

Calming Down: An Introduction to Stress and Some Stress-Solutions

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What is Stress?

According to the dictionary, the word stress means: 'to be subjected to pressure or strain, a mentally disruptive or disquieting influence'. A situation that causes pressure or strain is called a stressor. The stress that we all experience at various times in our lives is expressed through different emotions, such as anxiety, anger, frustration, depression or even excitement, and affects us physically. In order to cope with stress, it is important to understand how stress affects the body and to familiarize oneself with the various types of stress.

This article will describe some causes of stress, and offer some options for reducing it.

How Stress Affects Your Body

When we are under stress, our bodies respond with the 'fight or flight' response. Researchers believe that this reaction is an ancient response that has allowed humans to survive as a species since prehistoric times. We know that the human brain responds to stress (both real or imagined) by sending signals to the part of the brain called the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus in turn activates the stress response by stimulating the nervous system. Finally, the nervous system creates changes in the body that get us 'pumped up' to either stand and fight, or run away.

Effects of the 'fight or flight' response: Even though we have evolved from the caveman days, this stress response is still with us and causes the same increases in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, and muscular tension as it did to our caveman ancestors. Blood gets directed away from our extremities and digestive system into our muscles. Our pupils dilate to see more clearly, and hearing becomes clearer. These bodily responses mobilize us in the short run. If we cannot turn off the stress response, or if it is activated frequently for non-emergency situations, its physical effects can take a toll on our body and can become unhealthy.

Stress tampers with the body's effectiveness: The unhealthy effects of being chronically stressed result from a variety of physiological changes. As part of our response to stress, adrenaline and other hormones are released. Over time, these hormones may inhibit digestion, growth, and tissue repair, as well as the effectiveness of our immune and inflammatory systems.

Stress makes illness worse: Most illnesses are made worse by stress. Some illnesses particularly affected by stress are:

- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Arthritis
- Coronary heart disease
- Stomach ulcers
- Tension headaches
- Asthma
- Hypertension
- AIDS

Not everyone who experiences high levels of chronic stress becomes physically ill, but stress can be a contributing factor in exacerbating physical ailments. One recent study indicated that workers reporting a high level of stress had 46 percent higher health costs.

One goal of stress management is to learn how to switch off the stress response when it is not needed. We can learn to identify when we are experiencing unhealthy levels of stress and teach ourselves some skills to feel calmer and more relaxed. There are several different types of stress and I will discuss practical strategies for managing each.

Types of Stress and Stress Solutions

The following are a series of stress types and some suggestions for easing their effect.

Constant Day-to-Day Stress

Constant day-to-day stress can be a barrage of minor irritants, time pressures, an overload of responsibilities, or the result of hostile interactions with others. Here are some steps to help ease day-to-day stressors:

Recognize when it happens: The first step is to recognize when you are feeling stress. Are you aware of the situations that cause stress and are you aware of how the stress is affecting you? Do you feel tense, irritable, frustrated, or angry when exposed to a series of daily stresses, which if experienced individually might appear to be minor? You can often learn to change the way you react to constant minor stressors.

Modify what you say to yourself: Pay attention to the connection between your thoughts and your mood. Experiment by learning to step back and replace your upsetting thoughts with 'self-statements' that lead to reduced frustration, anger and anxiety. For instance rather than saying, "If this project doesn't go smoothly, I'm going to be really upset," say instead, "I'm expecting that this project may not go smoothly. Whatever happens, I can handle it. I am proud of myself for not letting it get to me."

Learn to use relaxation exercises: When you become tense, irritated or anxious, your breathing becomes more rapid, and, without being aware of it, you may create muscle tension. This constant state of muscle tension contributes to tension headaches, chronic pain, and other physical syndromes. To address this problem, you can learn specific relaxation techniques.

Learn a breathing exercise: Breathe in through your nose, hold the air deep in your lungs, and then slowly exhale through your mouth. Do this quietly and without attracting attention so that you can use this technique anywhere. Continue until you feel calmer.

