

*Stress management
after a
trauma*



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Stress management after a trauma

Introduction

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to eliminate most of your stress in your life (but not all). After all, if you were so relaxed that you hit the snooze button over and over again, your chances for promotion would be considerably reduced. Complete relaxation may be the goal for monks meditating on a mountain but it is more complicated in a 9 to 5 work world. Moderate stress motivates us to behave in adaptive ways. It helps us focus on and solve the problems that stand in our path.

Our stress system though, is an old one. It was originally created in an environment where even a momentary lapse could mean danger or even death. The same neural anatomy that saved us from the lions is being used today when someone cuts you off in traffic. In our everyday lives, we rarely need to go into that stressful fight-or-flight response. Yet, we often do.

Symptoms of stress

This chart, adapted from the Mayo Clinic staff (2007) lists symptoms of stress in 3 categories: physical, emotional/thinking, and behavioral.

Physical symptoms	Emotional symptoms	Behavioral symptoms
Headache	Anxiety or worry	Over or under eating
Chest pain, palpitations	Restlessness	Alcohol abuse
High blood pressure	Anger or irritability	Angry outbursts
Labored breathing	Depression	Drug abuse
Muscle or back aches	Mood swings	smoking
Jaw tension (teeth grinding)	Job dissatisfaction	Social withdrawal
Stomach upset	Feeling insecure	Relationship conflicts
Constipation or diarrhea	Confusion	Tearfulness
Increased sweating	Forgetfulness	Lower productivity
fatigue	Resentment	
Sleep disturbances	Inability to concentrate	
Sexuality disturbances	Loss of motivation	
Weight gain or loss	Negativity	
Skin breakouts		

What stress can do

The list of ailments caused or exacerbated by stress, both emotional and physical, is daunting. From the Journal of Counseling & Development, Winter 2008 edition:

Unmanaged chronic stress can have deleterious effects on the physical and psychological health of individuals. Stress may lead to or worsen disorders and diseases such as heart disease, anxiety, depression, hypertension, substance abuse, and gastrointestinal disorders (Astin, 1997; Brennan & Moos, 1990; Levy, Cain, Jarrett, & Heitkemper, 1997; D. Shapiro & Goldstein, 1982; Treiber et al., 1993; Whitehead, 1992).

Stress is also a contributing factor for lifestyle behaviors that increase vulnerability to diseases such as lung cancer, cardiovascular disease, and obesity (Brennan & Moos, 1990; Roth & Robbins, 2004; Treiber et al., 1993; D. R. Williams, 1999).

In addition, stress during pregnancy presents risks to the developing fetus (see the [April 2008 newsletter](#) for details). Add all these risks together and it becomes clear why it is essential to have strategies to reduce stress.

Techniques to avoid and manage stress

There are a large number of stress management techniques. The ones shown here are a subset of all the possible interventions. To learn more, go to the [recommended reading section](#).

Avoid the stressful situation if you can

I knew someone who had an accident at a busy intersection. Whenever he went back to that intersection, he felt a deal of great anxiety knowing that there was a curve which made it hard to see oncoming cars. I asked him if he could take another route. He replied “Sure, there a few different routes.” Then it occurred to him to just avoid that intersection. It will not always be possible for you to avoid stressful situations but in those fortunate times when you can, take advantage!

Forgive past hurts

You may have been a loyal employee to company that summarily laid you off and the anger is hard to contain. But holding on to that anger will only make you continue to suffer and will not affect those who hurt you. To quote Malachy McCourt, “Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” There are scores of books written about forgiveness. One technique is to write a scathing letter (not to be mailed!), then ask a few trusted friends or family to witness you burn that letter.

Avoid over committing your time

We each have to balance demands on our time that come from competing areas of our lives (employment, family, leisure, friends, etc.). Over committing your time will result in stress. If you already have a demanding job or a lengthy commute, your time and energy are already constrained. You should consider requests on your time carefully. It is a

perfectly reasonable thing to say that “I would love to help you but I can’t at this time.” You could offer alternatives such as “I can help you when things calm down at work” or “I am vacation in two weeks, I’ll come over then.” Agreeing to add optional tasks to an already busy life is bound to increase your stress.

