



REDUCING STRESS



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What is stress?

Stress means different things for different people. It is the bodies reaction to something that is outside of the norm or a challenge. It could be a physical response such increased heart rate, sweating or shaking or emotion such as anger, crying or overwhelm. Stress can be good or bad. It can help you get through a difficult situation or it can be debilitating. The key is to know how to manage your stress and face challenges head on.

Stress can be acute (short periods of time or for something specific like trauma, exams, running late) or chronic (long periods of time and doesn't go away – things like relationship issues, work problems, loneliness/isolation, bullying, feeling unsafe, pain, illness, health concerns).



It can also be:

Environmental – chemicals, radiation, pollution.

Postural – sitting for too long, looking down at your phone for long periods of time, sleeping position.

Emotional – things like not feeling good enough, poor self-esteem, feeling unloved or unwanted. This is the type that runs down our immune system.

Nutritional – herbicides, pesticides, antibiotic use, consuming too much processed foods, synthetic oils which are inflammatory.

Small amounts of stress can be beneficial to our health and keep us out of danger but if it continues it needs to be addressed. If you are stressed and relying on food, alcohol, drugs and cigarettes to get your through or find that you aren't sleeping, feel unable to cope, thoughts of self-harm or are withdrawing from your normal life then it is time to get help.

What Stress does to the body?

Symptoms of stress can include:

- Headaches, other aches and pains
- Sleep disturbance, insomnia
- Upset stomach, indigestion, diarrhoea
- Anxiety
- Anger, irritability
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Feeling overwhelmed and out of control
- Feeling moody, tearful
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of motivation
- Low self-esteem, lack of confidence
- High blood pressure
- Weakened immune system
- Heart disease
- Inflammation leading to disease
- Weight gain



Stress has a major impact on the body's nervous system and can cause structural changes to the brain including atrophy and decreasing its size and can impact cognition and memory as well as change your response to stress. It impacts the Hippocampus, amygdala and temporal lobe.

When we experience a stressor our eyes and ear send a signal to amygdala, which interprets the danger and alerts the hypothalamus which communicates it to the rest of the body.

The sympathetic nervous system then alerts the adrenal glands which release adrenaline, activating the flight or fight response. It activates different body systems so that you can face the challenges ahead of you such as increasing your heart rate, pushing blood to the muscles, heart and other vital organs. It also releases glucose and fats from the temporary storage sites in the body so it supplies energy to the parts of the body that need it. The spike in adrenaline activates the HPA Access (Hypothalamus, Pituitary, Adrenal glands) which in turns activates the release of



Cortisol from the adrenals. Cortisol is also released when you wake, when you exercise and will spike during periods of stress. It also increases the metabolism of glucoses, controls blood pressure and reduces inflammation. Although it is good in times of acute stress, long term stress leads to excess cortisol production. Too much cortisol can lead to weight gain around the abdomen and face, affect your skin, cause acne and for women cause facial hair and irregular periods.

Tolerance Levels

We all have different tolerance levels for stress. What you find stressful may not be stressful for someone else. We are all triggered by different things. For example – Jane and Sarah sit an exam. Both feel very prepared but Jane remains cool, calm and collected whereas Sarah is struggling, she is a little shaky and off balance.

Stress tolerance is described as the ability to be relaxed and composed when faced with difficulty. Having a healthy stress tolerance is important so that we can function when faced with a challenge so that it doesn't have a negative impact on our health.



Ways to build stress tolerance.

- Be self-aware – note when you are starting to feel stress and what your body's reaction is. Identify where you are holding tension,
- Evaluate priorities – if you feel you are starting to feel overwhelmed and can feel stress creeping in, look at what is going on for you. Is it that you have too much to do? Look at what you need to prioritise and what can wait till later.
- Don't get carried away – emotions can take over. Check in with yourself to see if your reaction is warranted or if you are overreacting to the situation – take a few breaths and see how it looks.
- Write a to do list and focus on one thing at a time. Having too much to do is overwhelming, breaking it down helps take the stress out of it.
- Take time out – being busy all the time increases your stress levels and lowers your stress tolerance – you need to make time to relax and recharge.

How do we Stress less?

The first thing you need to do is look at the stressors in your life are and if possible remove them or learn a way to deal with them. If you are stressed don't put yourself in situations where it could introduce more stress.

Breathe – it sounds simple enough but most of the population don't breathe properly. Don't go for the long inhale through your nose and long exhales through your mouth. You want to be breathing in and out through your nose and just focus on your breathing.

Mindset – having a positive mindset helps you deal with your stress. Being aware that you have the power to make positive changes in your life and adopting the mindset that you can get through any challenges that come your way really helps reduce your reaction to stressors as they come up. If your mindset is that you cannot cope and everything is too hard then that is what you will go to when faced with a challenge. Positivity in the face of adversity will help reduce your bodies stress response.

Practicing self-care Eat well, exercising regularly, hydrating, get quality sleep, minimise toxins and avoiding the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs to cope with stress. Maintain good relationships with friends and family (even if virtually), read, practising relaxation, gratefulness, meditation and mindfulness, get out into nature and sunshine (if possible) and making time for activities and hobbies. Self-care is simply doing something that you love for you. Make time for it.



