Stress Newsletter

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How Stress Affects Your Health

Stress can have far-ranging negative effects on your health. Learn what happens when you live with long-term stress.

When stress grips your body, you know it. Your heart starts pounding, your muscles tense, your stomach feels tied in knots. Sometimes this response can be a good thing. It may help you escape from an attacker or win your tennis game. However, continued stress can have negative effects on your physical health.

The stages of stress

Over 50 years ago, a scientist named Hans Selye recognized that stress was a major cause of illness. He broke the stress response into three stages, which he called the general adaptation syndrome.

- **The alarm stage** occurs when you are frightened or under threat. Your body goes on red alert, releasing stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. These increase strength and concentration. Your heart speeds up, sending more blood and oxygen to your muscles so you can take quick action. This "fight or flight" response can be lifesaving, but if it is prolonged it can take a toll on your body.
- **The resistance stage** occurs after the initial extreme reaction. Your body tries to adapt to the continued stress. If the stress passes, you can start to rebuild your defenses. If it becomes long-term, you move to the third stage.
- **The exhaustion stage** is the "burnout" or overload phase. Continued pounding by stress depletes your body's reserves, which puts you at risk for disease.

This sequence may happen in response to either a physical threat (such as being in a car accident) or an emotional one (such as being laid off from your job). Facing multiple longterm stressors piles extra strain on your system and can quickly lead to exhaustion.

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The effects of stress

Stress can have effects throughout your body on both your physical and mental health. It can affect:

- **Digestion.** Stress hormones slow the release of stomach acid and interfere with how well the stomach can empty itself. This can cause stomachaches. These same hormones cause the colon to work faster and may lead to diarrhea.
- **Heart and blood vessels.** High levels of the stress hormone cortisol increase your heart rate and your blood pressure. Cortisol can also raise your cholesterol levels. These factors raise your risk for heart attacks and strokes.
- **Immune system.** Normally, your immune system responds to infections by releasing chemicals that aid in the healing process. The stress response weakens your immune system by reducing the release of chemicals, slowing wound healing and making you more likely to get colds and infections.
- **Weight.** Cortisol makes you crave fats and carbohydrates, which can cause you to gain weight. Cortisol also makes you more likely to put on weight in your abdominal area. Weight gain in this area raises your risk for heart disease and diabetes.
- **Mental health.** Being bombarded with stress hormones creates a constant state of tension and anxiety. Over time this can set you up for depression, headaches or other problems, especially if they run in the family. Also, because your body is in a heightened state of arousal, you may have trouble sleeping.

Regaining your balance

If stress has taken over your life, it's time to regain some control. Your health depends on it. Here are some ideas:

- **Make time for regular, moderate exercise.** It's one of the best stress-busters, and it can improve your mood and help control your weight. Check with your doctor to see what activity level is right for you.
- **Spend some time doing things you enjoy.** Go to a funny movie, take your kids fishing or have dinner with a friend.
- **Learn some relaxation techniques,** such as deep breathing or meditation.
- **Treat yourself well.** Make time for healthy meals and getting enough sleep. Avoid smoking, drinking too much and overeating.

If you still cannot get a handle on your stress, talk to your doctor. He or she might recommend a counselor who could help you find other ways to reduce or manage the stress in your life.

6 Soothing Ways to Ease Stress

Learn ways to calm the stress in your life.

Feeling stressed out? Most Americans do.

Not all stress is bad. A certain amount of stress enables executives to perform at their peak. But too much stress can be harmful. Stress is linked to such chronic conditions such as heart disease and depression.

The trick is to manage or control stress to keep it within healthy limits. If your stress meter is soaring, learn to relax. Here are some soothing ways to handle the stress in your life.

1. Breathe

You've heard the expression, "take a breather"? Sometimes just five minutes of deep breathing is enough to ban stress.

Most people take shallow breaths that fill only part of the lungs. Deep breathing gets more oxygen into the lungs and can help calm the brain. Try these steps:

- Sit or lie with one hand on your belly.
- Breathe in through your nose, filling your lungs. Focus on making the hand on your belly rise.
- Breathe out through your mouth, trying to empty your lungs as much as you can. The hand on your belly should move in as your muscles tighten.
- Continue these deep, slow breaths, in through your nose, out through your mouth, making your belly rise and fall.

This simple but powerful exercise can be done almost anywhere. It can be combined with meditation or muscle relaxation.

2. Relax your muscles

Progressive muscle relaxation is another simple way to ease stress. Practicing it can help you become aware of when you are holding stress in your body. Relaxing your muscles can help your mind relax too.

- Lie down in a quiet place. Take a few minutes to breathe slowly and deeply.
- When you feel relaxed, start with your right foot. Squeeze the muscles as tightly as you can. Hold while you count to 10.
- Relax your right foot. Take a few deep breaths.
- Next, squeeze the muscles in your left foot while you count to 10.
- Relax and breathe.
- Slowly work your way up your body (legs, belly, back, chest, arms, neck, face), squeezing and relaxing each group of muscles.

3. Say yes to yoga

Yoga is a system of exercises (called asanas) for gaining bodily or mental control and well-being. The philosophy is that the breath, the mind and the body are so closely linked that whatever you do to one will affect the other. In addition to easing stress, yoga can improve strength, balance and flexibility.

Yoga is gentle form of exercise that is safe for most people when it's practiced correctly. Consult a trained yoga teacher. Make sure you ask your doctor before you start any new activity.

4. Try tai chi

Tai chi is a series of postures that flow into one another through connecting transition moves. These slow, graceful and precise body movements are said to improve body awareness and enhance strength and coordination. At the same time, they are supposed to help the practitioner achieve inner peace. Like yoga, it is designed to enhance both physical and emotional health.

