

# Strategies for Dealing with Stress

By Frank Gemmato

Stress can actually be good for you. An invigorating challenge, a cool breeze, an exciting vacation: these are positive stresses. But what may be good for you may be bad for someone else. This is a function of your overall mental and physical health. Most of you are well aware of negative stress, and the impact it has on your life. Job pressures, family conflicts, and not having enough time are but a few examples of stresses commonly affecting the average person.

A large number of medical conditions have been linked to stress. These include: angina, asthma, cancer, heart disease, depression, diabetes, headaches, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, premenstrual tension, rheumatoid arthritis, ulcerative colitis, and many others.

## The stress response

If you've ever been suddenly frightened, you know what it feels like to have adrenaline surge through your body. Adrenaline comes from the adrenal glands which lie on top of each kidney. Adrenaline induces a *fight-or-flight* response, designed to give the body a boost to escape from danger. When stresses continue for extended periods without a respite, depletion of the adrenaline glands may result. This can lead to insomnia, depression, fatigue, stomach aches, and irritability.

## Determining stress levels

To determine whether a person's health problems are stress related, many practitioners utilize the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). In it, various life-changing events are numerically rated in terms of their potential to cause disease. Examples of this include divorce, job changes, vacations, etc. If you suspect stress as a cause for your health problems, and would like a free copy of the SRRS sent to you, call my office at 503 659-8900. Adrenal function can also be assessed through laboratory testing and questionnaires.

## Negative Coping Patterns

People choose a variety of strategies for dealing with stress, and many are not supportive to good health. Use the following list to identify negative or destructive coping patterns, and then try to replace them with more positive ones discussed below.

- Chemical dependency (drugs, alcohol, smoking)
- Overeating
- Watching too much television
- Emotional outbursts
- Overspending

## Effective Stress Management

There are five areas of stress management. These include:

**1. The relaxation response** and other techniques to calm the mind and body, can help stress melt away. Meditation, prayer, progressive relaxation, self-hypnosis and diaphragmatic breathing are all effective. Resources on how to perform these are available from your healthcare provider.

**2. Lifestyle factors** like time management and relationship issues can be addressed and greatly diminish negative stresses. Learning to set priorities, be proactive, and avoid procrastination can help. Becoming a good, active, reflective listener can improve relationships. Sometimes it is necessary to seek help from a counselor or clergy person when an impasse is reached.

**3. Exercise** can be of enormous benefit in helping to increase the body's resilience to stress. Regular aerobic activities (3-4 times per week) like walking, jogging, bicycling, etc. can relieve tension, fatigue, and greatly diminish feelings of inadequacy and worry.

**4. Diet** is of crucial importance to those suffering from stress. Eliminate or restrict caffeine, sugar and alcohol intake. Eat regular planned meals based on whole natural foods in a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere. If you suffer from anxiety or chronic fatigue, food allergies may be the reason. Consult your practitioner.

**5. Supplementary measures** can be a great benefit to stressed out individuals. These are largely directed at supporting the adrenal glands. Vitamin C, B6, and pantothenic acid (B5), zinc, and magnesium play a critical role in the health of the adrenal glands. Ginseng (Chinese and Siberian) supports adrenal function and act as a general tonic. For dosage information and a customized plan, ask your health care practitioner.

**6. Acupuncture** has a well-documented ability to release stress, support relaxation and regulate adrenal function. In terms of traditional Chinese medicine, stress affects the Liver, causing the qi, or vital energy, to stagnate. This causes tension to build up in muscles which blocks the circulation of blood and energy. Patients often feel simultaneously rejuvenated and calmed after acupuncture. This is the result of the release of endorphins and the regulation of neurotransmitters in the brain.

### **A fact of life**

Stress is a fact of life. Having the right mental attitude, lifestyle, diet, exercise, and nutrition can neutralize the negative effects of stress. Whether you utilize the stresses in your life as positive challenges that invigorate you and fuel creativity or let them control and wound you, is well within your control. Find the appropriate, health affirming strategies that will work for you.

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*Part of the preceding article is based on the chapter entitled "Stress Management" in The Encyclopedia of Natural Healing by Michael Murray.*