Develop new routines – Establishing some structure and rituals in your day will help to provide stability. There are a number of ways that you can do this and you have to find the way that works for your best. An example is if your drive to work stresses you out because of traffic, find an alternative route, adjust your routine to leave earlier or later. Daily planning – if you are busy, write out your three big things that need to be done today, followed by the would be nice to do today and then everything else.

Take breaks: Plan your breaks and use them to do something that makes you feel calm and happy. Schedule in time to get up and walk away from your computer. This gives you time to quiet your mind and go back with increased vigour.

Limit your media exposure: Stay informed but not alarmed. Be mindful of exposure to information and try to limit how often you consume news updates on. Remember that incorrect information is easily shared. Remain curious and question the source of everything you read or hear.

Don't believe everything on social media: Do you really think people's lives are as perfect as they show you. Definitely not. The problem with social media is that people show you what they think you expect so don't show you the vulnerable side of themselves. Some of those people may be incredibly stressed. Therefore limit the time you are on there and only follow people that light you up and not the ones that make you feel bad about yourself. Stop comparing yourself to those images, we don't know what is going on for them either.



Seek support: Don't be afraid to talk to others about how you are feeling. Talk to a family member or a friend. You might just find that by opening up you can help each other because they too might be experiencing similar feelings. If you want to talk to someone else, and not sure where to start, there are lots of great online and phone chat support services available. If you are feeling anxious or depressed for an extended period see a health professional.

Smile and laughter – it is really hard to stay stressed if you continue to smile. This will not eliminate your stress but it will help you feel more in control of it. Smiling is also contagious. If you smile at someone else you just might make their day a little brighter or even reduce their stress level. Laughter has been described as the best medicine for a lot of things – find something that gives you a good belly laugh. Also sometime human touch is all we need to feel less stressed. A hug from a friend, or a loved one or hearing a kind word can turn it all around. Go see family or a friend.

Exercise – one of the most important things you can do for your health is to move. Exercise releases endorphins into the blood stream. Endorphins are a neurotransmitter and are a natural pain reliever, improve mood and trigger positive feelings. It is the same feeling we get when we eat chocolate! We can also get them when listening to music, laughing, having sex, dancing and during acupuncture.



Try Yoga for the benefits of relaxation, go for a walk to calm your body and mind, Boxing to relief tension, running for escape or Dance – like no one is watching.

Massage

Massage helps relieve tension from our body. It also makes us switch off for a while. It also can give you the opportunity to just relax and have some time to yourself. You don't need to talk or be anyone for that time.

Journal/practice gratitude – This isn't for everyone. Journaling helps get all the things playing on your mind out and onto the page, therefore they are no longer cycling through your head. Practicing gratitude can be part of journalling by writing down one thing you are grateful for each day. This is a great way to focus on the positives in your life and reduce the negatives. Leave the journal by your bed, that way if you do wake during the night and the mind starts racing and you can't sleep you can do it again.



Singing or chanting – releases endorphins to make you feel good. Can also improve lung and heart function. So, belt out your favourite songs whenever you can.

Affirmations – now this one can be a trigger for some people because let's face it who wants to stand in front of a mirror, especially if the stress is caused by how you feel about yourself. Affirmation don't have to be done like this. You can download an app that will send you positive affirmations during the day – this helps if you have a busy job or lifestyle. Or you can write you own and put them on your phone and look at them whenever you are feeling a bit stressed. You can have things like:

- I will only focus on things I can control
- I have the power to make positive changes in my life
- I am capable of getting through tough times
- I am strong and resilient
- I am doing my very best
- I choose to take breaks and focus on self-care today

Sleep – one of the top things we can do for our health is to get good night's sleep. This allows the body to rest and reset. Stress can often impact our sleep leading to insomnia. Our cortisol levels drop in the evening and allow the production of melatonin. If we are stressed our cortisol levels may not drop enough and therefore we aren't getting enough of our sleep hormones. It is really important to have downtime late in the afternoon and early in the evening to ensure we will reduce our cortisol, increase melatonin and get enough sleep.

Diet

The foods we eat can also play a big role in how we respond to stressful situations. When we are stressed, it is natural to go for quick and easy snacks and meals. We grab chocolate, chips, cakes and lollies – looking for a quick hit to feel better. Bad news is you'll have a crash afterwards and it may even make you feel worse! Sugar and processed foods cause inflammation as does stress so you might just be making yourself sick. Inflammation can cause sleep issues, gut issues, illness and decreased immunity.



Food can also cause stress for people. Knowing what to eat when there is so much information out there on what is a superfood one week and not the next. Are you eating the right foods and getting the right nutrients. Getting your kids to eat healthy is another one.

Foods that help you with stress include:

- Cheese
- Cashews
- Spinach
- Salmon
- Turkey
- Mushrooms
- Oats
- Dark Chocolate
- Avocado
- Leafy Greens



Foods that increase stress are:

- Sugar
- Processed foods
- Trans fats
- Fried foods
- Alcohol
- Microwave popcorn
- Cakes & Biscuits
- Processed meats

Making a few of these changes can have a great impact on your stress levels. If you are feeling stressed and these things don't help it may be time to look at supplements or herbal medicines or see your doctor. There are many additional things that can help you if you are stress and you do not need to continue to suffer the effects of being STRESSED!

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