

Feeling ready to explode? Here's how to take the heat out of the situation and smooth the way to a slimmer you

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5 ways to blast through stress

There are plenty of things that can cause a man's stress levels to spike, from being 1-0 down with two minutes remaining, to the words 'you've remembered our anniversary, right?' Stress can affect us in all areas of our life, and more people take time off work because of it in the UK than anywhere else in the developed world.

Stress can manifest in many ways from anger and anxiety to depression, and sadly men are far less likely than women to seek out help with stress. Consequently, we blokes often choose to self-medicate with junk food and alcohol. The problem is, these high-Syn coping strategies are temporary fixes and are only going to stress out the button on your jeans. It doesn't have to be that way, though. Here's how to turn yourself into your very own Zen master...



STRESS STOPPER #1 Take time out

Ask men to pinpoint the main cause of their stress and the majority will go straight to one thing: their job. Bringing home the bacon can often lead to bringing home the bacon double cheeseburger, too, as busy periods at work find us reaching for snacks or fast food to help. However, the idea of foods providing solace from stress is a fantasy of Tolkien proportions according to a recent study at the University of Minnesota. *The Myth of Comfort Food* investigated the psychological benefits of comfort eating and the researchers found... absolutely none! Participants were shown 18-minute videos composed of film clips designed to induce anxiety and sadness (presumably a mix of costume dramas for the men!). They were then given either their favourite

comfort foods; foods they liked but didn't consider comforting, or no food at all, and were left for several minutes before their moods were measured. Comfort food did improve mood, but here's the kicker – so did the neutral food and no food at all. The study's authors reported that it was actually time that was the healer across all three groups. So, if you're feeling stressed, walk away. Take time out. Or by all means grab yourself something to eat – just make it a winning choice. 'The chances are some of your top comfort foods will be Free Foods if they're cooked the Slimming-World way,' says Dr Jacquie Lavin, head of nutrition and research. 'Mashed potatoes, pasta, curry, eggs – you can fill up, feel less stressed and know you're still in control!'

STRESS STOPPER #2 Talk about it

The closest most men come to 'sharing' their feelings with the outside world is when a goods lorry on the M4 cuts them up. Other than that, we're a pretty introspective bunch, which means the signs of stress are much harder to spot. Studies have shown that depression is more likely to be written off as low mood, and anxiety as just a bit of pressure – not only by men themselves, but by the doctors assessing them. One factor in all this is the assumption men should be tough

and strong. The truth is that talking about your worries isn't a sign of weakness – quite the opposite in fact. In reality, it takes strength to admit you'd like help and actively seek it out. Don't underestimate the power of the support you'll get from your Slimming World group. It's likely that other members have been through similar experiences and they'll be happy to share the weight loss-friendly coping mechanisms that helped them get through tricky times.

'High-Syn coping strategies are only going to stress out the button on your jeans'

STRESS STOPPER #3 Be more mindful

No one leads a totally stress-free existence. Even Tibetan monks have their worries! The difference is they have learned how to control any stress in their lives with meditation, and you can do something similar using mindfulness. This is both a form of meditation and therapy where you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance. It's a good antidote to stress because it teaches you to experience things in a more detached way. There are many mindfulness exercises. 'The three-minute breath-awareness exercise is very easy to do,' says mindfulness coach Beverley Harper (beverleyharper.co.uk). 'Simply focus on the rhythm of your breathing and nothing else. If your mind strays to something stressful, just bring your focus back to your breathing.' Not only will this help to calm you, it can help you tackle any stress-eating tendencies and stay in control of your food choices by connecting with how you're really feeling inside. Take a moment to ask yourself if you really want that chocolate biscuit, or if there's something more effective you can do to address the problem? The three-minute exercise can also help you breathe properly. Believe it or not, most people don't. Proper breathing involves long, slow, deep breaths; drawing in through the nose as deeply as possible and out through the mouth as slowly as possible, helping both mind and body to relax.

STRESS STOPPER #4 Focus on fitness

If you're the kind of bloke who would rather express himself physically than verbally – think Roy Keane in his playing days – then it might be time to find a new way to channel your inner Hulk. Many young men would rather smash something up than talk about their feelings. Yet if you refocus that energy into something more positive such as exercise, you'll have found one of the most effective stress stoppers known to man (or woman). And you don't have to join a gym either. Finding a Body Magic activity you can enjoy – whether it's swimming, cycling or brisk walking – will keep you motivated to make exercise a regular habit. And if you'd prefer a more hands-on approach to stress relief, you can always try boxing. Just pretend the punch bag is your problem and you'll be too tired to be stressed by the end of the sparring session! You'll also feel great about yourself. 'Exercise releases endorphins, which are the feel-good hormones,' says personal trainer Phil Evelyn (musclelondon.com). 'Sustained

exercise in any form literally makes you happy.' If the kind of exercise you're considering involves walking to the pub, though, then you need to reconsider. Booze has a depressant effect on the central nervous system, affecting the brain's ability to produce beneficial chemicals. This, in turn, can create a vicious circle. 'Alcohol is the only micronutrient known to stimulate appetite. Drink makes it so much easier to walk home via the takeaway,' says Slimming World's research specialist Professor James Stubbs. Especially if you reach your personal alcohol 'tipping point', which tends to be around 10.5 units for men (equivalent to four pints of beer) and eight units for women. Go beyond that and your resolve weakens, making you likely to consume on average an extra 2,829 calories in food and 1,476 calories in alcohol on the same day, plus another 2,051 extra calories in food the following day. That's 6,300 extra calories over the next 24 hours – the equivalent of two large stuffed-crust meat feast pizzas!

STRESS STOPPER #5 Build up your resilience

Journal writing is usually something reserved for retired politicians and Antarctic explorers. However, it can also help keep your stress levels in check as it encourages you to develop emotional and mental resilience. Writing things down highlights the stress trigger points in your life: the situations that lead you to eat your bodyweight in salted nuts or to finish off a fridge pack of lager. As you identify these triggers, you can spot them coming a mile off and develop new and healthier coping strategies – such as high-frustration tolerance. When something difficult or annoying happens, you have two options: you can get frustrated and upset, and feel you can't handle

the situation; or you can take a more productive approach – to deal with the issue and move on. The more you do this, the higher your frustration tolerance becomes. You realise you've coped with similar frustrations before, so you know you can cope now and will cope in the future, too. You're 'coping', of course, when you come home and crack open a beer, you're just not coping in a way that's helpful! Your journal comes in handy again here. Use it to reflect on the hassles you've overcome and remind yourself how strong you can be. So the next time stress kicks in, don't bury your head in a family-size bag of crisps – bury it in your self-penned book of inspiration instead!