

MANAGE YOUR STRESS



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Stress management is probably the most important aspect of long-term health. Why? Because no matter what diet you follow or how much you exercise you do, if you're not managing your stress you will still be at risk for modern degenerative conditions like heart disease, diabetes, hypothyroidism and autoimmunity.

Doctors see this every day in their practices. They have a lot of patients that are following a 'perfect' diet, and yet they are still sick. Stress is often the cause. Yet as pervasive as stress is, many people don't do anything to mitigate its harmful effects. The truth is it's a lot easier to make dietary changes and pop some pills (whether drugs or supplements) than it is to manage our stress. Stress management bumps us up against core patterns of belief and behaviour that are difficult to change.

Many people may feel defeated or overwhelmed by stress. Stress management is hard. It asks a lot of us. It forces us to slow down, to step back, to disengage (if only for a brief time) from the electric current of modern life. It asks us to prioritise self-care in a culture that does not value it.

It's time to lay down some tough love: **If you're not doing some form of regular stress management, you will sabotage all of your best efforts with diet and exercise.** Stress management is absolutely crucial to optimal health and longevity. If most health conscious people spent even half the amount of time they spend focusing on nutrition and exercise on managing their stress, they'd be a lot better off.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Hans Selye, the famous physiologist who coined the term 'stress', defined it this way:

"...the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it."

The prominent psychologist Richard Lazarus offers a similar definition: "...any event in which environmental demands, internal demands, or both tax or exceed the adaptive resources of an individual..."

At the simplest level, then, stress is a disturbance of homeostasis. Homeostasis is the body's ability to regulate its inner environment. When the body loses this ability, disease occurs.

The adrenals are two walnut-shaped glands that sit atop the kidneys. They secrete hormones – such as cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine – that regulate the stress response. Because of this, the adrenals are what determine our tolerance to stress and are also the system of our body most affected by stress.

Most people are aware of the obvious forms of stress that affect the adrenal glands: impossibly full schedules, driving in traffic, financial problems, arguments with a spouse, losing a job and the many other emotional and psychological challenges of modern life.

But other factors not commonly considered when people think of 'stress' place just as much of a burden on the adrenal glands. These include blood sugar swings, gut dysfunction, food intolerances (especially gluten), chronic infections, environmental toxins, autoimmune problems, inflammation and overtraining. All of these conditions sound the alarm bells and cause the adrenals to pump out more stress hormones.

Adrenal stress is probably the most common problem encountered in functional medicine, because nearly everyone is dealing with at least one of the factors listed above. Symptoms of adrenal stress are diverse and nonspecific, because the adrenals affect every system in the body. But some of the more common symptoms are:

- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Decreased immunity
- Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep and waking up
- Mood swings
- Sugar and caffeine cravings
- Irritability or light-headedness between meals
- Eating to relieve fatigue
- Dizziness when moving from sitting or lying to standing
- Digestive distress

HOW DOES STRESS HARM THE BODY?

The short answer is “in every way imaginable.” It would take books to explain the full effects of stress. And those books have been written, but we’ll just summarise here.

When stress becomes chronic and prolonged, the hypothalamus in the brain is activated and triggers the adrenal glands to release a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol is normally released in a specific rhythm throughout the day. It should be high in the mornings when you wake up (this is what helps you get out of bed and start your day), and gradually taper off throughout the day (so you feel tired at bedtime and can fall asleep).

Research shows that chronic stress can not only increase absolute cortisol levels, but more importantly it disrupts the natural cortisol rhythm. And it’s this broken cortisol rhythm that wreaks so much havoc on your body. Among other effects, it:

- Raises your blood sugar
- Weakens your immune system
- Makes your gut leaky
- Makes you hungry and crave sugar
- Reduces your ability to burn fat
- Causes hormonal imbalances
- Reduces your DHEA, testosterone, growth hormone and TSH levels
- Increases your belly fat and makes your liver fatty
- Causes depression, anxiety and mood imbalances
- Contributes to cardiovascular disease

These are all well-documented in the scientific literature, and the list of health problems caused by stress goes on. In fact it’s not a stretch to suggest that stress contributes to all modern, chronic disease.

But most people don’t need much convincing of this. We’ve all witnessed the negative effects of stress firsthand, every day of our lives. So the question is, what do you do about it?

