procrastinators are lazy. Rather, I think that they just have so much to do, they don't know where to start. Or perhaps they want to start, but they don't really know what to do or how to do it.

A study by the nonprofit Families and Work Institute reported that one in three U.S. employees is chronically overworked, and that more than half feel overwhelmed at least once a month. The study also found that 21 percent of those who are overwhelmed experience symptoms of clinical depression—more than twice the rate of employees who are not overworked.

dear diva

“I have too much to do and feel overwhelmed and out of control. How can I manage my time better?”

secrets from the de-stress diva

When you feel overwhelmed, this is what I want you to do:

1. Write down all the things that make you feel overwhelmed, including relationships, tasks, calls, e-mail, filing, and so forth.
2. Choose the top ten things that are essential for you to do.
3. Choose only two items to begin or to complete before you move on to any of the other items. Then, choose two calls, two e-mails, and so on—two things from each category. I call this the Rule of Two. To choose the two items, decide which two items need to be

done so that if you don't do anything else that day, you will still feel as if you accomplished something important. Notice that I didn't say that you will feel as if you accomplished *something*, because just having lunch means that you accomplished eating. So, please be sure that the two items (and calls, e-mails, and errands) you choose are important.

Breathe

Our emotions are directly connected to our breathing. When we're nervous or fearful, our breathing is usually shallow. So, one of the best places to start when you feel overwhelmed is to take in a slow and deep breath, hold it a few seconds, and then slowly exhale. You may want to do this two or three times to fully calm your mind and get oxygen circulating in your brain to boost creativity and mental power.

Yoga

You can do the following exercise at home or in the office.

1. Sit down comfortably in a chair, with your feet squarely on the floor.
2. Breathe in deeply as you slowly raise your arms above your head, palms facing forward. Breathe out while keeping your arms straight and lower them in front of you, along with your upper torso, as if bowing. Gently stretch so that your head is down between your knees and your arms are hanging in front of your legs. Be sure to keep breathing.
3. Slowly start to sit up, one vertebra at a time, so that you don't hurt your back or become dizzy.

Nutritional Solution

Strawberries are rich in B vitamins, vitamin C, flavonoids, and fiber so they're heart healthy and good for digestion. They also help to destroy environmental toxins and alleviate stress-related conditions.

You may even want to grab a glass of fresh veggie juice when you feel stressed and overwhelmed and your anxiety is over the top. Combine the following ingredients in a blender:

- A large handful of kale
- A large handful of spinach
- A little fresh ginger
- 1 carrot
- 1 apple

Energy Drainers

We often go through our days without realizing that we are losing energy. Many unsettling thoughts and problems swirl through our minds: that recent miscommunication with a coworker, feeling deluged with requests and demands on our time, the annoyance of sitting in traffic when we're in a hurry, or myriad other anxiety-producing experiences in modern life.

I want you to focus on what brings you joy and what brings you down. In other words, first think of the people, the things, the activities, and the places that make you happy and add to your energy. Then mentally list the people, the things, the activities, and the places that bring you down, drain your energy, and zap your body of vitamins and minerals.

Did you know that when you feel stressed, the vitamin balance in your body can be disrupted, and you end up with a vitamin, mineral, and/or amino acid imbalance? These imbalances then cause “dis-ease,” said Dr. John Neustadt, a naturopathic doctor.

Keep track of the people, activities, and things that give you a boost or that drain your energy for a week. You'll be amazed at what you discover. Be mindful of how you're feeling and of the amount of stress you experience, rating it from 1 to 10 (10 being your highest stress level). You will find a Stress Sheet to use for this exercise at my Web site, www.destressdiva.com/energy. After you have filled it in for a week, review it to find patterns.

Dance

Play some of your favorite high-powered music and start dancing. You may want to put on a song with a slower rhythm for gentle dancing. The most important thing is that you dance to your heart's desire and keep your movements free flowing.

daily aspiration "Today I take one thing at a time."

