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"God says the role
of the husband is
to protect his wife"
—USHER

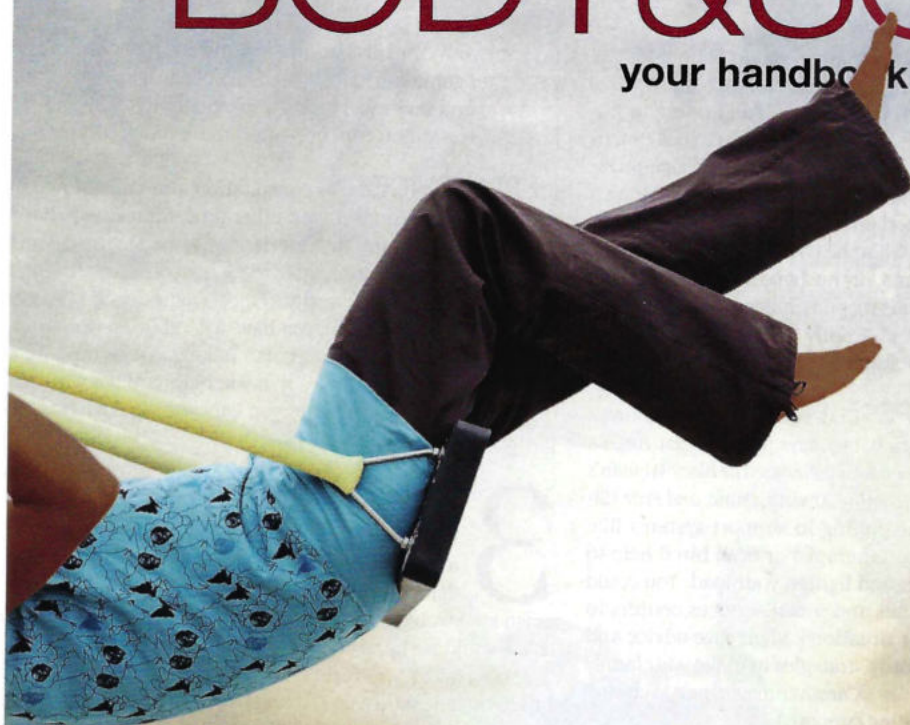
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LESSEN YOUR STRESS

What every Black woman needs to know about taming tension, overcoming anxiety, and finding a little bit of peace in each and every day BY CAROLYN DESALU

Stress. It's a part of life. And like spending half the day at the hair salon, sometimes there's just no way around it. But there are smart things you can do to get through tense periods of your life, and having that know-how is critical. "Stress, which is your mental, physical and emotional response to pressure, can compromise your health," notes Gail Porter, Psy.D., codirector of the Gaston & Porter Health Improvement Center in Potomac,

Maryland. You've probably heard that stress has been linked to everything from heart disease to problems with the immune system. But it can affect you in other more surprising ways by decreasing your productivity or even lowering your self-esteem. So if you're tired of letting stress get the best of you, start practicing these techniques for finding greater calm and less chaos in every tension-inducing area of your life, right now. ▷

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1 FAMILY DRAMA

Let us guess: Your sister has asked you to babysit for the third time this week because "something's come up." Or maybe you're stuck in the middle of an argument between your two cousins who are on the verge of never speaking to each other again. For Gina Parker Collins, a 41-year-old vice-president at a media company, her family tension arose from being a part of the sandwich generation. "I promised my dad I would never put him in a nursing home. So when he got Parkinson's disease, I brought him home to live with me, my husband and our two kids," she says. But it was a tremendous responsibility for her, not only helping with medications but also daily tasks like getting Dad dressed. Some stress-relieving solutions:

ASK FOR VOLUNTEERS "Understand all your resources before you commit to helping anyone," says psychologist Angela Neal-Barnett, Ph.D., author of *Soothe Your Nerves: The Black Woman's Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Anxiety, Panic, and Fear* (Simon & Schuster). That means pulling in support systems like other family members, friends, a therapist or even hired help to get through tough family times and lighten your load. You could also contact sororities, churches and social services centers to connect with people in similar situations. Their sage advice and experience could help you identify strategies to make your family situation easier. (Check out *Today's Caregiver* magazine's Web site, caregiver.com, for ideas on finding support.)

