

Coping with Stress

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We all experience stress in our daily lives, you *can't* avoid it. All stress, however, is not bad. Small amounts of stress and tension in life can be helpful. The physical stress a body experiences during an athletic competition or the psychological stress of meeting a deadline at work are examples of stress helping us perform at our best. Falling in love can be stressful, but we wouldn't necessarily say this was a negative stress. We are confronted with many decisions and changes in our lives, and our interpretation of these changes and how well we adapt determines the amount of stress we have.

Stress we experience can be grouped into four basic categories: Social, Physiological, Environmental, and Psychological. Social stressors include our relationships, demands by others of our time and attention, and whether or not we feel we "fit in" and are accepted. Physiological stressors include lack of sleep, poor nutrition, not getting enough exercise, illness, injuries and bodily changes such as adolescence, pregnancy and menopause. Environmental stressors include pollution, noise, weather, traffic jams, your home and work environment. Psychological stressors include our negative interpretations of what is happening around us and repetitive worry or negative thought patterns. If we are constantly running worst case scenarios over and over again in our minds, this negative self-talk is creating stress for us. At work we are thinking, "My boss must hate me; I'll never get ahead." We look in the mirror in the morning and think, "My hair is awful, I'm overweight, and nothing looks good on me." You are rushed in the morning and forget to send lunch money to school with your child and think, "I'm a terrible mother." The list could go on and on. While probably none of these statements are true, our mind will interpret them as true and we will become stressed as a result. American baseball legend Satchel Paige has been quoted as saying, "If you don't mind, it don't matter." It really is a matter of how we feel about what is happening around us.

When you are confronted with a stressor, real or imagined (it makes no difference), your body undergoes certain physiological responses. Stress hormones elevate, digestion slows, blood flow to major muscle groups increase, and heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate elevates. You may be familiar with the term "fight or flight response" which refers to these bodily changes. Primitive man, when confronted with predators, needed to be ready to fight for his life or retreat as quickly as possible (which would have been my personal choice!) Unfortunately, many people are operating under chronic low grade stress conditions and that is causing uncomfortable symptoms. Signs of chronic stress can be experienced as headaches, muscle aches, digestive problems, poor quality sleep, teeth grinding, jaw clenching, fatigue, feelings of anger, fear, frustration and feeling loss of control in your life. It is estimated that as much as 90% of doctor visits have some stress related component.

Our stress reactions are individualized. No two people are exactly alike in what will make them experience stress. Loud music in the background as I'm working stresses me, but a teenage college student may find it helpful. We need to become aware of what stresses us

and then develop tools to have on hand to counteract stress when it presents itself. It makes no sense to wait until stress becomes acute when it is much simpler to deal with it early on when it is a nuisance and not a catastrophe. Then we need to experiment with de-stress techniques to find which ones suit us best. Not everyone is the same here either. The type of de-stress technique you choose must suit your personality and learning style. If you are a kinesthetic learner, someone who has a lot of energy, has difficulty staying still for long and considers themselves a hands-on learner, tai-chi, yoga or mindfulness walking meditation may suit you best. If you are an auditory learner who learns best by hearing, listening to recorded meditations or guided visualization, chanting or breath work with music may be what you need. If you are a visual learner, meditating in nature, guided visualization or focusing on something beautiful such as art as you meditate may be best.

Once you find what works best for you, practice makes perfect. Meditation and de-stress techniques are learned skills with cumulative effects. Reducing stress should not be a chore, it should be relaxing and something you want to add to your daily routine to enhance your wellness. Committing ten minutes a day can make all the difference in the world. Just think of the amount of time we spend on outer aspects of our body as we prepare for our day. Wouldn't ten minutes spent developing a skill with life-long benefits be time well spent? After all you are worth it!

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