

Keys to Managing Stress

“I’m stressed”; “He is under stress”; “She’s stressing me out”; these are statements that are frequently used in every day conversation. Most people can talk about stress, tell what’s stressful, and speak of how stress does or not does not affect them. Most people know stress as something that must be avoided.

Can stress be avoided? No! Not for most people (for any one who is alive, it is part of life). Living, functioning, everything we think or do, and everything around us demands a response. This response causes wear and tear on our bodies and this wear and tear is stress. Every one experiences some stress each day. A loud alarm or wake up call, hurrying to get to school or work can all activate the body’s stress mechanism, called the stress response.

Our bodies are complex and remarkably effective in responding and adjusting to most anything that can happen to us. There is a sequence of events that begins with an event or something happening around us. We respond to the event with our thoughts about what it means to us. Should we pay attention and do something or can we dismiss it? Our thoughts lead to an emotional reaction and this triggers a series of responses within our bodies. Chemical alarm signals are sent by the nervous system to our adrenal glands and pituitary glands, which produce the hormones our bodies need to become as alert and as strong as possible.

Sometimes the body doesn’t work perfectly. If the response is too weak, we may not react enough to protect ourselves. If our responses are too strong we may hurt ourselves by over reacting. Our ability to react with balance, not too little or not too much, to our environment or life demands, reduces the wear and tear on our bodies.

Recent scientific research has proven that we can learn to manage stress, restore balance, and prevent much of the stress from happening. Taking steps to strengthen our bodies, mind, and emotions can make a difference. The results will be improved health, a more positive attitude, more joy, and a higher quality of life.

Each person can experience a typical day with many stressors differently. A person who has prepared for the stress will have a different and healthier, more balanced, reaction than the person who has not prepared. Consider the following two examples.

Jim is a single Dad who’s trying to get his two children to school on time. He’s frustrated that he has had to yell at them to get them up, rush them through breakfast and get them into the car. He is angry that they ignore him, expect him to do everything for them and then argue with him about every little thing. On the way to school he gets stuck in traffic and the kids are fighting with each other in the back seat. He yells at the kids as well as at the traffic. He tells himself, “I can’t stand it,” and tries to relax but can’t. He gets the children to school and breathes a sigh of relief, but the stress has already taken its toll. He feels tired and overwhelmed by life.

Julie, a single Mom with two children starts her day off with exercise and calming thoughts in a practiced meditation. She has to deal with her children’s’ resistance to getting up and getting ready for school. She reminds them of the time and helps as much as she can. She insists on every one sitting down for breakfast. The kids are slower than usual and they are late getting out of the house and on their way. She gets stuck in traffic and the kids are arguing in the back seat. She talks to herself reminding herself to relax and to take several deep slow breathes. She distracts the children. Accepts the traffic as something she has no control over and will do the best she can. She drops the children off at school, smiles, wishes them a

good day and is looking forward to her own good day.

Events such as these get replayed daily, with variations, all over the world. While some of the events in both Jim's and Julie's day are beyond their control, some they each responded to differently. The amount of stress experienced was different and the resulting wear and tear on their bodies was different.

Jim's thoughts and feelings of being out of control triggered a sequence of physical changes inside his body. Large amounts of stress hormones entered her bloodstream. The excess adrenaline and cortisol caused his heart to pump faster, his breathing to become faster and portions of his nervous system to signal greater alarm than needed. These physical responses sent messages to his brain that interfered with his ability to relax and maintain a balanced response.

Julie was able to stay relatively calm and on task. She minimized the negative and unnecessary physical events inside Her body. Her thoughts and actions helped her to respond to the stressors with relative balance. She was able to physically respond to the morning's events and keep the flow of adrenaline and cortisol, within her body, to a minimum. Julie's habit of self care, her perception of the events and her stress management skills made a significant difference in her reactions to the events and to her health.

Everyone can become better prepared for stress and reduce the negative affects of stress on their body. Every one can minimize the wear and tear on the body. Preparation starts with the basics of self-care: daily exercise, nutritious food, plenty of water, and some form of relaxation practice. Keeping the nervous system healthy through regular Chiropractic care is helpful.

Understanding and accepting that feelings are caused more by our thoughts about people and events than by the people or events them selves is important in preparing for maintaining balance.

The different ways in which Jim and Julie thought about being stuck in traffic can help understand the power of thoughts to affect one's experience of the situation. Both were stuck in traffic. Jim thought the event was just one more thing to go wrong and that it was making his day more difficult, and it was awful. The consequences of this thinking were to feel angry and to yell at the traffic and at the children.

