

How to Use Pressure Points to Relax and Ease Tension

The key to calming stress is right at your fingertips—literally.



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Written by Laurel Leicht

There are many natural ways to tackle daily stress in our lives—from deep breathing at your desk to guided meditation or a yoga class. One tactic you might not have made use of: pressure points. These are the spots that an acupuncturist sticks with needles during a session. But you can work pressure points to relax (sans needles) by yourself, anywhere and anytime you’re feeling tense.

“Many of us manifest stress in the form of tension in our muscles. Think of how you feel when you’re at your desk stressing about a deadline or trying to get something done at your computer, and your shoulders tense up,” says Audrey Greenfield, M.D., a licensed acupuncturist at Shellie Goldstein Associates in New York City.

A massage can help by relaxing your body and relieving stress and muscle tension. This allows blood vessels to expand and can lower blood pressure.

Like a massage, acupressure can ease tension and increase circulation in the tissue surrounding the stimulation, Greenfield says. But that's not all. "There are a variety of acupressure points with specific indications so that you can actually devise your own point 'prescription' based on your unique combination of stress-related symptoms," she says. "For people who tend to feel stress in their gastrointestinal system, there are some key points that can be particularly useful. Others who get stress headaches can focus on points that treat those issues."

Focus on the four points below to help you unwind—plus, Greenfield shares her tips about how to press them for some sweet relief.

How to Do It

Manipulating pressure points by yourself takes a little experimentation to discover what works for you, Greenfield says. You can press each spot using a knuckle or the pad of your thumb or index or middle finger. Press gently at first, and then increase the pressure to your own comfort level. Massaging the point with a clockwise motion can help. Greenfield says, "You want to use deep, firm pressure, but it shouldn't hurt. It should feel good!" She also advises taking slow, deep breaths as you press. "Deep breathing will also help activate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping to offset the stress response."

Now that you know how to push your own points, employ these methods on the following sweet spots.

Pressure Points to Press

Yin Tang: between the eyebrows

"This is one of the most easily accessible points and among the most studied acupressure points for stress reduction," Greenfield says. If you practice yoga, this is the spot instructors refer to as the third eye. This point is said to quiet the spirit, Greenfield says. Pressing this point has been shown to help with hypertension and insomnia.

Tianzhu: the upper neck

Located just above your hairline on the back of your neck, applying pressure to this spot helps loosen up tightness in your neck and shoulders. These are two common places you may feel stiffness when you're stressed. It's actually two spots, which you'll feel as a depression in the muscle on either side of the midline of your neck. Press on both points simultaneously for best results.

Hegu: between the thumb and index finger

This might just be the most famous pressure point. It's the fleshy little triangle nestled between your index finger and thumb. Applying pressure to this point is especially beneficial for relieving headaches. Greenfield also notes that this spot is highly effective for creating movement in the body and shouldn't be used if you're pregnant. If you are, check with your doctor before manipulating any pressure points to be safe.

Zu San Li: the lower leg

Pressing on this point to the side of your shin is especially helpful if you have gastrointestinal or digestive issues associated with stress. To find the spot, measure about four finger-widths down from your knee on the outside of your leg. It's about one finger width outside of your shin. "You'll know you're on the point if you feel a slight depression. It may even feel a bit tender," Greenfield says. "This point is perhaps one of the best-known acupressure points for promoting health and well-being."