

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life. A small amount of stress can be good, motivating you to perform well. But multiple challenges daily, such as sitting in traffic, meeting deadlines and paying bills, can push you beyond your ability to cope. Stress management gives you a range of tools to reset your alarm system. It can help your mind and body adapt (resilience). Without it, body might always be on high alert. Over time, chronic stress can lead to serious health problems. Hence, one should not wait until stress damages health, relationships or quality of life rather people should start practicing stress management techniques today.

What Is Stress?

Stress is your body's response to changes in your life. Because life involves constant change (ranging from changing locations from home to work each morning to adapting to major life changes like marriage, divorce, or death of a loved one), there is no avoiding stress.¹ This is why your goal shouldn't be to eliminate all stress but to eliminate unnecessary stress and effectively manage the rest. There are some common causes of stress that many people experience, but each person is different.

Causes of Stress

Stress can come from many sources, which are known as "stressors." Because our experience of what is considered "stressful" is created by our unique perceptions of what we encounter in life (based on our own mix of personality traits, available resources, habitual thought patterns), a situation may be perceived as "stressful" by one person and merely "challenging" by someone else.

Simply put, one person's stress trigger may not register as stressful to someone else. That said, certain situations tend to cause more stress in most people and can increase the risk of burnout. For example, when we find ourselves in situations where there are high demands on us; where we have little control and few choices; where we don't feel equipped; where we may be harshly judged by others; and where consequences for failure are steep or unpredictable, we tend to get stressed.

Because of this, many people are stressed by their jobs, their relationships, their financial issues, health problems, and more mundane things like clutter or busy schedules. Learning skills to cope with these stressors can help reduce your experience of stress.

| Stressful Events |
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| Breakup of intimate romantic relationships, friendships |
| Death of a family member or friend |
| Economic hardships |
| Racism and Discrimination |
| Poor Health |
| Assaults on physical safety |
| Birth or Adoption |
| Relationship transitions (marriage, moving away from home) |
| Promotion or Demotion at work |

The table above lists a number of serious stressful events that people experience, often more than one at a time. It's important to note that a given event doesn't have to be negative in tone to be stressful; Any significantly challenging event, even positive ones like weddings, can create stress.

There are many positive and 'functional' methods of coping with stress:

- **Exercise** - Regular physical exertion of any intensity (a gentle 30 minute walk, a Yoga or Pilates class, an hour long strenuous free-weight workout, etc.) helps discharge muscle tension and build strength, resilience and energy.
- **Healthy Diet** - Eating healthy whole foods and avoiding sugary and fattening treats helps keep the body's internal rhythms more balanced.
- **Socialization And Supportive Conversation** - Many people are able to relax and to feel part of something larger than themselves by sharing their concerns with trusted others. This can take the form of talking with friends and family, psychotherapy or counseling, or prayer.
- **Assertive Communication** - Some stress is caused by not getting what you want from other people. Asking for what you want in a direct but polite way is the best method for getting what you want, and thereby reducing stress.
- **Time Management** - Some stress is caused by poor organization. Learning how to manage appointments, to say 'no' to requests you can't get done, to organize records, and to use memory enhancement tools (like alarm clocks and 'palm pilots') can make a big difference.
- **Asking For Assistance** - Whatever it is that you are dealing with right now, other people have dealt with it before. Seeking out their counsel when you don't know what to do is often a good way to avoid reinventing the wheel.

The big problem with healthy coping strategies is that they often don't make one feel better immediately; they only really work after one makes a commitment to practicing them repeatedly over time. It takes some faith and a certain amount of discipline to make it possible for these strategies to work.

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques are an essential part of stress management. Because of your busy life, relaxation might be low on your priority list. Don't shortchange yourself. Everyone needs to relax and recharge to repair the toll stress takes on your mind and body.

Almost everyone can benefit from relaxation techniques, which can help slow your breathing and focus your attention. Common relaxation techniques include meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, tai chi and yoga. More-active ways of achieving relaxation include walking outdoors or participating in sports.

It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. Select a technique that works for you and practice it regularly.

Good General Advice For Managing Stress:

"Make the time to practice one or more healthy coping strategies on a regular basis. You won't have time to fit it in at first but do it anyway. Over time your practice will yield results and you'll find you want to make the time to continue your practice."

The Nature of Stress

When we talk about stress, really we are often talking about how stress affects us in body mind and spirit. Our bodies and minds have been designed with a 'fight or flight' reflex that helps to orient and become alert

when we are faced with challenging or dangerous events. Our attention gets narrowed towards such events, and our brain instructs our bodies to prepare for possible physical action such as confronting the event physically (e.g., 'fight') or running away from the source of the danger (e.g., 'flight'). Muscular tension, increased heart rate, and higher concentrations of blood sugars and hormones are involved in this process.

Our body's stress response is really designed for the people we once were; less sophisticated hunter-gatherer type tribes people whose major sources of stress are where the next meal will come from and how to avoid predators. Where our ancestors could deal with their stress reactions through direct physical activity (e.g., hunting for food, running away from an attacker), our own threats are less tangible and larger-scale and we often are unable to find anyone to attack or run away from. Even when we can, for example, attack someone as a way of discharging our tension, we often don't because we don't want to be sued or arrested for breaking the law. Because we are often unable to discharge our activation we end up experiencing this activated physical and mental state a lot of the time so that it ceases to be just occasional 'acute stress' and becomes instead 'chronic stress'.

Where acute stress is healthy and very important to our well-being, chronic stress is unhealthy. A great number of diseases (physical and mental both) are either brought on in part or made worse by people being chronically stressed out. Chronic stress also makes it more difficult for us to handle our relationships well.

CONCLUSION

Stress can be defined then as the reaction we have to difficult, demanding or challenging events. The stressors faced by most of us today are less physical and concrete than those faced by our ancestors; we worry instead about the threat of being laid off from work, of how to keep our children from becoming drug addicts, and about what to do if terrorists attack. Cultivating interior stillness and calmness through meditation and relaxation techniques such as massage therapy, and progressive muscle relaxation can help to reduce level of stress.

References

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