Learn a muscle exercise: Tense and then relax different muscle groups in your body. For instance, tense your shoulder muscles and study the tension as you hunch your shoulders up by your neck. Now relax your shoulders, drop them back and allow the relaxation to spread through your shoulders and neck. This exercise can be done with your leg muscles, arms, buttocks, and so on. By doing these exercises, you can study the difference between tension and relaxation and learn to identify more clearly the muscle groups that tense up when you become anxious. Through repeated practice, you can learn to relax these muscle groups during times of stress.

Learn a relaxation exercise: Create relaxing images in your mind. Imagine what relaxes you and visualize yourself in those situations, such as relaxing by a lake or on a beach. Try to engage all your senses as you create an image. This technique can also be helpful in overcoming insomnia.

Start by practicing relaxation exercises when you are not in a stressful situation. When you are more familiar with the techniques, you can start using them in real-life situations.

Mentally prepare for 'stressors': It can be very helpful to take some time out to mentally prepare yourself for confronting a specific stressor. This type of preparation is referred to as stress inoculation training. With this technique, you rehearse your response to a stressful situation before you enter it. It involves thinking of appropriate self-statements, relaxation exercises, and images, which you can later evaluate to determine what works best for you.

For example, before an important meeting, assume that you might be criticized or met with disapproval at some point during the meeting but decide that you will stay calm. Once you are sufficiently prepared, test your response in a real situation. Afterward, reward yourself with praise or by treating yourself to something special. If you were unsuccessful in staying calm, think of how you could improve your preparation to be more effective in the future. Try drawing up a list of stressful events and situations, arranging them from least to most stressful. First, practice and rehearse responses for those that are least stressful and then slowly work your way up the list to more stressful situations. Expect what will likely happen, instead of 'hoping for the best'. Predict and actually say to yourself that you will deal well with whatever happens. Remember to prepare in advance.

Chronic Anger

The other type of day-to-day stress response is chronic anger. Are you constantly holding in anger? Are there people in your day-to-day life who repeatedly make you angry? Do you spend a lot of your time angrily thinking about what certain people said or did to you? Do you feel you are a victim of injustice? For example, does each interaction with your work supervisor get you angrier and angrier?

Perhaps you are so angry that you are no longer holding it in. Do you find that interactions with important people in your life are becoming increasingly tense, hostile or explosive?

Researchers believe that this type of angry, prolonged stress is the most physically unhealthy, particularly for the cardiovascular system. If you suffer from this type of anger-related stress, you should be making some immediate changes in your life.

Take a step back: Step back and try to interpret what people say in a less hostile manner. Are you taking what people say too personally? Are you taking people's comments out of context so that the comments become more insulting or threatening than they were intended to be? Sometimes it is helpful to talk with others. This will allow you to express some of the feelings that you have been suppressing while receiving some valuable feedback.

Express your feelings and needs: You can frequently resolve misunderstandings by assertively (not angrily) expressing your feelings and preferences. Since anger often results from a failure to be assertive, you should experience a reduction in your stress level. Here are some simple steps to take:

- Try to listen to the other person's point of view even if you do not agree with it.
- Try to express your concerns by using "I", or communicate your own concerns and issues, rather than focusing your thoughts on what you think are the other person's intentions. If you are angry with someone, you cannot assume that you know why they are behaving in a way you dislike. Expressing your true feeling before you become angry and upset is the best way to avoid misunderstandings. Seek compromise, so both parties can get some of their needs met.

Expect reality: If your boss is totally impossible and causes you to be anxious and angry, it may be advisable to consider a job change. Certainly in any conflict it is important to understand how our own attitudes, expectations and behaviors contribute. Almost all anger results from expecting and demanding one thing and getting something else. Rather than saying to yourself, "I hope that John cleaned his room like I asked him to, or Mary better not be late again," expect reality. "I am expecting that John may not have cleaned his room because he often fails to do what I ask him to."

