

"Help! I'm so irritable!"

With everything life throws at us, it's easy to see why women are more aggravated and stressed than ever before. Here, ways to cue calm—fast

Start within

Get out your 'flashlight'

Irritability tends to mask deeper feelings, like a sense of overwhelm, which is why expert Beth Kurland, PhD, suggests bringing awareness to what may be going on beneath the surface. Her trick: Picture a flashlight in your mind's eye, then turn that "flashlight" inward. "Ask yourself what you're feeling, such as exhaustion, because irritability is often triggered by a thwarted need, like lack of sleep." Once you become aware of your emotions, you can begin to act.

Notice patterns

Looking to your past can help you discover the roots of irritability, notes expert Susan Heitler, PhD. For example, if getting interrupted is a big trigger, maybe that's because growing up, you felt you lacked privacy, or your kid sister was always barging into your room. "Just tell yourself, *That was then and*



this is now—I have so much more control over my actions as an adult." Then do something calming like taking a few deep breaths. Also smart: Name your feelings. "You might say to yourself, 'That's the voice of 'Irritated Iris'—I'm glad I caught it early.'" Naming it creates distance, allowing you to let it go more easily.

Ask yourself this

When we're irritated, our focus narrows, which is why Heitler urges asking yourself two questions to broaden your view: "If you look at your irritation in the best possible light, what is it intended to accomplish? And what might be a more effective way to do that?" If you're frustrated with an airport delay, say, you might tell the ticket agent you understand how hard her job is, and you have just one question. Stopping to reflect on how you can problem-solve keeps irritability from taking the wheel.



Magnify joy

Tap 'pre-empathy'

If you know you always get annoyed when, say, a friend calls to complain for the billionth time, tap into "preparatory empathy," advises expert Nixaly Leonardo. "This means trying to understand what others are going through before you talk to them so when you do, you're calmer," she says. "If you're frustrated with a friend, you might remind yourself she's going through a stressful time." Showing compassion before the interaction ensures less frustration and more connection.

Tame tension with a pen

In our go-go-go culture, it's easy to become irritated by everything we have on our plate. "Take a few minutes to jot down anything on your

mind from to-do's to worries," says Leonardo. "Having a specific action plan like, 'Tomorrow at 2 PM, I'll do X task for 30 minutes,' helps prevent responsibilities from piling up and frustrating you."

Let yourself take it all in

A great long-term strategy to keep irritability at bay is zooming out to observe your surroundings, says Kurland, who recently found herself stuck behind a school bus. Her frustration subsided, however, when she stopped to focus on a little boy being greeted at his home by his dog. "It was a warm moment that I would have missed if I let myself get stuck in my frustration. Just stopping to take in the positives in your environment can soften the grip of irritability and foster peace of mind."

Our expert panel



Beth Kurland, PhD, author of *Dancing on the Tightrope: Transcending the Habits of Your Mind & Awakening to Your Fullest Life*, is a clinical psychologist.



Susan Heitler, PhD, author of *Prescriptions Without Pills*, is a Harvard-trained clinical psychologist. More at PrescriptionsWithoutPills.com.



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