

Stretch Out, Don't Stress Out

Supports: Building Block 16 — Stress Management & Self-Care

Why It Matters

Stretching is one of the most overlooked parts of a movement routine, and it may be one of the most calming. Gentle stretching can ease the tension that builds up in your body over a long day and help you feel looser and more mobile. Paired with slow, deep breathing, it can also quiet a busy mind and offer a small reset in the middle of a stressful stretch of hours. The best part is that you can do much of it right where you are, even seated at your desk. A few minutes here and there can make a real difference in how you feel.

What to Know

Why gentle stretching helps

Flexibility work rounds out cardio and strength as part of a balanced approach to movement. Better flexibility can support your range of motion, ease of daily activities, and blood flow, and stretching can also be a simple tool for managing stress. When you slow your breathing while you stretch, your body has a chance to relax and your mind has a chance to settle.

Check with your doctor first. If you are new to stretching or increasing your activity, talk with your physician before you begin. Everyone's body is different, and a quick check-in helps you move in a way that is safe for you.

Stretch smart

Stretching should feel good, not painful. A few simple guidelines help you get the benefit while staying comfortable, and many of these moves work just as well from an office chair as they do at home.

- Warm up first, or stretch after activity, so you are not stretching cold muscles.
- Ease into each stretch until you feel a gentle pull, never pain, and hold it for about 15 to 30 seconds.
- Move through both sides of your body and the muscles you use most, like your neck, shoulders, hips, and back.
- Breathe slowly and deeply throughout to help your whole body relax.
- Be consistent; a little stretching woven into your week goes further than one long session.

You can try simple seated moves like a gentle spinal twist, a shoulder or neck stretch, a figure-four hip stretch, or an overhead reach whenever tension creeps in. For a full set of movement ideas to build on across the year, see Appendix D, A Year in Motion.

Try This

Pick one or two gentle stretches and pair them with a few slow, deep breaths. Notice how your body and mind feel before and after, and think about where a short stretch break might fit into your day.

- ? Where does tension tend to build up in your body during a typical day?
- ? When could you fit a two- or three-minute stretch break into your routine?
- ? How did you feel after pairing gentle stretching with slow, deep breathing?