5 time to focus on what is most important ... now

Setting priorities is crucial to achieving our goals for each day and for our lives, yet our personal priorities often become lost because of our hectic schedules.

A report from the Mayo Clinic cites several modern factors that disrupt our efforts to establish priorities. Our global economy has created a round-the clock mind-set in how we view work, which also affects the hours we set aside for our personal lives and priorities.

Advanced communication technologies have led to a loss of personal down time; we are always "on" or accessible. These technologies also distract our attention from the here and now—activities we may be absorbed in or people we are interacting with. Today's families, in which two or more members may be fully immersed in the world of work, must struggle to maintain quality relationships within the family unit and with friends.

dear diva

"How do I rise above the distractions, focus on the most important priorities, and achieve real results?"

secrets from the de-stress diva

Not setting priorities is one of the main reasons that people feel stressed and overwhelmed. Setting priorities stems from being very clear about your values. If you have identified your five most important values, then setting priorities becomes so much easier. For example, my top five priorities are God, family, work, exercise, and play. So, if there is a meeting in the evening and one of my children asks me out to dinner, I will almost always choose spending time with my family. Why? My family is a higher priority than my work, even though my work is very important to me.

What are your top three highest values? What are the top three highest priorities in your life, in general?

Now I want you to make a “worry” list:

1. Write down all of your worries and/or all the things that make you feel overloaded and stressed out.
2. Look at this list closely and categorize the worries into personal, home, specific person, work, organization, and so forth.
3. Now decide which items on this “worry” list are causing you stress because of your feelings and reactions or because of time pressures.
4. Which tasks can you delegate to someone else?
5. How can you “reframe” your stress or worried feelings and reactions to calm yourself down and see the situation more positively?
6. Now consider how this new reframing and the projects you have delegated allow you to focus on your priorities. Do you have more quality time and a better outlook as a result?

Thoughts

Shut your eyes and imagine that you do not have the gift of sight for two minutes. Slowly open your eyes and “see” how you feel now.

Breathe

Sit quietly and breathe in a slow, relaxed manner. Lovingly let your feelings of being stressed or worried arise, and then “thank” them as you let them go. Feelings are not facts; they are information. Our feelings are trying to tell us something, and we need to pay attention to the information, not dwell on the stress and the pain.

Now that you have let your stress and obsessive thoughts go, tell yourself, “I have enough time to accomplish my top priorities right now.”

Take a Walk

Take a walk for about five or ten minutes and be mindful only of the scenery while you are walking. Leave your anxious thoughts and stress behind. If they crop up in your mind, simply be kind to yourself and say, “Thank you” and “Good-bye.” Or loudly tell yourself to “Stop!”

Aromatherapy

If you feel that you need to refocus and lift your spirits and emotions so that you can focus on your priorities, you may want to use essential oils that stimulate the mind, such as peppermint, various citruses, and even basil. Terri Hicks, an aromatherapist, said, “These are excellent uplifters.”

Acupressure

Eastern societies believe that healthy chi, or the flow of energy through the body, is important in order to maintain your vigor and well-being.

By pressing areas on your face and head, you can stimulate chi and, as a result, release tension.

1. Using your index finger, quickly and gently tap various spots on your face.
2. Using the fingertips of both hands, rhythmically and gently tap the sides of your head a few times.

Food

Astragalus is known to increase vitality and prevent colds and flu. It has been used in Asia for more than two thousand years and is considered an excellent antiaging herb. Astragalus also helps heal skin wounds and infections.

daily aspiration “I am calm and peaceful and I feel inner joy.”

6 uncork your feelings

There's science to back up the long-held advice that sharing your feelings can help you to alleviate stress. A 2007 brain-imaging study by UCLA psychologists found that the simple act of verbalizing feelings elicits useful insights or advice from the listener. The study also found that expressing your feelings in writing, such as by keeping a journal, is beneficial in reducing stress.

dear diva

"I get so angry sometimes, I wish I could just express my feelings out loud. But I'm afraid I'll be judged as weak or whining. Instead, I bottle everything up and just want to scream by the end of the week. How can I express my feelings?"

secrets from the de-stress diva

We are full of emotions, and it is important to frequently "empty out" our feelings and emotions. Putting them in writing is a healthy way to do this. It allows us to gain perspective on what we feel and, as a result, lowers our stress levels.

