

Stress...Energizer or Energy Drain?

Stress is one word that you hear everywhere. Everybody has it. In fact, according to a survey done for Northwestern National Life Insurance, one in three Americans seriously thought about quitting their jobs last year because of workplace stress and a third expected to burn out soon. These are disturbing statistics. So, what really is this thing called stress?

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Stress is any response to an event or demand which causes mental and physical strain on the mind or body. Stress is a syndrome, or a group of characteristic signs and symptoms which people exhibit in response to an event. Stress itself is neither positive nor negative; only your response to a given level of stress is positive or negative.

In its positive aspect, stress can help you to concentrate, focus, perform, and can often help you to reach peak efficiency. It also makes you alert to danger and allows you to deal with crises when they arise. Many people, in fact, do their best work when under pressure. Then, when the challenge has been met, they take the time to relax and enjoy their achievements. This relaxation response allows them to build up the physical and emotional reserves to meet the next challenge and is one of the key elements of positive stress.

Stress becomes negative when you stay "geared up" and don't—or can't—relax after meeting the challenge. Also, feeling out of control and perceiving situations as hopeless are other primary sources of negative stress. Unfortunately, when stress becomes a constant, ongoing cycle, your health and well-being can suffer.

Stress is a fact of life, but it doesn't need to be a way of life. There are many things in life

you simply can't control, but there are very few that you can't learn to manage. This article focuses on the techniques needed to better manage the stress in your life.

The first step to managing stress is awareness of the things that make you feel stressed (stressors) and of the way you feel when under stress. Ask yourself, "What are the sources of my stress?" Write them on a piece of paper. Then break them down under two headings: Things you can do something about/Things you can't do something about. Focus first on the things you can do something about, which will

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motivate you to better deal with the things you can't control. Most people have a faulty perception that situations are hopeless. If we believe a situation is hopeless; it will be. We have the power to change that. If there are difficult people who are causing you stress, learn to become more assertive in your dealings with them. Let them know, in a constructive manner, how their behavior affects you. Deadlines can usually be negotiated, if reasonable alternatives are presented. If it is a situation, such as traffic, there is nothing you can do to make it move faster, but there is something you can do to give you some control over it. Buy a car telephone—one of the best resources available for reducing anxiety. With a phone call, appointments are notified you are on your way, emergency help is contacted, and you feel better. You have taken charge of a seemingly hopeless situation. One word of advice, do not give your phone number to anybody. It is to be used for out-going emergencies only. For many of us, the only quiet time we have is in our daily commute. If we allow it to interfere with that time, it may become a negative stressor, rather than a stress reliever.

Now that you have identified your stressors, how do they make you feel? Stress is triggered by many factors, such as, conflict, change, frustration, emotional upset, pressing deadlines, uncertainty, or anxiety. Constant stress will upset many body systems and wear you down. Some common physical reactions to stress include: muscle tension, clenching or grinding teeth, rapid heart beat, stomach or intestinal upsets, headaches, frequent fatigue, weight changes, lack of concentration, or sleep disturbance. Learn to recognize your own early stress signals. Many times our bodies become physically ill to save us from an emotional breakdown in stressful times. It forces us to take a rest. When you notice a symptom, stop whatever you are doing, and consciously change your reaction to whatever is causing you stress. Listen to your body. Watch its

signals and pay attention to them. It's doing you a favor. Don't ignore it.

If you find that you are a select member of the wide-awake 4 a.m. crowd, with your mind racing about things to do or dealing with an emotional upset, try the following tip to help you sleep better. Either before you go to sleep or when you wake up, write down all the thoughts you have on a piece of paper. Don't worry about grammar or sentence structure—just get your thoughts or that list of things to do out of your head. Follow with deep breathing and concentrate on relaxing and going to sleep. You have just literally transferred your busy mental activity to a piece of paper, which should now physically relax you and let you go back to sleep. As long as your mind is working, your body will not relax. Learn to keep a pencil and pad of paper on the nightstand. It works.

As soon as your stress signals appear, interrupt the stress cycle with a relaxation technique. There are several different kinds of anxiety control measures which can be used in stress situations. You will have to experiment and discover those that work best for you.

■ **Deep Breathing**—This is a simple technique that is basic to most other relaxation skills. By inhaling deeply and allowing your lungs to breathe in as much oxygen as possible, you can begin to relieve the tension that can lead to negative stress. And, best of all, deep breathing can be done anywhere and at any time. When you have no patience left or anxiety arises at the thought of giving a presentation or dealing with a difficult person, close your eyes, and take a deep breath. Hold, count to four, release, count to four. Repeat several times; you will feel the tension release with each exhalation.

