

STRESS

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TAKE CONTROL OF STRESS BEFORE IT TAKES CONTROL OF YOU

Usually when we talk about stress, we are speaking of the negative types of stress that cause us problems both emotionally and physically; yet stress has a purpose. It can be a beneficial response that prompts us to get out of a harmful situation, such as running from a vicious dog or seeking shelter during a hurricane. Evolution has given us stress to help us to survive. Stress was meant to move us to either fight against or run away from (fight or flight reaction) a sudden, short-term situation. After the situation is over, we can relax. The problem is when the stress is not short-term, but instead is long-term and more constant, thus not allowing us to relax appropriately. Another harmful type of stress, and one that we as humans seem to differ from animals, is that we often worry about an event that may or may not happen. We are sometimes stressed for no reason at all!

All of us experience stress throughout our lives, but the types of stress change as our lives change. When we are children, we stress about making friends, doing well in school, and pleasing our parents. As young adults, some of our stresses are about building our careers, starting a family, and getting financially stable. As we get older, things continue to change. We stress about retirement, death or illness of a spouse or close family member or friend, injury and illness, change in residence, and change in financial status. All of these are valid reasons to feel stressed, fearful, or worried, but some of us are more sensitive to stress than others. And, some of us handle stress better than others. This last sentence is the key to not letting stress harm us.



And harm us, it can. Although long-term stress functions on a lower level of intensity than short-term stress, our bodies were not built to maintain this state of tension. Thus, negative results of stress include depression, anxiety, heart disease, hypertension, strokes, susceptibility to infections, gastrointestinal disorders, weight gain or loss, diabetes, pain (worsening of chronic pain, back pain, or headaches), sleep problems, sexual dysfunction, poor memory, lack of concentration, allergies, skin disorders, and more.

There are many methods to treating stress, and it is usually a combination of approaches that is most effective. In addition, what works for one person may not work for another. Improving one's response to stress is often met by a few obstacles. First, you might feel that trying to relax is threatening or dangerous because it feels like letting down your guard. However, being stressed does not protect or prepare you to read if the stress situation is not immediate and temporary. Second, some people feel that they are being selfish if they practice stress-reducing activities because they feel that they are benefiting only themselves. The fad is that the self-sacrifice of not taking care of oneself can be harmful not only to yourself, but to those close to you. Third, you might feel that your response to stress, such as anger or withdrawal, is just part of who you are. This is not so. Research has shown that people can be taught to change their emotional responses to stressful situations.

(1) Figure out your sources of stress. Writing in a journal can be helpful, even just jotting down a few notes. Also, write about positive experiences and things that made you feel happy and relaxed. (2) One of the best general approaches to handling stress can be understood from a quote by Reinhold Niebuhr, "Grant me the courage to change the things that I can change, the serenity to accept the things I can't change, and the wisdom to know the difference." Although it is unreasonable to expect to get rid of all stress, try reducing some of the activities that you noted were stressful. More importantly, perhaps, increase the pleasant activities. One study has shown that adding daily pleasant activities can be better for the immune system than reducing stressful activities. (3) Next, look for the silver lining in the cloud. Positive outlook is a powerful tool to health and wellness. (4) Humour is a wonderful way to cope. Laughter releases pent-up emotions, puts things into perspective, and has a physical effect of lowering stress hormone levels. It is not uncommon for people to laugh during serious and tragic events, such as the death of a loved one, and then to remember the laughter as helping them to hold up under the emotional pain. (5) Build or strengthen your support network. [Actually, you can conveniently combine approaches #2 and #5] (6) Discuss your feelings with someone you trust. This does not mean venting your frustrations or wallowing in self-pity. It means communicating in as positive a way as possible. If you have a hard time talking, try writing in a journal or other creative form, or writing a letter that you never mail. And, do not forget that half of communicating is listening. (7) Practice relaxing using deep breathing, meditation, exercise, stretching, singing, etc. (8) Ask for help. You do not need to do this alone.

We all experience stress. The difference is how we deal with it. In the next issue, we will cover both physical and mental/emotional ways to cope using Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and solution-focused therapy techniques.

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