1. **Keep a journal.** People are often afraid to express their feelings because they fear that these will be misinterpreted. Express your feelings on paper, to yourself, first. Keep a journal and write down what you feel when a stressful situation arises. Keeping a journal is an enlightened way to explore your stress-triggers, as you track what makes you feel stressed and why.
2. **Use your journal as your script.** Revisit what you have written in your journal to avoid blurting out your feelings to others first. When you have had a chance to dispassionately examine your feelings on paper, you will be calm and thoughtful (versus angry or overemotional) when you express your feelings to others.
3. **Find a trusted sounding board.** Ask a friend to become your sounding board, in exchange for your being that person's sounding board. Promise each other that you won't pass judgment or even offer advice but will only listen. In Great Britain, there are social organizations that offer professional "listeners" to workplaces, not

to offer advice, but merely to act as sounding boards. If you're hesitant to express your feelings to a boss or a family member, practice with your trusted sounding board first.

What Is Your Emotional Temperature?

In the wonderful play *Wicked*, a prequel to the children's classic *The Wizard of Oz*, the characters don't say, "Wait a minute." They say, "Just wait a tick-tock!" At home and at work, we tend to be obsessed with watching the tick-tock of the clock. But before we resort to the same old habit, we can tackle our emotions, which so often control how we measure time. We all have what I call an "emotional thermostat," and we each have a different emotional boiling point. Just as water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit, we, too, have a temperature at which our emotions boil. Once we hit that boiling point, our creativity fizzles and our body goes into fight-or-flight mode. We've all experienced this when our stress is in overdrive and perhaps we have just had an altercation with a colleague or a family member. As we walk away from that person, we think of all the things we could have said but didn't think of. That is exactly what happens: our fight-or-flight response overrides our creative thinking.

Emotions Feed Our Energies

Turning a negative emotion (the feeling of being overwhelmed, fearful, or anxious or just being in a bad mood) into a positive one can reenergize us.

A study conducted by the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania reports that "positive people cognitively process more efficiently and more appropriately." People in a negative mood tend to inefficiently spend too much processing time on the mood itself. The Wharton research report found that when in a positive mood, people are more open to taking in information and handling it effectively. Here are two de-stress strategies you can use:

1. **Make a choice.** The choice to approach your day in a negative way or a positive way is entirely up to you. Instead of allowing yourself to feel overwhelmed, take positive action

by breaking up your many tasks for the day into only two to do at a time. Concentrate on one page at a time in order to finish a report. Go room by room to clean your house or deal with home maintenance problems. Take one step at a time to reach your healthy eating or exercise goals. It's all up to you.

2. **Try it out.** Spend five minutes writing down your to-do list on a piece of paper. Circle the two most important items. Tackle those first. Then return to your list and repeat the exercise. It's hard to feel positive when you feel overwhelmed. It's easy to be positive when you know you can accomplish one thing first, then another, and then another.

Focus on Your Decisions Today for a Happier Tomorrow

It's hard to hear sometimes, but for the most part, our current lives consist of the decisions we have made along the way. Where we are today is a culmination of those decisions. Jack Canfield, the coauthor of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books and the author of *Success Principles*, says in the first chapter of *Success Principles* that we need to take 100 percent responsibility for our lives right now.

Become conscious of all your decisions. Look at the decisions you make daily, starting in the morning; for example, did you have breakfast? Did you exercise or did you feel there wasn't enough time? Did you stop for a moment and say something loving to your child or spouse before leaving for the day? Did you decide to work through lunch to meet a deadline or did you refuel your body and your mind by taking time off for lunch? Continue to be conscious of your decisions during the day for the next week. You may be motivated to make different types of decisions.

daily aspiration "I will honor my feelings today and then let them go."

