



Cities

## America's Most Relaxed Cities

Francesca Levy, 11.02.10, 6:30 PM ET

If you're having trouble relaxing, it might be because you're living in the wrong city. Places with high unemployment, heavy traffic and long working hours can be physically painful to live in: Stressful environments can take their toll on your health, causing everything from headaches and back pain to high blood pressure and heart disease.

So where can you go to escape the rat race? If you're searching for a mellow metro in the nation, head for the [Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.](#) metro area. The Twin Cities rank No. 1 on our list of America's Most Relaxed Cities.

### In Pictures: America's Most Relaxed Cities

To pinpoint the cities where stress is lowest, we examined the country's largest 40 largest [Metropolitan Statistical Areas](#), measuring them on six metrics that are closely correlated with stress, or that result from stress. First, we used data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to score metros based on their unemployment rates--lower unemployment ranks a city higher on our list. Then we used data from the 2008 American Community Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, to look at several other data points, including how many commuters spend an hour or more in traffic on the way to work, and the average weekly hours people spend at work. Metros where commuters have more free time away from these stressful activities rank higher.

Since physical health is closely tied to emotional health and stress, we also ranked metros on health factors, including whether most residents had any access to health care and how they rated their overall health, using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Finally, because exercise is proven to reduce stress, we scored cities higher if more residents reported getting any kind of workout in the past month, using CDC data.

In No. 1-ranked Minneapolis-St. Paul, joblessness isn't the stress-inducer it is elsewhere: At 7%, the unemployment rate is well below the 9.6% national average. Fewer than 5% of workers spend their mornings stuck in traffic, and 84% of the population reported recent exercise--the best workout rate of any city we surveyed. The metro also scored well for its high percentage of inhabitants that have medical coverage and good general physical health.

Another friendly Midwestern city, [Milwaukee, Wis.](#), takes second place. Milwaukee pulls ahead of other large metros in part because of its healthy work-life balance. The city boasts great commute times and short working hours. Just over 96% of its residents take less than an hour to get to work, and the average amount of time spent toiling away is among the lowest in the country, a manageable 38.4 hours per week.

Four cities that make the list are known for residents who love the outdoors. [Portland, Ore.](#) (No. 4), [Denver, Colo.](#) (No. 6), [Seattle, Wash.](#) (No.7) and [San Jose, Calif.](#) (No. 10) have all benefited from abundant opportunities to commune with nature, and exercise rates in all three cities are higher than most.

The effect of exercise on stress shouldn't be underestimated, says Kathleen Grace Santor M.Ed., Ed.S., a therapist and founder of the Stress Management Center of Nevada. "When you're chronically stressed out, you've got this ongoing flow of stress hormones in your bloodstream. It triggers a fight-or-flight instinct, but instead we sit and stew in those juices," she says. "Exercise is a marvelous way of tricking your body into thinking you're fighting or fleeing, and burning off those juices."

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The other cities on the list include [Columbus, Ohio](#), (No. 5.), where less than 4% of the population has a long commute, and [Boston, Mass.](#), (No. 3), which boasts healthy residents and world-class health care infrastructure.

Bringing the rest of the country's stress level down to that of these calm cities starts with making stress-reduction techniques an everyday practice, rather than an obscure fad, says Santor.

"There needs to be some kind of a mainstream way of coping with stress," she says. "It's not part of the mainstream to cope with stress; it's part of the mainstream to talk about how stressed out you are."

**[In Pictures: America's Most Relaxed Cities](#)**