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STRESS MANAGEMENT

The term 'stress' refers to any reaction to a physical, mental, social, or emotional stimulus that requires a response or alteration to the way we perform, think, or feel. Change is stressful, whether the change is good or bad. Worry also produces stress. Indeed, stress is an unavoidable part of life, and it can result from many things, both physical and psychological. Pressures and deadlines at work, problems with loved ones, the need to pay the bills, and getting ready for the holidays are obvious sources of stress for many people. Less obvious sources include everyday encounters with crowds, noise, traffic, pain, extremes of temperature, and even welcome events such as starting a new job or the birth or adoption of a child. Overwork, lack of sleep, and physical illness put stress on the body. Excessive alcohol consumption and smoking are usually increased as a reaction to stress and yet create more stress for the body. Some people create their own stress, whether there is anything objectively wrong in their lives or not, they find things to worry about. For such people, stress becomes almost an addiction.



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Some people handle stress well, and it has little impact on their emotional or physical health, but others are very negatively influenced by it. Stress can cause fatigue, chronic headaches, irritability, changes in appetite, memory loss, low self-esteem, withdrawal, tooth-grinding, cold hands, high blood pressure, shallow breathing, nervous twitches, lowered sexual drive, insomnia or other changes in sleep patterns, and gastrointestinal disorders. Stress creates an excellent breeding ground for illness. Researchers estimate that stress contributes to as many as 80% of all major illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, endocrine and metabolic disease, skin disorders, and infectious ailments of all kinds. Stress is also a common precursor of psychological difficulties such as anxiety and depression.

The body responds to stress with a series of physiological changes that include increased secretion of adrenalin, elevation of blood pressure, acceleration of the heartbeat, and greater tension in the muscles. Digestion slows or stops, fats and sugars are released from stores in the body, cholesterol levels rise, and the composition of the blood changes slightly, making it more prone to clotting. This in turn increases the risk of stroke or heart attack. Almost all body functions and organs react to stress.



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Today, most of our stresses are not the result of physical threats, but the body still responds as if they were.

Many people attribute their stress-related symptoms to “nerves”, and in fact stress usually does affect the parts of the body that are related to the nervous system first, especially through the digestive organs. Symptoms of stress-related digestive organs may be a flare-up of an ulcer or irritable bowel syndrome. If stress that produces such symptoms is not handled properly, then more serious illnesses may result.

Stress can be either acute or long-term, with long-term stress being particularly dangerous. A state of continual stress eventually wears out the body. Because of its effect on immune response, stress increases susceptibility to illness and slows healing.



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Recommendations:

Avoid processed foods and all foods that create stress on the system, such as artificial sweeteners, carbonated soft drinks, fried food, junk foods, pork, red meat, sugar, white flour products, foods containing preservatives or heavy spices, and chips and similar snack foods.

Eliminate dairy products from your diet for three weeks, then reintroduce them slowly and watch for returning symptoms of your “nervous” condition.

Limit your intake of caffeine. Caffeine contributes to nervousness and can disrupt sleep patterns.

Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and mood-altering drugs. While these substances may offer temporary relief from stress, they do nothing to really address the problem, and they are harmful to your health. The stress will still be there the next day.

Exercise regularly. Physical activity can clear your mind and keep stress under control. Some people like to run or walk by themselves, while others prefer team sports or group workouts. Any form of exercise will do the trick, as long as it is regular. Exercising only once a month will not do much to relieve stress.

Learn to relax. Relaxation is often difficult for people suffering from the effects of stress, but it is necessary. A technique called progressive relaxation can be helpful. This involves tightening and relaxing the major muscle groups one at a time, being aware of each sensation. Start at your feet and work up to your head. Tense the muscles for a count of ten, concentrating on the tension, then let the muscles go lax and breathe deeply, enjoying the sensation of release.

Get sufficient sleep each night. This may be difficult, because stress can keep you up at night (unless you are one of those who welcome sleep as an escape), but it is very important. The less sleep you get, the more stress will affect you, the more your immune system will weaken, and the greater your chance of becoming ill.

Try meditation. Many people find that regular meditation helps them to relax and handle stress. Meditation does not have to have spiritual or religious connotations. For example, you can meditate on a word such as ‘peace’, ‘calm’, ‘relax’, or ‘warm’. You may find it helpful to meditate on a pleasant person, place or event. It is good to have a store of pleasant thoughts to draw on during stressful times. While meditation can have short-term benefits, it is more effective when practiced on a daily basis. Try meditating twice a day for ten to twenty minutes each time.

Practice deep breathing. This can be done when facing a stressful situation at home, at work, in your car, or elsewhere. Holding your breath is also good for relieving stress. Inhale deeply with



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your mouth closed, hold your breath for a few seconds (do not wait until you are uncomfortable), then exhale slowly through your mouth, with your tongue placed at the top of your teeth, next to the gum line. Do this four or five times, or until the tension passes.

Monitor your internal conversations. The way we talk to ourselves has a lot to do with how we feel about ourselves and our environments. Telling yourself things like 'I should be able to handle this better' or 'I shouldn't have let that idiot cut me off in traffic' or 'I'll never get the hang of this computer' only adds to the stressfulness of situations and does nothing to resolve the tension. Learn to listen and then make yourself stop these futile inner conversations. Some therapists recommend shouting 'Get Out!' (or any other phrase you choose) immediately when any intrusive and unpleasant worries enter your thoughts.

Identify the sources of stress in your life. This can be an important first step in managing stress. Take a stress inventory periodically to help you understand what is causing your problems. You can use the following list of major stressors as a starting point:

1. Death of a spouse or other close family member
2. Divorce
3. Death of a close friend
4. Financial problems
5. Legal separation from spouse
6. Job loss
7. Major injury
8. New marriage
9. Scheduled surgery
10. Change in health of a family member
11. Serious trouble at work
12. Increased responsibility at work or at home
13. Sexual problems
14. Change of job



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15. Child leaving home
16. Change in residence
17. Major change in diet
18. Vacation
19. Allergies

Remember that this list is not exhaustive and that different people react to the same events differently. Also remember that children and young adults have different lists of stressful situations, which are just as serious for them as those above are for adults.

Pursue a hobby. Hobbies are great for relieving stress. Take the time to do what you enjoy. Don't feel guilty about spending time doing something for yourself. Your health is worth it.

Avoid hassles. Identify the things that are making you feel stressed out and either eliminate them from your life or prepare yourself to cope with them. If rush-hour traffic causes you stress, see if you can change your work hours slightly to avoid it. If that isn't possible, join a carpool or listen to a book on tape or a favourite piece of music while driving.

Do not repress or deny your emotions, as this only compounds stress. Admit your feelings and accept them. Keeping strong feelings bottled up only causes them to resurface later as illness. Don't be afraid to cry. Learning to cry can help you to manage stress. Crying can relieve anxiety and let loose your bottled-up emotions.

Try not to take life too seriously. Learn to laugh.

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