In contrast Julie's response was to initially feel annoyed and then to notice that she was beginning to get tense. She distracted her thinking about the effects of the traffic by interacting with and attending to her children. Taking deep slow breaths to relax were effective.

Thoughts that focus on the negative and exaggerate the badness of an event lead to unhealthy negative emotions.

Whenever a person thinks this way they will experience emotions that inevitably will lead to destructive events in our bodies; while to focus on the positive will result in feelings of being more in control and reduce negative emotions thus minimizing the stress.

In addition to thinking positively, learning how to relax is one of the most important skills a person can learn to help maintain balance in the mind and body. Some approaches to relaxation training emphasize the importance of external help but the most helpful relaxation skills will be exercises that can be practiced alone. Relaxation is a skill that helps strengthen a person for encountering stress and that can help to minimize the effects of stress when one does over react. It can be most helpful in recovering from stressful activities or events.

Some relaxation techniques are easier to learn than others. Some are physical some are mental. Some are simple and some are complex. Different techniques seem to work better for different people. Some people prefer exercises that require movement and others prefer mental techniques. By Learning different techniques we can learn which one works the best for us to help keep our bodies' responses to stress in

balance. I suggest that you try these relaxation methods that I will describe here.

Brief Relaxation Technique:

Take a long slow breath through your nose; hold it for a moment, breathe out through your mouth slowly as you think of letting the stress and tension flow out of your body with your breath. Do this several times.

Imagine Your Stress Away:

Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a place that is pleasant for you. You could be on a beach, a mountaintop, or an imaginary, made up place. Imagine yourself experiencing this place with all your senses. What do you see in your mind's eye, what are the sounds of this place, notice what and how you feel; can you smell the flowers? Think of this as a place where you can just be yourself and let go of all your problems. Think of relaxing in this place. You can go to this place in your mind's eye whenever you feel the need. The more you practice the easier and more effective it will become.

Tighten And Let Go To Relax:

This exercise can be done with any group of muscles. For now you can focus on the shoulders and neck, a common place for people to feel tension: Lift your shoulders up to your ears and squeeze them up tightly. Try to squeeze them to your ears. Try to squeeze all the tension out. Count to 10 and then let go. Let your shoulders droop and your arms just hang by your side while you count to 30. Repeat this several times.

Notice Your Breathing and Listen to Your Heart:

How are you breathing right now? Notice the air flowing into your lungs as you breathe in. Open your lips and let the air flow out as if you were gently blowing the hair of a baby. Breathe in through your nose and out through your lips, letting the flow of air be comfortable and unforced, listen for your heart after each breath. Do this for a minute.

Focus on Relaxing:

Sit in a comfortable position with your feet on the floor and your hands and arms on your thighs. Focus your attention on your hands and remember to breathe. Say to yourself, "My hands are warm and heavy." Don't try making your hands warm and heavy. Just imagine how that would feel, as if they all ready were warm and heavy. Say these words in a gentle loving way. Say them over and over in your mind. Do this for several minutes. The more you practice the easier it will become to actually feel your hands as warm and heavy and therefore relaxed.

Think Relaxed:

Think of a word, such as "relax" or a simple prayer that comforts you. Breathe in through your nose, as you breathe out through your mouth say the word or prayer silently for about 10 minutes every day.

Appreciation:

Make a list in your mind of things you appreciate or for which you are thankful in your life: such as your health, the sunshine, your children, etc. You could also write out the list ahead of time and read the list several times

All of the above relaxation techniques can help to reduce stress on the body. They will provide an increased feeling of wellness and stress resilience. The ability to relax can make your life more pleasant.

Lets take a closer look at how to get more control over our negative emotions. Emotions such as anger can be very destructive. Anger is often a signal that something needs to change. Remember the anger, like all emotions is a result of our beliefs and expectations, such as, beliefs that are negative or blaming of others. Try to change your perspective, ask yourself if this is something worth getting angry about. Distracting oneself from the anger by exercise, listening to music or doing something creative helps to turn anger into something positive. Recognize and acknowledge the distortions in your thinking. Practice relaxation techniques described above so that you can use them when your anger is trigged. Learn assertiveness skills so that you can express all feelings appropriately.

Stress within the body can be minimized when thoughts are positive, emotions are expresses appropriately and each person practices their favorite relaxation technique.

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