

# Introduction to Stress Management

What is stress? We all use the word, but what does it really mean? Stress is the mental or physical tension that can result from any kind of demand on our body systems. Given that definition, it's obvious that stress is unavoidable! As one writer puts it, if you have no stress then you're either dead or in denial. What happens during a stress reaction? Anxiety usually prevails. What we do know is that anxiety can only live in the past or the future thus simply all we need to do is to live in the now. This unfortunately is much more difficult than it sounds. Something in the environment around us results in a threat or a perceived threat to our safety either physical or emotional. Our ancient survival program is loaded and the "fight or flight" kicks in: the hormones of adrenaline and cortisol are released; blood flow is redirected to the more instinctual parts of the brain and to our heart as well as the large muscles in our body. The levels of blood sugar increase; the heart beats faster; the liver manufactures cholesterol; the pupils dilate and the muscles tense up. All these responses can be helpful in dealing with physical attacks (we've all heard of the parent being able to lift a car off her child) but if we don't take action, and if this response is repeated often, it can make us physically or mentally sick and suppress our immune system.

## The source of stress

A common belief is that only unhappy events can cause severe stress, but in fact many happy events such as marriage, the birth of a child, holiday celebrations and trips can also be stressful. Stress can be caused by day to day hassles of the human life like traffic, losing things, or an argument with your partner or co-worker. It can also come from hurriedness—the pressure to get things done and not enough time to do them. Although the sources of stress are "out there" they are also "in here": the level of stress experienced by an individual is the product of both the external situation and of how that person has an expectation of the outcome that is not realized.

## When Stress becomes Distress

Stress is a fact of everyday life. In fact studies indicate that mild levels of stress actually help learning, probably because they help us to mobilize our energy and resources for us to do our best. But what happens when stress is at a high level for a long time? We are at risk for depression, anxiety and panic—not to mention a whole host of physical ailments. Learn to recognize stress overload by these warning signs: concentration problems; appetite change; weight gain or loss; pessimism; increased arguments with others; sleep problems; concentration problems; fidgeting or listlessness; increased dependence on drugs or alcohol; cigarettes or sedatives; susceptibility to colds or viruses and chronic pain, headaches and muscle tension.

## What Does and Does not work

What does not work to manage stress? Drugs and alcohol may suppress or mask certain symptoms in the short term, but they do not help us to deal with the sources of the stress itself and of course can become self-destructive in the long run. Catharsis—screaming into a pillow or playing aggressive video games—does not work any better and can actually increase some people's feelings of anger and aggression. While stress can't be eliminated, it can be managed so that it's not a destructive power in our lives. The first strategy is to remove the stressor from your life or to remove yourself from the stressor, if possible. In other words change what you can. Get rid of small irritations. The second option is to change your response or interpretation of the situation. Part of the source of the stress is based on our attitudes and beliefs which we can never really run away from. Thus a good formula for coping with stress involves a balance between changing our environment and changing ourselves. I offer some tips on the back of this page that might be helpful. Have a look unless you are in denial in which case you will stop now or maybe haven't even read this far in which case it cannot be helped.

# **Positive Ways to Deal with Stress**

1. Exercise—Whether you garden, roller-blade or do yoga, physical activity is one the best methods to relieve stress and to strengthen your body to withstand its effects.
2. Escape for awhile—Get away from whatever is causing the tension. Lose yourself in a book or take a bath so you can calm down and come back to deal with the situation.
3. Eliminate the small hassles—Don't shop at the busiest times. Buy a bus pass if you are always short of change when the bus arrives.
4. Breathe—Take a time out to practice slow breathing. As you exhale very slowly say a word like "relax" or Calm down". As you exhale concentrate on letting your body relax.
5. Try relaxation or meditation—Consider taking a course to learn these techniques. Or make an appointment with a counselor to get professional help.
6. Be realistic—Don't think you are superhuman: be realistic and don't expect too much from yourself at this time. Make a good effort, but don't try to achieve the impossible.
7. Draw on spirituality—if you draw your strength from a spiritual connection, then tap into that area. It may help you to put things into perspective with the help of a higher power.
8. Set priorities and goals—Managing your time well reduces stress! When you're overwhelmed, take the time to figure out what your priorities are. Then break down intimidating projects into smaller chunks. Sticking to a weekly schedule can also help.
9. Eat healthy and get regular sleep—A poor diet will put additional stress on your body, so try to limit your junk food intake as well as things like caffeine. Listen to your body as to how much sleep you need in order to be well rested.
10. Take time for you—Plan a little time each day for fun and recreation, whether your thing is playing the guitar, reading novels or playing sports.
11. Note the positive—Take the time to consciously reflect on and even write down all the things that are good in your life. This can help keep you grounded as the tornado whirls around you.
12. Laugh—Whether you play charades with friends or watch Seinfeld reruns) whatever it takes to make you laugh), research shows that laughing is an excellent way to cope with pressure.
13. Talk to others—Don't bottle up your feelings, reach out to those around you who you trust. A friend, family or other co-workers. Talking may not take the source of your stress away, but it can help you to put it into perspective, reduce your anxiety and come up with solutions.