GIVE UP THE GUILT "For many Black women, just the idea of taking time for themselves is in itself stressful," says Neal-Barnett. But you've got to brush past that. Don't feel bad if your kids know that Friday after work is earmarked for Mom's pedicure or if your family knows not to call you during your Sunday brunch with the girls. And remember, your health is just as important as the health of those you're trying to care for, whether it's a sick relative or troublesome child. (After all, if something happens to you, who will take care of them?)

2 CAREER CHAOS

Logging extra hours to meet tough deadlines. Constantly multitasking. Dealing with difficult coworkers. Brief bouts of stress may help you get the job done. But when your stress is chronic, it can become a problem by decreasing the amount of work you can focus on, increasing your irritability and possibly making you sick since your immune system will be weaker. Here's how to handle it:

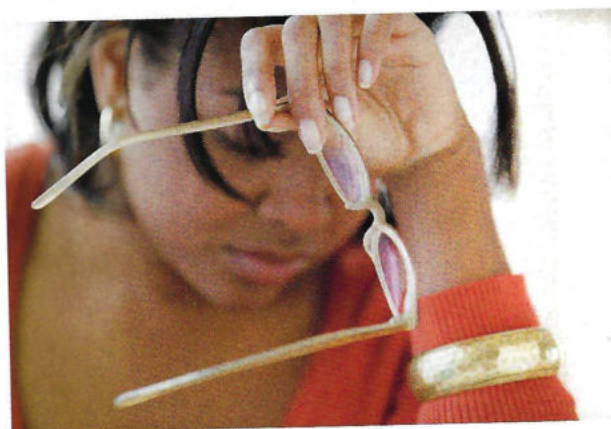
TAKE A MINUTE "I know everyone's busy, but there's so much research that shows that if you practice serenity, your blood pressure drops and your immunity is boosted," says Kathleen Hall, Ph.D., author of *Alter Your Life: Overbooked? Overworked? Overwhelmed?* (Oak Haven). How do you practice serenity? She suggests spending three to five minutes at least once a day listening to nature sounds (like rain or wind blowing) or doing a short meditation or even repeating a positive affirmation (like "I am strong," "Keep letting go," or "Lord Jesus Christ, hear my prayer"), taking a breath between each phrase. Tossing a minibasketball into a hoop

on your wall or even goofing around for a few minutes with a computer game can help, too. "Being playful can lower your blood pressure and may even increase productivity," she says. (Try going to games.yahoo.com or pogo.com for quick computer fun.)

HEED ADVICE "Peer consultation and professional mentoring allow you to connect with other professionals who have paved the way through similar experiences," says Savitri Dixon-Saxon, Ph.D., interim associate dean of the School of Counseling and Social Services at Walden University. "Once you understand who you are and what you want to do, you have a good framework for accomplishing work and personal goals." Talking to your boss about tasks outside your job description that you may have been asked to take on could also help. Together you can prioritize what is most important and try to jettison what's not.

3 MONEY MELTDOWNS

When her mortgage was in arrears, Diandra Alarcon, 26, a staffing coordinator at a career placement agency, decided to pawn her car for cash. "As I realized paying the pawn loan would be an additional \$387 per month, I cried, feeling as if I would never be able to pay it off," recalls the Fredericksburg, Virginia, resident. You don't need a mortgage to have cash concerns bring you to tears, though. Living paycheck to paycheck, finding out your identity has been stolen or needing to scrape together cash for a surprise car repair can send anyone into a tailspin. "Money is the number one stressor for Americans," says Hall, who is also founder and CEO of the Stress Institute in Atlanta. "There's a shame ▸



“I overcommit myself and then get stressed about all I have to do. But making a list helps.”