HOW TO REDUCE THE IMPACT

There are two important approaches to reducing the impact of stress:

1. Reduce the amount of stress you experience.
2. Mitigate the harmful effects of stress you can’t avoid.

1. REDUCING THE AMOUNT OF STRESS YOU EXPERIENCE

Reducing stress means just what it sounds like: reducing your total exposure to all forms of stress, whether psychological or physiological. Of course it's never possible to completely remove stress from our lives. But even in the most stressful of circumstances, it's still possible to reduce stress.

The first step is to avoid unnecessary stress. This often seems obvious, but it isn't. It's easy to overlook habitual patterns of thought and behaviour that cause unnecessary stress above and beyond the stress we can't avoid. Here are a few guidelines for how to avoid this kind of stress:

- **Learn to say “no”.** Know your limits, and don't take on projects or commitments you can't handle.
- **Avoid people who stress you out.** You know the kind of person we're talking about: drama queens and people who are constantly taking and never giving. Limit your time with these people or avoid them entirely.
- **Turn off the news (or at least limit your exposure to it).** If watching the world go up in flames stresses you out, limit your exposure to the news. You'll still find out what's going on, and still be able to act as a concerned citizen, but you don't need to watch and read every possible news report. Some people cope better with reading rather than watching, some with headlines first to enable filtering of what is received, and some are happy to simply avoid current affairs altogether. Whatever suits you, you'll have more time for yourself. Choose what you're exposed to.
- **Give up pointless arguments.** There is obviously a place for discussion and debate, and working towards change. But have you noticed that most arguments don't lead to change? In fact, they tend to have the opposite effect - each side becomes more defended

and entrenched in their world view. Find other ways to get your point across, learn to listen with empathy, and don't waste precious time and energy trying to convert fundamentalists to your religion.

- **Escape the tyranny of your to-do list.** Each day spend some time in the morning really considering what needs to be done that day. Drop unimportant tasks to the bottom of the list. Better yet, cross them off entirely. The world will go on.

The second step in reducing the amount of stress you experience is to address any physiological problems that are taxing your adrenals. These causes include anemia, blood sugar swings, gut inflammation, food intolerances (especially gluten), essential fatty acid deficiencies and environmental toxins. If you have one or more of these conditions, it's probably best to get help from a dietitian or naturopath.

2. ACCEPT WHAT YOU CAN'T AVOID

Obviously there are times when we just can't avoid stress. Maybe we have a high-stress job, or we're caring for an ailing parent, or we're having difficulty with our partner or spouse. In these situations it's not about reducing stress itself, but about reducing its harmful effects.

How do you do that? There are several different strategies:

- **Reframe the situation.** We experience stress because of the meaning we assign to certain events or situations. Sometimes changing our perspective is enough to relieve the stress.

For example, being stuck in traffic can be a 'disaster' or it could be an opportunity for contemplation and solitude.

- **Lower your standards.** This is especially important for you perfectionists out there. Don't let 'perfect' be the enemy of 'good'. Let good enough be good enough.
- **Practice acceptance.** "All suffering is caused by wishing the moment to be other than it is." Many things in life are beyond our control. Learn to accept the things you can't change.
- **Be grateful.** Simply shifting your focus from what is not okay or not enough, to what you're grateful for or appreciative of can completely change your perspective – and relieve stress. Simply put, focus on the good, not the bad.
- **Cultivate empathy.** When you're in a conflict with another person, make an effort to connect with their feelings and needs. If you understand where they're coming from, you'll be less likely to react and take it personally.
- **Manage your time.** Poor time management is a major cause of stress. When you're overwhelmed with commitments and stretched too thin, it's difficult to stay present and relaxed. Careful planning and establishing boundaries with your time can help.

In addition to everything listed above, one of the most important things you can do to manage stress is to bring more pleasure, joy and fun into your life.

STRESS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND TECHNIQUES

All of the stress management tips above are important, and can make a huge difference in your health and well-being. However, there's a certain amount of stress in modern life that is simply unavoidable for most of us. That's why it's so crucial to have a regular stress management practice.

There are a lot of options here, of course. Healthy ways to relax and recharge include:

- Go for a walk
- Spend time in nature
- Call a good friend
- Have a good workout
- Write in a journal
- Take a long bath
- Light some scented candles
- Savour a hot cup of tea
- Play with a pet
- Work in the garden
- Have a massage
- Read a good book
- Listen to music
- Watch a comedy

These types of relaxation techniques evoke the body's relaxation response and induce a state of restfulness. This is the opposite of the stress response.

Regularly practicing these techniques will build resilience, heal your body, and boost your feelings of happiness and contentedness.

THIS WEEKS CHALLENGE:

Include one method of relaxation every day to help reduce stress. Use the list above or your own methods, but do something every day.