7 expectations are a setup for frustration

Having high expectations of others can lead to self-imposed stress when people fail to meet your expectations. To reduce your stress levels, downgrade your expectations, not only of yourself but of others, too. One New Zealand study suggests that “putting things into perspective” can help diffuse stress that is caused by others failing to meet your expectations.

dear diva

“I work hard, but everything falls apart when other people fail to do their jobs, too. Their failures make me look like a failure. How can I avoid the frustration that always arises when I have to depend on others to get a job done?”

secrets from the de-stress diva

1. **Be realistic.** If you feel frustrated when people fail to perform at the level that your expectations have set for them, then lower the bar. Expecting what’s impossible of others will only guarantee disappointment. Step back and ask yourself what you realistically can expect from your family members, friends, contractors, or employees. Then plan your tasks accordingly.
2. **Listen.** Oftentimes, in setting yourself up for failure by expecting too much of others, you fail to listen to other people. Instead of making demands, ask whether your request can be met. You might hear an answer that will allow you to better coordinate a partnership or a project without the stress that comes with “guessing” but not knowing whether an expectation can be met.
3. **Focus on your priorities.** If your personal priorities rely on whether others can meet your high expectations, then revisit your priorities. Focus your priorities on yourself, not on setting priorities for other people. If you keep your focus on your own goals, you won’t overrely on others.

Are You Playing the Blame Game?

Sometimes we expect too much of others as an excuse to blame someone else for our own failures. Ask yourself, why are you demanding so much of someone else? Are you taking full responsibility for your actions, regardless of how the other person acts? This is an exercise best practiced in your personal journal, which will allow you to write down, examine, and then revisit your answers to learn whether you are guilty of playing the blame game.

Expect Good Food First

When people find that they have misinterpreted their expectations of one another, here's a good, nonthreatening way to determine whether a group is a "good fit" for a project or a partnership. Plan a meal in which your guests bring their talents to the table in the form of a dish. Plan a family meal or a work-focused picnic. Allow participants to volunteer their strengths in presenting certain dishes and to acknowledge their weaknesses in allowing someone with more skill to prepare other dishes. The give-and-take of the planning process, the execution, and the enjoyment of the meal can set the stage for more productive partnerships that acknowledge that everyone can share in getting a job done.

daily aspiration "I am confident of my own decisions and strengths."

8 laughter de-stresses the spirit

It seems that laughter really is the best medicine. Researchers at Loma Linda University in California report that laughing reduces stress hormones, lowers blood pressure, relaxes tense muscles (especially a good belly laugh), triggers the release of endorphins, and boosts immune functions. Best yet, it's free!

Researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine have linked laughter to the healthy functioning of our blood vessels, which can stave off heart disease. The researchers showed funny movies to their test subjects and discovered that people experienced an increase in blood flow throughout their bodies. Laughter apparently causes the tissue that forms the inner lining of our blood vessels, the endothelium, to contract and expand to increase the blood flow. Laugh out loud. It's good for your health, as well as for reducing your stress levels.

dear diva

"I don't have time to do my job, take care of my home, and meet every other overwhelming obligation in my week. How can I find more time to have fun?"

secrets from the de-stress diva

So, go ahead. Rent a funny movie. Visit a witty friend. Read a humorous book, it's good for you!

- **Rent a funny movie.** You can catch up on simple chores such as filing paperwork or repairing furniture while you watch a funny movie. It's not multitasking; it's integrating some fun into an otherwise monotonous day of chores, which makes the work go that much faster. Laughter burns calories, too!
- **Remember: the more, the merrier.** Invite your peers or family to join you at a funny movie, an amusing play, or a stand-up comedy performance. Laughter is contagious and is a nonthreatening way to strengthen relationships.
- **Read a funny book.** And share what you read with friends and peers. Write down comic phrases to enjoy again when you feel stressed or to forward in an e-mail to a family member. Your public library and local bookstores are great resources for advice on finding humorous, entertaining books.
- **Be silly.** In a popular episode of the hit television sitcom *Friends*, the character Rachel is aghast at her friend Phoebe's silly method of running helter-skelter, versus the orderly jogging practiced by others at a local park. Rachel ultimately relinquishes her fear of being silly and joins her friend, waving her arms, leaping, and

running in a free, unrestrained manner. The point is, it's fun to be silly, so drop your inhibitions sometimes and act silly with a friend or even all by yourself. Sometimes you can have the most fun laughing at yourself.

