

A Guide to Understanding and Navigating Stress

How Stress Hurts

Stress is something that we all face at one time or another. Despite it being unpleasant, stress in itself is not an illness. An important point to realise is that stress is not inherently bad. Stress causes physical changes to the body, increasing heart rate and breathing. In short bursts, stress can be a good thing and can *help you*, with short-term memory becoming more effective. If you are in the midst of a major challenge, you can leverage your stress reaction to enhance your performance, optimising your awareness and other mental faculties.

It is only when we experience an excess of stress that it becomes damaging and destructive. When the stress response becomes prolonged (chronic), it has a very different effect to that of short bursts and can result in the body's stress response no longer being able to return to its normal state. This long-term stress can contribute to both physical and mental ill health through effects on the heart, immune and metabolic functions, and hormones acting on the brain.

Too much stress can lead to binge eating, insomnia, stomach pains, headaches, high blood pressure, back pain, irritability, infection, anxiety, depression. Stress, too, seems to lead to more stress, creating a vicious cycle.

Recognising The Symptoms

Too frequently, people will ignore stress. The key to handling stress healthily is cultivating your ability to spot it while it is happening to you. The more readily you can discern stress as it arises within you, the more quickly and efficiently you will be able to respond to it, implementing strategies and tactics for overcoming it or managing it. The *symptoms* of stress. can include:

- * fatigue
- * headaches
- * difficulty concentrating
- * difficulty making decisions
- * uncontrollable anger
- * abuse of alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes, and drugs
- * overeating
- * undereating
- * binge eating
- * overwhelming feelings
- * overthinking

How To Cope

Coping strategies may not eliminate stress altogether or protect us from the source of the stress that we are feeling. They *can* however help us to work through our feelings. Here are some of the coping strategies that research indicates to be most effective.

* Identify the cause

Firstly, try and identify the cause of the stress and deal with it. Avoiding the problem may make one's situation worse. Sometimes it is not possible to change a situation and prevent stress, but there are many ways to help control it. Stress management may be an effective means to improving your health.

* Maintain a positive attitude

You do not want to ignore your mental health challenges in the name of positivity, but there is substantial research pointing to the benefits of optimism. Negative thinking does more than hurt our moods: it leads to poor decision-making and poor health too. Obsessing over negative beliefs can even change (for the worse) your very brain chemistry.

* Form a connection

When you bond with others, you are fulfilling your social drive, which is central to who you are as a person. Hug someone you love, chat with someone whose company you enjoy, or offer encouragement to someone. The benefits of social connection are wide-reaching with studies finding that people who connected more were happier and more able to cope.

* Move your body

Physical activity is great for your organs and your cardiovascular system, but researchers have also found that it is great for your mood. When you follow a routine of physical activity closely, you can break through stress substantially, freeing yourself of muscle tightness, generating pleasant brain chemicals, reducing unpleasant brain chemicals, avoiding anger, minimising anxiety, and escaping depression.

* Do something for someone else

Sometimes the fastest way to free yourself from stress is to find a favour that you can do for another person. Research shows that people who go out of their way to help other people experience lower rates of depression, pain and anxiety.

* Sleep well every night

Even though it may seem challenging to stick to a consistent sleep schedule, failing to do so may lead to many long-term issues, including depression, anxiety, heart disease, cancer, memory failure, poor immunities, and weight gain.

* Remind yourself of gratitude

Every day, find little things that you can appreciate. Make a conscious effort to express gratitude for all the wonderful things in your life.

* Be kind to yourself

Every day, seek out opportunities to pursue joy in your life. Laughing and feeling good should become daily parts of your life. When you feel good, you become better able to solve problems, think on the fly, and fight through illness, according to researchers. Something as simple as laughing can improve your health, supporting stronger heart and lung function and fortifying you against emotional difficulties. One study has even shown that people who relax and enjoy life more develop Alzheimer's disease and dementia at a lower rate than those who do not take the time to treat themselves to moments of joy.

* Change up your diet

Your eating habits fuel your brain, which in turn enables you to respond to stress effectively. Look at the foods you are eating and see which changes you can make.

* Breathing exercise

This calming breathing exercise technique just takes a few minutes and can be done anywhere: http://www.cycleagainstsucide.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2-1-Breathing-Technique_v3.mp4

* Get help from a professional

If the problems in your life are stopping you from functioning well or feeling good, professional help can make a major difference. And if you are having trouble, know that you are not alone. A list of support agencies are available at: <http://www.cycleagainstsucide.com/help-in-your-area/>