

Got Stress?



"Stress" is *not* a four-letter word. Stress can hurt you, it's true. And it's impossible to eliminate stress from your life. But even if it were possible to do that, you wouldn't want to. Why? Because not all stress is bad!

Like "The Force," stress has a light side and a dark side.

Some stress protects us. If you put your hand on a hot stove, the physical stress of the heat alerts you to remove it.

Some stress makes us happy. Birthdays, holidays and other celebrations come with their own form of stress, but it's a joyful, welcome form of stress.

It is stress that provides impetus for creative activities, and it's stress that adds excitement to life. The actor with "first night jitters" and the athlete digging down deep for that extra "something" that allows him to win the contest are both under stress.

The downside of stress comes from prolonged stress – chronic, mismanaged stress – that accumulates and does its damage over time. We tend to handle a major crisis better than we deal with the constant little hassles. Chronic, prolonged stress depletes exactly those nutrients the immune system needs to do its job. A depressed immune system leaves us vulnerable to illness and disease. No wonder 75 to 90% of visits to primary doctors involve stress-related conditions!

The harm stress does to us comes not from stress itself but rather from our *reaction* to that stress.

The major stressors (causes of stress) may be environmental, nutritional, physical, or mental/emotional.

Our environment is full of chemicals. We come in contact with these substances in our food, water, household cleaners, cosmetics, gardening products – just about any product we use. Chemicals are inhaled, ingested, and absorbed through the skin. The body needs to process, detoxify, store and eliminate these substances; this is primarily the job of the liver. This puts an added workload on the already-busy liver and stresses the body. Our environment may be too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, too noisy, etc. If these conditions are extreme and beyond our ability to adapt to them, we will be stressed. If elements of our environment make us fear for our safety or comfort, we will be stressed.

Nutritional stress results from food that does not agree with us, from an inability to properly absorb nutrients, and from the fact that stress itself depletes vital nutrients (especially the B-complex vitamins; vitamins A, C and E; magnesium; selenium; zinc; and essential fatty acids).

Physical stress may arise from body tension, poor posture, lack of (or too much) exercise and lack of sleep.

Mental and emotional stress usually arises from life events or situations where one feels conflicted or lack of control. Spiritual stress can develop from searching for answers to such questions as the meaning of life.

Under stress, we react physiologically. The body prepares for "fight-or-flight" just as it has since our prehistoric ancestors' time. A center in the brain calls for the immediate release of adrenaline and other hormones. Adrenaline affects all the body's systems: heart rate increases; blood pressure increases; blood sugar and cholesterol levels rise; muscles tense; digestion stops as blood is shunted to the muscles; hearing and sight become more acute; blood thickens so that healing, if necessary, can occur faster. This automatic response occurs whether the stress is good or bad.

Our prehistoric ancestors' stressors involved survival – providing food and shelter, and protection from dangerous animals. Today our food and shelter are more certain, and our environment more friendly. Our stressors are more likely to involve ringing telephones and busy family and work schedules and deadlines. **Our circumstances have evolved, but our stress response has not.**

We live in the "Information Age." It has been estimated that during the 18th century, an average peasant living in a rural area would have been exposed during his whole lifetime to the amount of information we find in one day's issue of the *New York Times*.¹ Information comes at us constantly, from many sources, and it is stressful. Adrenaline, the main stress hormone, affects our motivation and concentration; it is easy to feel overwhelmed.

The "fight-or-flight" response is perfectly appropriate in emergency situations. But when we have dealt with the emergency and it is over, we have used up the stress chemicals. The body reverts to normal functioning and we restore ourselves and replenish our reserves. "Fight-or-flight" is not considered an appropriate response in many situations today – an argument at home or work, or a traffic jam, for example. The stress chemicals in our systems are not used up through physical action, and with a seemingly constant stream of annoyances and hassles, they have no time to dissipate. As a result, we may be almost constantly in a "fight-or-flight" state.

¹ Stress Protection Plan by Suzannah Olivier; published by Collins & Brown Limited, 2000

As we adapt to this state, we may feel that everything is fine. But over time this chronic low-level stress takes its toll on our energy and affects our functioning. The altered balance of hormones results in a suppressed immune system, slower metabolism (with an accompanying weight gain) and slower rate of cellular repair (which means faster aging).

Yet, some people seem to be less affected by stress than others. These are the more "stress-hardy" types. They don't necessarily have less stress; they are somehow better able to handle their stress.

It is possible to learn to be more stress-hardy. The connection between the mind and the body is not completely understood, but it is acknowledged. It appears that perception plays a role in the stress response. In other words, it is not only the fact that a stressor is present, but also *how you perceive* that stressor that determines how you will respond.

There are many steps you can take to help manage your stress: learn proper breathing techniques; develop your relaxation skills; learn to manage your time effectively; and prepare your body and mind to deal with stress.

Serenity Center exists to help you learn about holistic stress management techniques. Please contact us for a list of current workshops.

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