Burn Calories with a Good Belly Laugh

It's true. Researchers have found that sustained laughter (in other words, a good belly laugh) burns calories.

View Yourself through Your Childhood Eyes

The great scientist Albert Einstein said, "Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods." As adults, we often take ourselves too seriously, which can prevent us from having more fun in life.

Try this exercise. The next time you find yourself worrying over what someone said at work or whether you will measure up to the expectations of your boss or whether you have adequately responded to all of your e-mails, ask your ten-year-old self what your inner child thinks and then *listen*. Once a client expressed fears that he would not measure up at a technology conference, even though he had spent weeks reading up on the latest advances in computers. I asked him what his response would be if he were ten years old instead of fifty. He said, "Wow! I'll get to see some cool toys." He laughed at the thought, and his anxiety disappeared. Just like that! Sometimes it's enlightening to see yourself through the eyes of your inner child.

Think Back to a Funny Experience or Situation

When you think about it, our lives are full of funny experiences, if we take time to reflect back on them. I remember the day I was walking in the snow with my family and I fell. My daughter couldn't stop laughing. I didn't think it was so funny at the time, but watching her laugh put me into a funny mood as well. What funny experiences can you reflect back on when your stress level starts to climb?

Start Your Own Comedy Night

Gather all of your “funny” friends together, or invite someone who has a “funny gig” to your house and ask that person to try out his or her new material on your crowd. Can you imagine . . . planning a comedy night once a week or every couple of weeks for the mere enjoyment of looking at life’s funny side with friends? Just like anything else, you have to plan for it before it happens.

Watch Funny TV Reruns

I often think of the movie *Pretty Woman*, where Julia Roberts plays an adorable prostitute. While she’s waiting to go to “work,” she amuses herself by watching *I Love Lucy* reruns on television. Some hilarious TV shows are on DVD, such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and others. The main idea here is to spend time every day or each week exercising your “funny” stomach muscles and to downshift your stress level, while you’re laughing.

daily aspiration “I enjoy and appreciate the funny moments and situations in my life today.”

9 create boundaries without blaming yourself or others

Today’s working moms feel guilty about spending less time with their children, even though research shows that mothers now spend more time with their children than in previous generations. Although the women surveyed by the University of Maryland stated that they didn’t spend enough time with their children, the university’s researchers discovered that modern-day moms put in more time with their children than mothers did in

1965—an era of the infamously “perfect” TV mom. The study shows that mothers now spend an average of nearly 14.1 hours a week primarily tending to their children, versus 10.2 hours a week in 1965.

This study is an example of how we can experience guilt that is caused by others. In this case, nostalgia about stay-at-home moms in previous generations is pervasive in the mass media, creating guilt where there should be none.

dear diva

“I hate to feel guilty, and I hate being around people who make me feel guilty all the time. It’s too overwhelming to have people around you who always want to make you feel bad about yourself. How can I make it stop?”

secrets from the de-stress diva

The guilt you suffer from believing that your actions hurt another person can send your stress levels skyrocketing. Researchers in the United States and Canada report that “great distress” is the result when guilt becomes excessive or irrational. In a situation like this, you can use your emotional intelligence as a powerful weapon against people who make you feel guilty. For example, you may have aging parents who unerringly know how to make you feel guilty about working full-time while raising your children. In this case, use your emotional intelligence to neutralize their criticism. Remind yourself that they might not be aware of the high costs of raising children in this era. In terms of real dollars, the average income in the United States has actually declined since the 1970s. Yet the cost of necessities has skyrocketed.