■ **Stretching**—One of the best ways to loosen tight muscles and relax is by stretching. Stretching helps to break up tense muscle knots, by releasing lactic acid into the bloodstream, where it can

be transported out of the body. This process can help you feel more relaxed as well as relieve any aches and pains that can result from tension. Stretching also can help energize you. When you keep those shoulder, neck, and chest muscles loose, you breathe more deeply, increasing your oxygen levels. Oxygen recharges your body and reduces feelings of stress, helping you feel refreshed and invigorated. At the same time, it improves blood flow to the skin, nourishing the cells. You can stretch anywhere and anytime. It should feel wonderful. Use this time to forget everything but the pleasure your body is experiencing.

■ **Music, Relaxation, and Books on Tapes**—Choose tapes or recorded music that is especially relaxing to you and set aside a quiet time to listen. Let yourself be absorbed in the music. If you can't find the time to sit and read, go to the library and get the books on tape. Listen to them when you are driving. Just be careful not to get too absorbed and not pay attention to the road.

■ **Diversion**—One of the quickest ways to reduce stress is to divert your attention to something else, or to remove yourself from the stress situation temporarily. Sports or physical activities are excellent, especially to combat purely mental stress. Anger, fatigue, and confusion have been shown to decrease following brisk exercise. A coffee break, music, or a brisk walk, will usually do the job when the situation is not very intense. If you are reaching your critical stress level, you will have to make a considerable effort to replace your tension and anxiety with another activity. Turn your attention to a totally new situation, in new surroundings if possible. Take a vacation. Do something fun.

■ **Visualization**—This can be thought of as a mental vacation—a license to daydream. You can produce feelings of relaxation simply by using your imagination. Try to

visualize yourself feeling warm, calm, and relaxed. Picture a tranquil setting that has particular appeal to you and try to imagine all of the details. Are you lying on a warm beach? How does the sun feel on your back?

■ **Rest and Relaxation**—Sometimes the best thing you can do for yourself is nothing at all. Don't cram your days off with endless chores—make an effort to relax and enjoy your free time. And, try to get to bed at a reasonable hour—especially if you're under stress. Your body needs sleep to refresh itself; you need sleep to feel refreshed.

■ **Time Management**—Learn to control your time, instead of time controlling you. Don't fall victim to "timelock," where you become so overwhelmed by things to do, that you retreat and do nothing. Take a deep breath and focus on what must be done. Then do it. Other things may just have to wait. By using techniques to help you plan, prioritize, communicate, and delegate more effectively, you should be able to find that important time—some just for you.

Finally, and most importantly, to deal with today's challenges, you must have a positive attitude and lifestyle. Humor and laughter are powerful stress coping techniques. Medical research has shown that laughter has several beneficial physiological effects. They include: exercising the lungs and stimulating circulatory and cardiovascular systems, reducing muscle tension, and distracting attention from sources of discomfort. In addition, endorphines, our body's natural painkillers, are released when we laugh.

A sense of humor comes from having an inner, positive attitude towards life and the will to live. This positive attitude is important in fighting any illness and assisting in the healing process. Cardiologists, Dr. Meyer Friedman and Dr. Ray Rosenman, studied male heart attack victims and wrote about a behavior pattern that is likely to produce heart attack or health problems.

This behavior pattern is referred to as "Type A"—an intense drive to get things done. Type A personalities react to situations that others ignore, so they live under nearly constant stress; stress that is often largely created by themselves.

The opposite of the Type A pattern is called "Type B." The Type B person may have as much ambition as a Type A, but this kind of person is able to relax even under stress. Type B can walk away from an unfinished task at the end of the day, forget about it, and return to complete it later. As a result, Type B people rarely have heart disease.

There is a new classification out today, that refers solely to women—"Type E." In Harriet Braiker's book, *The Type E Woman—How to Overcome the Stress of Being Everything to Everybody*, the Type E syndrome describes women who become overly responsible about everything to the point that they don't take care of their own needs. They are Supermom, Superwife, Superwoman, Superworker, and they super suffer. Nobody can do it all.

If you recognize yourself as either a Type A or a Type E person, slow down. Focus on what is really important in your life. Try asking yourself, "what is the worse thing that can happen if something isn't done, the house isn't clean, etc." We are hardest on ourselves, by creating unrealistic expectations with all the demands that come our way. Search for some balance. Let stress energize you positively, not drain all the energy out of you.

In closing, there is a great little book by Spencer Johnson called, *One Minute for Myself*, that I would like to share a passage from. It is one that has helped me through the years deal with all the challenges in my life. I hope it helps you.

When I take good care of myself, I am less angry and happier—with myself and others. When I am happier, I work better. And I treat people around me better. □