—Crystal Ellis-Abdullah, 25, Chicago

body & soul

associated with money stress. If you had a medical illness, you'd tell family or people at church. If you had marriage problems, you'd reach out to others for help. But for some reason, money problems are too embarrassing for us to talk about." Ways to destress:

DEVELOP A SOLID PLAN Whether your accumulated debt is from overspending or an unpaid loan to a friend, once you design a plan to tackle your cash flow problem (by having a garage sale, going for debt counseling, or finding a new job), you'll feel less worked up. "If we can get our minds to thinking about problem solving—instead of dwelling on our situation—it makes most of us feel better," explains Stacy Shaw Welch, Ph.D., director of the Anxiety & Stress Reduction Center of Seattle. (Go to essence.com for a listing of side hustle ideas that can increase your cash flow without taking up all your time.)

DO JUST ONE THING Time is money, so the sooner you can kick-start your game plan, the better. "Many people find when they're overwhelmed that making a list and doing the first thing on the list can really reduce stress levels," says Welch. So if your get-out-of-debt solution is to save more, step one can be calling your bank to arrange for \$25 to be automatically deposited into a savings account each pay period.

4 BOYFRIEND OR HUSBAND BLUES

Relationships can be tough, whether you're busy trying to make one work or just out there looking. "Women generally are going to feel interpersonal stress more," says Welch. "It's partly our culture and partly biology. We're the caretakers. Being more interpersonally oriented helps us deal with stress but can also cause it." So how do you manage the tension that arises over everything, from who's going to finally tackle the tower of laundry you both created to why you got into an argument in the frozen food section of the grocery store? Tips on dealing:

DIVVY UP TASKS Who's responsible for which chores is a classic relationship problem. "What's for dinner?" and "Where did all the forks go?" have been known to kick off their fair share of arguments. "You have to find time to sit down and talk about the division of labor, even if that labor gets farmed out to someone else like a housekeeper who comes in once a week," suggests Neal-Barnett. "Be creative."

TAKE STOCK Figure out if your relationship is healthy enough to stay in. "Ask yourself, *If I saw someone else being treated the way I am by my mate, what would I do?*" suggests Neal-Barnett. "Or *If I were braver, what would I do?*" If your relationship isn't supporting you and helping you become the person you want to be, it might be time to leave.

“I get frustrated when my boyfriend doesn't give me the attention I want, so I shop away my stress.”

—Charyn Robinson, 35, D.C.

“I get stressed when I can't pay my bills on time. I just do the best I can and leave it in God's hands.”

—Wendy Mars, 51, New York City



5 HEALTH HAZARDS

Maybe you've been trying to get pregnant for a while and the disappointment of getting your period each month has you frazzled. Or you've been diagnosed with diabetes and get tense every time you go to find something to eat. Stress can make an already troubling health situation worse by elevating your blood pressure, your heart rate and even your glucose or blood sugar levels. What's worse, some conditions—like obesity—can trap you in a vicious cycle: You're unhappy that you're obese, so you stress-eat to feel better, thus gaining even more weight. Some ideas:

PUT WELLNESS FIRST "I encourage women to start the day by meditating or praying," advises Porter. Meditation has the power to slow your heartbeat, lower your blood pressure, and decrease anxiety, according to some studies. A morning walk at a local track or a mall before the stores open can also do the trick. "You're reframing your priorities by choosing health first," says Porter. "And you're decreasing the likelihood that you'll eat a doughnut or pick up a heavy meal that day."

MAKE HEALTH A NO-BRAINER Save time by regularly ordering healthy groceries online from your local supermarket or delivery services like Peapod or FreshDirect. Book a personal trainer so you're less likely to miss exercise. "Workout activities that help induce weight loss also are stress reducers," says Neal-Barnett. In addition, they release endorphins that can take you beyond feeling calm to feeling joyous.