The American comedian and writer Erma Bombeck put it succinctly: “Guilt, the gift that keeps on giving.”

- **Consider the source.** When others *try* to make us feel guilty or we think we *should* be feeling guilty based on others’ comments or opinions, ask yourself, Who is trying to make me feel guilty? Is it a sibling, a parent, a colleague, a spouse, or someone else with a specific agenda? Or is something triggering me to feel guilty.

- **Consider the motive.** Once you identify who is trying to make you feel guilty, then you need to figure out the motive behind the guilt-slinging. For example, many people try to control a situation or another person's behavior and use guilt to manipulate someone into doing what they think is correct. Whether people do this intentionally or unintentionally, their motive to control is the same.

What about “mommy guilt” or “can’t say no” guilt and many others? An entire industry has sprung up around making moms, spouses, children, and you name it, feel guilty by offering even more extracurricular activities, counseling services, books, and must-have products for mothers and couples than in any previous generation. The media also benefits from the money spent advertising these products and services. Remember, you have the power to control your feelings of guilt.

1. **If you're guilty, admit it and move on.** Don't let guilt rule your thoughts and emotions. If you are accused of something that is wrong, admit your guilt, ask for forgiveness, and move on. Revisiting the scene of the crime does neither party any good; use your mistakes as a learning opportunity. If you are not forgiven, forgive yourself, and move on!
2. **Listen.** If someone is trying to make you feel guilty, ask yourself why. Is it a cry for help or for more attention? Listen “through” the drama to what is actually being said and why. Use your emotional intelligence to learn why someone is trying to make you feel guilty. When you grasp the dynamics of the situation, positively address a way to solve the problem. Many times, this requires direct, heartfelt communication with the person.
3. **Don't be an enabler.** If someone often makes you feel guilty, ask yourself whether you are enabling that person. Don't make guilt the “gift that keeps on giving” for you or other people in your life. If someone is trying to make you feel guilty to get your attention or to control your behavior, try responding with “I want to spend more time with you, *and* I feel pressure from you to . . .”
4. **Make a conscious choice.** Then, consciously choose to spend less time with that person until he or she stops this behavior. You have the power to change from enabler to enlightener.

Breathe

Breathing exercises are a proven stress-buster that can be practiced free of charge, at any time, at work or at home, while you are completing a project, as you do the dishes, while you take a walk, or when you feel anxious or exhausted. If you find yourself in an awkward conversation with someone who is angry or frustrated, spend a few seconds taking deep breaths before you respond.

Always begin and end each day with a deep breathing exercise. Take five deep breaths, exhaling slowly each time. In fact, every time you feel stress, take a series of deep breaths to calm and energize yourself as you breathe in and eliminate the negatives around you as you exhale.

Take a Walk

Walking is a natural de-stressor that works on your emotions as well as your body. On my walks I have come up with some of my best solutions to problems that require sincere and direct communication. I have also thought up many of my most creative programs on my walks. Purchase a pedometer and try to get in ten thousand steps daily. The pedometer can easily be attached to your skirt, pants, or watch, and it automatically tabulates the number of steps you take daily. Just by having the goal of ten thousand steps daily will remind you to keep walking during the day.

Daily Affirmations

Affirmations are an excellent way to assert that we're okay. We sometimes tend to succumb to others' "guilt-making" because we may feel lesser than them, may want to please the other person, or think we'll get extra brownie points if we keep saying yes. Here are a few affirmations that may help you counteract unwanted guilt:

"I honor my time today."

"I love the person I am."

"I have the right to make my own decisions."

"I have confidence in my answers."

"I have the right to say no."

“I have loving boundaries without making the other person wrong.”

Practice Saying “No, Thank You!”

