

125th Anniversary

COLLECTOR'S ISSUE

MAY 2010

# Good Housekeeping

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(One is chocolate! p. 58)

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The solution that surprised even us

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who changed  
our lives

FIRST LADY  
**Michelle Obama**

On keeping her marriage close, raising the girls—and overcoming her biggest fear

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# Stress Less, Accomplish More

Forget bubble baths. Exercise, the right diet (with a surprise treat), and thinking about your troubles in new ways will keep you in the comfort zone

By Sarah Mahoney

“Why do I do this to myself?” I mutter. “Schedule something that means I have to clean and shop midweek, when work is so busy?”

The answer is obvious: I do this because even if I don’t like stress, I like the things in my life that create it—like my book group. My husband, kids, friends, volunteering, hobbies, exercise, and work all make me happy. Yet every one of them, at times, creates levels of stress that are downright scary. They can make my heart pound and turn my neck to granite.

But that doesn’t necessarily mean I should give up any of them. After years of bad-mouthing stress, urging women like me to try to eliminate it and spend more time soaking in bubble baths, experts are finally shifting their focus from our frailties to our hardiness. “How can we learn to handle stress better?” is becoming a more important question than “How can we make stress go away?” A certain amount of pressure isn’t just good for us, research shows—it’s a requirement for a rich life, providing us with stress hormones to fuel our creativity. “Often, people need a little jolt—like a deadline or an audience—to perform better,” explains Zhen Yan, Ph.D., a physiology and neuroscience professor at the →

**My book group is due to arrive** in less than 10 minutes as I screech into the driveway. I haul the grocery bags into the house, creating a cyclone of tulip petals, pistachios, and pre-chunked pineapple as I slam snacks into serving bowls. I quickly scan the kitchen computer for e-mails, grimacing at my still-unfinished assignments. And just as the first guest arrives, I notice that I dusted only half of a very visible lampshade, and that my son’s dirty sweat sock is wedged under a hassock.

**75%**  
Number of  
Americans  
who said their  
stress levels  
were “high” or  
“moderate” in  
the past year

State University of New York at Buffalo medical school. And studies at her lab show that short zaps of stress can improve memory and learning.

Experts are also backing off their old ideas about “good” stress and “bad” stress. While there may be huge psychological differences between happy upsets (“Your house sold, and the buyer wants to close in two weeks!”) and scary ones (“If this department doesn’t boost sales numbers in two weeks, we’ll have to start

## Dark chocolate boosts mood in the short term—and provides ongoing health benefits

laying people off”), your hormone system can’t tell the difference. Each of these events can trigger the body’s fight-or-flight response, releasing a flood of chemicals—including adrenaline (also called epinephrine), cortisol, and other neurotransmitters. And each of these hormones creates its own set of lingering (and sometimes damaging) consequences.

So instead of analyzing whether your stress is good or bad, “it’s more useful to focus on recognizing your personal signals for overload,” says Carol J. Scott, M.D., a stress-relief coach and author of *Optimal Stress*. “We need a certain amount of adrenaline to get things done.”

But when stress becomes so intense and prolonged that it feels bad—your belly churns, your temper flares—you’ve crossed into the red zone and need to corral it. Left unchecked, that kind of high-level, protracted stress can be—quite literally—a killer, contributing to problems from headaches to heart disease. But just as important, says Dr. Scott, that kind of pressure keeps you from immersing yourself in projects that make you feel good. How can you plan this sum-

mer’s herb garden when your ailing sister is absorbing your time and energy—and giving you back spasms?

You can, by learning to approach your stress in new ways. The Army is finding that training soldiers on basic resiliency skills, like trying to be less self-critical, helps them manage battlefield trauma and even grow from the experience. And that’s in

combat. To get into your best stress zone, where you’re pushed just enough to feel motivated but not so much you go over the top, follow our three-step plan.

### Step 1 Ratchet Up Your Core Resilience

Finding your zone requires beefing up basic stress hardiness, says Roberta Lee, M.D., vice-chair of integrative medicine at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City and author of *The SuperStress Solution*. That means doing all the healthy things you know you should.

• **Eat the six foods that stop stress** Comfort foods—those high-carb, high-calorie treats—release brain-soothing chemicals and may well help to soothe you in the short term. But they add pounds (talk about a stressor!) and don’t protect you from the physical assault ongoing tension can cause. For that, you need a dietary plan to fight the body-wide inflammation stress creates, which, left unchecked, can lead to cardiovascular disease and other ills, says Dr. Lee. Her list of stress-curbing foods: vegetables,



fruits, fish, whole grains, and heart-healthy fats—like those in nuts and olive oil. And don’t forget to treat yourself to a little dark chocolate. Not only does it boost mood in

the short term, but the high level of antioxidants can provide ongoing protection. It’s also important to eat less red meat, full-fat dairy and other high-saturated-fat foods, and processed items.