Major Life Changes

Major life changes are an important source of stress. It could be a loss of a job, geographical relocation, divorce, death of a spouse, or personal injury. Even positive life changes such as marriage can be anxiety-provoking and stressful. Research has shown that people are more likely to develop illness or clinical syndromes after they have been exposed to major life changes. Some stress is unavoidable and often it coincides with positive life experiences, such as having children or purchasing a house.

Muster a hardy response: How we respond to life situations is probably the most important factor in determining our stress level. In her research, Dr. Susanna Kobassa talks about "hardiness". Her research shows that if you can adapt to a stressful event such as a job loss, in a "hardy" manner, you are less likely to become ill. People who are hardy view change as a challenge and an opportunity for personal growth, rather than simply as a threat or catastrophe. Hardy people work at feeling in control of their life circumstances and perceive that they have the resources and abilities to make the right choices. They also have a commitment to home, family and community so they often have a greater sense of balance and can avoid becoming totally preoccupied with the stressor. When you are faced with a major life stressor, such as a job loss, think flexibly about solving the problem, look for the opportunity for growth, and turn to social support. Always maintain your leisure interests, community and family commitments. Also if you can say to yourself, "This is a difficult, unpleasant situation, but I can handle it," you will be able to handle it.

Traumatic Stress

Some stressors are traumatic and beyond the realm of ordinary human experience. For instance, you might be a victim of a car accident, a rape, violent hold-up, or have your house destroyed by a hurricane or tornado.

After-effects of traumatic stress: This type of traumatic stress often results in after-effects such as repetitive nightmares, intrusive thoughts about the event, severe anxiety and depression. It is not unusual to re-experience the traumatic event over and over again as if it is happening in the present. This reaction does not mean you are going crazy. Some of these reactions, such as repetitive dreams and intrusive waking thoughts of the trauma might go away over time. However, if you have suffered a major loss or if the trauma gravely impacts your current life, the stress reactions will often linger and it would be wise to obtain professional help.

Type A Personality Stress

One type of stress response that has received a lot of attention has been the response of a Type A Personality. Do you take on too many work demands and tasks at the same time? Are you constantly working with a sense of time urgency? Do you become impatient with the pace of events? Are you a perfectionist? Do you become angry with yourself or others when your goals are not accomplished? Do your standards and goals become ever more inflexible while you worry excessively about terrible consequences if these goals are not met?

If you fit these characteristics, perhaps you need to ask yourself if you really need to take on so many responsibilities. You can challenge your catastrophic fears and relax your rigidly high standards. Give yourself more time for leisure and allow more time to enjoy family and friends. If you are unable to benefit from the suggestions made in this article or from your own strategies, you should seriously consider therapy.

How to Get Help

Psychotherapists, such as psychologists, social workers and some psychiatrists, have professional training that qualifies them to carefully listen to your problems and teach you to verbalize your experiences in helpful ways rather than holding in your feelings and thoughts. While expressing your thoughts and feelings to friends and family can also be helpful, a professional can provide you with confidentiality and help you express and understand anger, guilt, and other powerful emotions that create stress.

Specialists can teach useful techniques: Some therapists, such as cognitive behaviorists, can teach you specific techniques to help overcome specific problems. You can learn to cope more effectively with symptoms of panic, anxiety, phobias, startle reactions, anger, depression, and isolation.

Psychiatrists can prescribe medications: Psychiatrists can prescribe medications, which can lessen symptoms of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance. In some instances psychotherapy and medications can be the most helpful combination.

Changing your emotional and behavioral responses is a process that takes time and effort. Do not expect immediate improvement, but a lack of progress after six months should prompt you to re-evaluate whether your commitment to change is sufficient or your therapist is effective for you.

Summary

Some people are more vulnerable to stress than others. If you seem to be subjected to stress that is causing you anxiety, depression, or anger that is too severe to handle alone or with advice from family and friends, talk with your primary care physician. He or she can offer you advice about getting professional help.

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