One of my friends who has recently retired from a successful placement firm often says, when introducing me to new people, “Ruth is the only person I know who can say no to you and you still feel good about it.” When I first heard her say that, I laughed. But then I realized that she meant it, and I reflected on her statement. It became apparent to me that the reason she (and possibly others) may feel that way is because when I do say no to a request or to anything else, I make sure that my refusal comes from a place of compassion for myself and respect for the other person. I know, for example, that when I’m overextended, I’m not a very nice person and that the anxiety and the feelings of being overwhelmed spill into other parts of my life. I don’t want that to happen very often, particularly since realizing that I am the one who has the power to say no. I can’t blame or control the other person for asking, but I can control my behavior and my words. What freedom I felt when I discovered that!

daily aspiration “I honor who I am.”

10 are you feeling anxious yet?

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that forty million Americans, or 18 percent of adults over the age of eighteen, suffer from some form of anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. Anxiety disorders include panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and phobias (social phobia, agoraphobia, and specific phobias). Help is available if you want to reduce your anxiety.

dear diva

"I have this overall feeling of anxiety with me most of the time, and it causes me a lot of stress. How can I handle my anxiety?"

secrets from the de-stress diva

Anxiety stems from fear, and one of the most important things you can do when you feel anxious is to slow down and breathe. Stephen Price, a recovering agoraphobic and a national public speaker, shares these five tips:

1. **Deepen your breathing.** Learning to control your breathing is the fastest and most basic way to reduce anxiety. That's because your breathing pattern is so closely connected to your emotional state. Rapid, shallow breathing from the top of the lungs is associated with worry, fear, and panic. Slower, deeper breathing that originates in the lower abdomen is associated with a blissful, carefree, and relaxed state.
2. **Change your mental diet.** Self-talk is the diet of the mind. Just as some diets lead to illness and other diets promote health, so it is with the nature of your self-talk. Negative messages are destructive to the mind and cause anxiety, while positive messages heal. Whatever type of messages your mind constantly chews on and digests will profoundly influence your emotional state.
3. **Choose your close relationships carefully.** Like it or not, our closest relationships can cause anxiety or contribute to peace of mind. The problem is that many anxiety sufferers are people-pleasers but choose to have close relationships with people who are difficult to please. These are the people who always place unrealistic expectations on you and withhold their approval unless you meet these expectations.
4. **Schedule a time for worrying.** Cultivate the habit of writing down your worries and make an appointment for worrying each day. This will postpone your anxiety and will help you keep your mind focused on the present.
5. **Exercise! Exercise! Exercise!** A regular running program (or other aerobic exercise) is an excellent way to regulate the physical changes that anxiety produces in your body. It is also the most natural way to satisfy the body's urge to fight or flee.

Each time you go for a run, for example, your body makes use of would-be anxiety symptoms. It needs the extra oxygen from faster breathing, the extra blood flow produced by a rapid heartbeat, and the extra adrenaline for added energy. Plus, after you run, you will enjoy a tired, euphoric feeling brought on by the release of endorphins, the body's natural tranquilizers, into the bloodstream.

Ten Minutes a Day

Dr. Herbert Benson, the director emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, said that setting aside only ten minutes once or twice a day to unwind with yoga, meditation, deep breathing, or even a calming activity like knitting will help you prevent anxiety from taking over. He said, "The repetition breaks the train of everyday thought, and that allows the body and mind to revert to a quiet state."

Schedule One Hour a Day of Worrying

Reserve one hour toward the end of each day for worrying. Keep a notepad with you during the day, and every time you start to worry about something, write it down. Each evening, when the hour comes that you have set aside for worrying, get out your list and focus on each worry, one by one. At the end of the hour, throw away the list and start a fresh one. You will find that some of the worries you wrote down earlier in the day might not seem so serious later that evening.

Write a Letter

A great way to "unload anxiety" is to write a letter to the person who is the cause of the anxious feeling in your mind. Say everything you need to say to this person, and don't hold back on expletives. After it's written, throw it away, burn it, or keep it in your journal . . . but don't send it. This is a wonderfully cathartic experience.

daily aspiration "I am breathing in life with calm and peace."