• **Work it out** Exercise conditions us to respond better to psychological stress. In rats, it takes about six weeks of running on training wheels to establish the basic level of protection, says Benjamin Greenwood, Ph.D., a neuroscience researcher at the University of Colorado. He hasn’t studied how long it would take for humans, but what’s important is having a routine of regular, moderate-intensity workouts. Possibilities: walking at a fast pace, bicycling, swimming.

• **Extinguish the electronics** E-mail, text-messages, ringing cell phones—these interruptions tend to stress us even when we’re not aware of it, says Dr. Lee. “And most of us don’t realize how seldom we go off duty.” Some people may check their e-mail as often as 30 or 40 times an hour, say Scottish researchers; 34 percent of workers report feeling stressed by the volume of e-mails, and 28 percent feel driven to deal with messages as soon as possible. (No wonder your coworkers are so twitchy.) While you may not be able to stop the flow at work, have a set time for shutting down computers and other devices at home.

• **Sleep it off** Most of us need between seven and nine hours a night, but the typical woman gets just six hours, 41 minutes on weeknights, a National →

Sleep Foundation poll reports. And while a lack of sleep is linked to many health problems, including obesity and hypertension, adequate rest is also vital for stress recovery.

## Step 2 Find Your Traps

This can be tricky. Is it really your morning commute that stresses you out? Or is that masking other tensions: how much you hate your job, for example, or worries about your child's day care? The way to find out is to spend a week listing everything that seems to be getting to you, then look for themes. Write down the big life problems (a brother's ongoing neediness, serious financial worries) as well as minor annoyances (a cluttered bedroom, your husband's unending connection to ESPN).

Now put the list aside and take some time to think about your goals: the projects you wish you had more time for, whether it's the quilt you want to start, the vacation you're eager to plan, or the idea you've

dreamed about pitching at work. Focusing on these can inspire you as you turn back to the soul-sucking stressors that are getting in the way of the activities that will energize you.

Look at your first list and see what themes you can decode. Say you were crazed by having to rush your kids each morning, not being able to stay with your son after his band concert, and never finishing the conversation with your husband about his best friend's job search. Diagnosis: You don't have time to be as focused on family as you'd like. If your frustrations center on housework, acknowledge that chores are eating your life. Or maybe work problems dominate the list. Now, instead of sighing, "I'm so stressed," you can know which area causes the biggest obstacles—and begin to address those.

## Step 3 Break Out

By looking at your problems in new ways—reframing them—you can diminish their effect on you.→

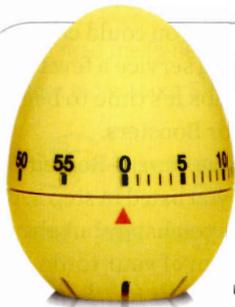


FACE OF GH

## Martha Stewart

**OCCUPATION** Cooking and homekeeping guru (eco-friendly cleaners are her latest project)  
**GH COVER** September 2007

- **Good housekeeping is...** all about making your home the loveliest place to be.
- **The hassle-saving device of my dreams is...** something that would groom my five cats, three dogs, 20 canaries, three donkeys, and four horses.
- **The good housekeeping rule I always break is...** I don't have trash cans except in my kitchen; I can't stand them. I collect a tiny pile [of things to be discarded] in my bathroom and take it to the kitchen.
- **The household chore I will never do is...** nonexistent. After writing my *Homekeeping Handbook*, I defy you to find a chore I haven't done 25 times!
- **The household job that makes me happiest is...** straightening my kitchen drawers.
- **I'm happiest at home when I...** am cooking something from my garden, dining with friends, or playing Scrabble with my daughter.



## 60 SECONDS TO SANITY

For those crazed, heart-racing moments, breathing deeply for a minute or so can lower your stress level. But to decrease overall anxiety and boost confidence, practice daily for 15 to 20 minutes (start with 10 and work your way up). Health experts at Harvard suggest three different methods; use whichever feels most comfortable to you.

- **SIMPLE BREAK** Take a normal breath followed by a slow, deep breath, letting the air come in through your nose to fill your lower belly. Now breathe out through your mouth or nose. Alternate normal and deep breaths.
- **HAND-ON-BELLY** Put one hand just below your belly button and breathe deeply. Feel your hand rise about an inch each time you inhale and fall about an inch when you exhale.
- **MULTISYSTEM** Close your eyes. Imagine that each inhale washes relaxation into your body and each exhale carries tension away. To reinforce the effect, as you inhale say (to yourself), "Breathing in peace and calm" and as you exhale say, "Breathing out tension and anxiety."