Tai chi is a low-impact aerobic activity, so you can de-stress and burn some calories at the same time. Another advantage to tai chi is its low risk of injury.

Take a tai chi class or buy a book or instructional video. Once you learn how to do tai chi, you can practice almost anywhere.

5. Meditate

Meditation is a centuries-old spiritual practice that is also a powerful stress-buster. You learn to relax while focusing on a word, a sound or your own breathing. It can have a deeply calming effect.

There are many different types of meditation. One type is mindfulness meditation. You can practice mindfulness while sitting in a quiet place or while walking. The key is to keep bringing your focus back to your breathing or your steps. When distractions come into your mind, observe them without judging, and let them go. The technique is simple, but achieving the desired result takes practice.

6. Get a massage

In massage therapy, the hands (or sometimes forearms, elbows and feet) are used to manipulate the soft body tissues. A good massage is not only relaxing, but it may also have some real healing benefits. Some studies have shown that the kneading and pressing of muscles slows the heart rate, lowers blood pressure, improves blood circulation, relaxes muscles and helps reduce stress levels.

If you can't fit in or afford a visit to a spa, ask your partner or friend for a neck, back or foot rub. Trading massages can be a relaxing way to reconnect after a stressful day.

The New Age of Stress at Work

Long-term job stress can grind you down. Learn more about stress and how to tame it in the workplace.

Your job used to be challenging but manageable. Now it seems no matter how fast you run, you can't keep up. Your inbox is piling up and your boss is on your back.

This scenario is all too common, according to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). In national surveys:

- 40 percent of workers say their job is very or extremely stressful.
- 75 percent say workers suffer more job-related stress than workers in the previous generation.
- 25 percent of employees say their job is their number one stressor.

Even if you love your job, long-term stress can grind you down. Read on to learn more about stress and how to tame it in the workplace.

From cave to cubicle: the stress response

Stress is a necessary survival response that draws upon instinct, hormones and muscle. Our distant ancestors' "fight or flight" response to stress allowed the human race to survive in a hostile environment.

These days we no longer brandish a spear or need to outrun predators. Yet we still have the same quickened heartbeat and surging stress hormones when faced with a stressful situation. Those biological responses are lifesaving when we're in danger, but they can damage our health if they become a way of life.

A small dose of stress can be helpful. It may help you meet a deadline or score high on a presentation. But if stress becomes an everyday reality, it can lead to poor health. At first it can cause headaches, upset stomach and poor sleep. Over time it may lead to chronic health problems such as depression, back pain and heart disease.

Take your stress temperature

Certain factors are well-known causes of stress in the workplace. Some of these include:

- Lack of control or input
- Heavy workload or too many responsibilities
- Not being recognized or rewarded for your work
- Working in dirty, noisy or uncomfortable surroundings

Are any of these at the bottom of your stress? Are there other factors that play a role? Pinpointing the causes of stress can help you find solutions.

Tame your stress

The good news is we live in an age when addressing work stress is important for business. Many managers know that stressed workers are not as productive, are more likely to get injured and take more sick days than workers who aren't stressed.

If work stress is getting you down

- **Talk to your manager.** Ask if there are ways to restructure your job to make it more manageable. Be positive. Offer solutions, not just complaints.
- **Explore work resources at your company.** Find out if there is an employee assistance program (EAP) or stress management course you could access.
- **Take good care of yourself.** Be sure to eat well, get enough sleep and make time for exercise. You'll handle stress better if you're healthy.
- **Get help if you need it.** You may want to take a meditation, yoga or tai chi class. You might also consider seeing a therapist who could help you seek solutions to your work situation.

Reduce Stress With Time Management

The key to getting stress under control is effective time management. With good time management, you'll get more done, feel better about yourself and lower your stress level. These tips can help.

Make a plan

Using a to-do list is the most powerful way to get control of your time. Spend a little time at the start of each week making a list of what you need to accomplish. Some people use a day planner, electronic device or spreadsheet, but you can use a simple notebook.

Prioritize

Once you have made a to-do list, rank each item by importance. Some people use a system of high, medium and low. Concentrate on things of high importance or urgency. Move those that are medium or low to the bottom of the list.

Be realistic

Allow a reasonable amount of time for each task. Don't schedule every moment. Leave some space in your day when you can take breaks or fit in the unexpected.

Include time for yourself

Your health and well-being are important, so make sure you allow time for good meals, exercise, relaxation and your family and friends.

Review your to-do list every day

Check off items as you finish them. This can give you a sense of accomplishment. What you don't finish one day can be moved to the next day.

Avoid procrastination

Putting off things you need to do just creates more stress. If you feel overwhelmed by a task, break it down into smaller parts. Tackle one part at a time. Give yourself a little reward when you finish each part.

Get help if you need it

See if there are tasks you can delegate to someone else. It can pay to give up some control in exchange for a less hectic schedule.

Learn to say "no"

Accepting more and more responsibilities is guaranteed to increase your stress. If you already have a full plate, don't take on more.

Get organized

Spend a little time setting up your workspace so you know where things are. Choose a spot where you put your keys, briefcase, purse or other items you use every day. Then use it every time. This can save a lot of frustration and hours of wasted time.

Beware of time-wasters

Phone calls and email can interrupt concentration and eat up productive hours. Set up your phone to take messages and schedule a time of day to return calls. Ditto with email. Set aside a time for it (maybe 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes after lunch). Identify other time-wasters and how you could deal with them.

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