Use problem solving skills

You just got a ticket because you forgot to get your car inspected on time. Whether you use a paper calendar or an electronic organizer, place next years inspection date on the calendar! This is a basic example of using problem solving skills to reduce stress. If you look at the stressors in your life, see if you can use problem solving techniques to reduce the stress that they produce.

Take a different perspective

Your mother in law is going to be visiting for a week and she likes to criticize your cooking. You feel your stress building as you start to imagine all the comments like “did you need this much salt in the soup?” If you can’t get her to modify her behavior, you can change the way you look at it. For example, keep a count of the criticisms and try and guess how many she will make each day and how many in total. If it is OK to share this with your husband or a trusted friend, let them make guesses too. By making a game out of it, it will be easier to tolerate.

Share with a friend (this includes furry friends)

“ Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: "What! You, too? Thought I was the only one."

C.S. Lewis

Stressors are common human experience and they become lighter when shared. Calling a friend to tell of a hard day or enjoying the company of a beloved pet are two important ways to reduce stress.

Acceptance is not endorsement

What?

That means that you can accept *what is* (intellectually and emotionally) without endorsing it. For example, you've just your third cold this winter. This might really frustrate you. "How can get sick so often?" you might ask yourself. Or "this isn't fair!"

Arguing with reality or saying "I will not accept this" is as understandable as it is futile. Reality is unyielding and insistent. The sooner you can accept what is, the better it will be for you. You eliminate the stress that comes from what you *wanted* to happen and what *did* happen. This is summed up in the ageless wisdom of the Serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference".

Mindfulness for stress reduction

Most of us spend the majority of our thoughts imagining the future or reviewing the past. Whether the view of the past brings pride or regret and whether the view of the future is hopeful or fearful; living in either time takes us out of the moment. The here and now is sacrificed in favor of a long gone past or an imagined future. In the book "Wherever you go, there you are," Jon Kabat-Zinn defines the concept of mindfulness:

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality. It wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present for many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation. (1994)

A survey of research on the effectiveness of mindfulness in stress reduction suggests that it is an effective technique (Grossman P, Niemann L, Schmidt S, Walach H, 2004).

But perhaps the best test is to try it yourself. When you are doing something that does not require your attention (e.g., as a passenger in a car), just notice your thoughts and observations. You will probably be thinking of things you have to do or things you have done. Try bringing your focus or attention to the scenery, paying careful attention to shapes, colors. If you see people, note your reaction to them. Now, try to see just what is, in other words, imagine you were a movie camera. You just record but make no judgment or evaluation. Or, imagine what an

infant would see. If you can manage that, even for a few moments, you have experienced a form of mindfulness.

Conclusion

Stress is a part of living but it is worth making an effort to minimize it in every way possible. Lowering your stress will help your relationships, as well as helping you emotionally and physically.

So go ahead, take that 5 minute walk, clear your mind or pet your dog. You'll be glad you did.

In parting, a quote from Tao Te Ching

Empty your mind of all thoughts.
Let your heart be at peace.
Watch the turmoil of beings,
but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe
returns to the common source.
Returning to the source is serenity.

If you don't realize the source,
you stumble in confusion and sorrow.
When you realize where you come from,
you naturally become tolerant,
disinterested, amused,
kindhearted as a grandmother,
dignified as a king.
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao,
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes, you are ready. (Mitchell S, 1998, p. 27)

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Recommended reading

On forgiveness:

[Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust](#)

A bestseller about a woman who survived the Rwandan holocaust and her path to forgiveness.

[The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace](#)

A beautifully written, easy to read discourse on the path to forgiveness.

On using mindfulness to reduce stress:

[Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness](#)

More information

If you would like more information, you can contact Michael Etts, LMSW, NBCCH

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About Mike

Mike Etts is a therapist who specializes in working with the after effects of trauma including anxiety, depression and insomnia.

Services

Anyone who has ever had to deal with weeds knows that it does no good to keep cutting off the tops. You have to get to the *root*. It's the same concept when you are dealing with psychological problems.

If you are ready to begin removing the legacy of trauma, if you are ready to start making anxiety, depression and insomnia a part of your past, then make a call and schedule a free consultation.

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