• **Rank the upset** Is it a crisis or a blip? Suppose you've just reminded your 13-year-old that it's trash night. He snarls. Your jaw clenches. "Take a breath and ask yourself what's really at stake here," advises Dr. Scott. "Of course you want to raise your children right. But while chores, in general, are important, you know that one trash night is a minor chapter in child-rearing." Perspective will enable you to summon a calm "I

brain's architecture: "When we feel we don't have control, the more primitive part of our brain (the amygdala) goes into a kind of all-over vigilance. That's very demanding and uses a lot of energy." But once we know we can control some aspect of a situation, the more developed prefrontal cortex can send a kind of "all-clear" signal to the amygdala, overriding its reactions. And the effect can be long-lasting. "Experiences in controlling stress

you can't change a bumper job overnight, it's vital to acknowledge the drag it puts on you.

When occupational health researchers in Italy recently tracked just over 100 nurses for a year, they found that those who disliked their jobs had weaker immune systems, as measured by certain T cells. But interestingly, the nurses who found ways to raise job satisfaction as the year progressed showed improvements in their immune systems.

If you're unhappy at work, think about fixes you might make: finding a new project, switching departments, changing your hours. Or ask yourself if it's time for a bigger solution, like looking for a new job or going back to school so that you can move into a more challenging position or change careers altogether.

• **Ask, "What would Bill Gates do?"** Fantasize about how you could eliminate stress if you had money to burn. Would you hire a maid? An assistant to do the bottle drive for Boosters? It's an exercise that can lead to surprising solutions: Maybe you could consider hiring a cleaning service a few times a year, or perhaps it's time to beg off volunteering for Boosters.

• **Finally, find your reward** Remember those projects you listed in step 2, the ones that make you happy but always fall to the bottom of your to-do list? Make one of them happen now, whether it's biking down a nearby hill, creating an elaborate dessert for friends, or trying a new dance class on your own. "The energy that comes from *that* kind of stress is what feeds us," says Dr. Scott. Somehow, even though you're adding to an already crowded day, you'll have the spirit to get through the drearier must-do's with less tension—and you'll feel more excited about your life. ■

## A certain amount of stress isn't just good for you—it's a requirement for a rich life

expect the garbage to be at the curb before you go to bed" rather than throwing down the gauntlet for the weekly skirmish. "That sense of priority helps you sort out real problems from mental clutter," says Dr. Scott.

• **Acknowledge your stress mountains...** While there isn't any magic pixie dust for life's biggest bummers—they still need regular, maybe even daily, attention—you can brainstorm ways to ease their impact. You can't cure your dad's cancer, but could you join a hospice support group? Your husband isn't willing to go to marriage counseling—would he agree to a weekend away so the two of you could talk? Even acknowledging that, in some cases, there is no immediate solution can help.

• **...but flatten the molehills** Traffic snarls get you worked up? Books on CD turn otherwise "lost" and tension-filled commuting time into a daily treat. For one week, try leaving for appointments (including picking up kids from after-school activities) 10 minutes earlier; you may find that relieves a lot of daily agitation. These aren't superficial fixes, says John Christian-son, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the University of Colorado—they alter the

change the way the brain works in the next stressful situation, blunting the effects," says Christianson.

• **Create numerical standards—and stick to them** Some stress is self-created, and for women who tend to do too much, concrete numbers help. Just because you cook dinner every night, you may assume your family expects you to do it, adding a lot of daily pressure. But maybe that's *your* vision of good Mommydom, and if you asked your husband and kids, you might find they'd be happy to take over three nights a week or to have DIY dinners. Or perhaps making every one of your daughter's soccer games—a logistical nightmare at work—means less to her than you think. Talk to her about it: Maybe she'd like you to come to just home games. Then post the list of family expectations on the fridge—four dinners a week, three home games—as a reminder that you are meeting your family's expectations.

• **Give your job a performance review** For many Americans, the recession has stolen job satisfaction: In January, the Conference Board reported that only 45 percent of those surveyed said they liked their work, the lowest level in more than two decades. While

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NEWS RELEASE

## Good Housekeeping: UB Study shows short zaps of stress can improve memory and learning

Release Date: April 30, 2010

Research conducted by Zhen Yan, professor of physiology and biophysics, is featured in an article in the May issue of Good Housekeeping magazine. The article interviews her on some of the benefits of stress, and notes that studies in her lab show that short zaps of stress can improve memory and learning. "Often, people need a little jolt -- like a deadline or an audience -- to perform better," she said. The article, which is based on a news release on Yan's research that was distributed in July 2009, is not available online. Good Housekeeping magazine, which is published 13 times a year, has an annual circulation of 59.8 million.

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