

CONTROLLING STRESS

BY STEVE LIGHTBURN

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

- **Buildup of stress is potentially deadly**
- **Ultimate goal is to reduce stress with out conscious effort**
- **As with any exercise, consult your physician**
- **Relaxation is a learned skill and takes practice**

Stress. The word itself conjures up all sorts of negative images; at every turn, we hear about stress related illness and the deleterious effect stress has on our bodies and minds. Our fast-paced, high-tech society, we are told, is responsible for creating high levels of stress in our lives, which leads directly to an early grave. But stress has two opposing connotations.

We cannot eliminate stress from our lives, nor would we want to. Although we typically categorize stress as negative, there are positive stressors as well. Negative stressors are bodily or mental tension that upsets our equilibrium. Positive stressors allow us to place importance, significance or emphasis on things. In other words, these stressors allow us to concentrate energies and set priorities to accomplish tasks. So some stress is necessary for us to function effectively.

The American Heart Association, however, cites excessive stress as a major risk factor for coronary heart disease. Heart disease, according to the medical and scientific communities, is only one example of stress-related illness. It holds, therefore, that reduction and control of negative stressors is imperative to our well-being.

There are many factors in our daily life that contribute to a buildup of physical and mental stress. Our bodies respond to this stress, usually through a malfunctioning of the most vulnerable parts. This response is our main line of defense against excessive stress. The symptoms we exhibit are a highly personalized set of danger signals.

Signs of stress buildup can be as nondescript as general irritability or depression or as invasive as migraine headaches, alcohol or drug addiction, or psychosis. When it comes to stress, only one thing is certain; left unchecked, stress will kill you.

The following techniques and exercises are designed to help you learn to control and reduce the stress in your life. Each will require some commitment of time and effort to give maximum results; unfortunately, there is no easy way to accomplish stress control. With a modicum of effort, however, you will be well on your way to becoming the master of your own body and its responses.

REDUCING DAILY STRESS

The first step in reducing daily stress is the identification of stress causing conditions. Ask yourself what makes you uncomfortable or tense; then either avoid those situations or change the conditions. Take constructive action to eliminate the source of stress.

If, for example, you frequently let your gas gauge drop to empty and then have to frantically search for a service station, you are unnecessarily creating a stressful situation. Eliminating the source of the stress is simple. Instead of waiting for the gas gauge to read empty before filling the tank, start looking for a service station when the needle reaches one-quarter full.

Many people create stress in their lives by taking on other people's problems. Stress results because they have little or no control over the problem or its resolution. To avoid this type of stress, you must be able to say "no" and feel good about it. This, of course, takes practice. The rewards, however, are well worth the effort.

Many stressful situations are short lived, but the effects on your body are longer lasting. Try to transfer the energy produced by the stressor from harmful tension to useful or pleasurable activities. Do meaningful work, pursue creative hobbies, volunteer your services, or develop a regular exercise routine. Rewarding yourself will reinforce each positive step you take in reducing stress and will increase your motivation. If you develop a healthy mind, it



It's not a matter of eliminating stress from our lives but rather learning how to become its master

it will help you develop a healthy body.

An important step in stress reduction is to first identify your skills and limitations; then learn to accept yourself for who you are. Above all, learn to laugh at yourself. This technique, more than any other, will help you achieve your goal. Remember to keep external events from disturbing your equilibrium. If you can laugh under trying circumstances, you will be immune to the negative effects of stress.

DEVELOPING A LOW-STRESS LIFESTYLE

A key to low stress living is learning to manage your life as a whole. You are your most valuable asset; it is important that you jealously guard your personal freedoms. Time should be your ally, not your master. Consequently, you should allow quiet time for yourself as often as possible. While you should always talk to yourself nicely, this is crucial during your time alone.

You reinforce or endanger your perception of yourself by the people with whom you associate. Choose relationships that affirm you as a person. Forming one or two quality relationships with people who you trust and can be yourself with is essential. Maintaining a confidante allows you to share your stress, thus dispelling its power.

If you smoke, stop completely. Use alcohol sparingly, only for social occasions if at all. Minimize or eliminate the use of recreational drugs and free yourself from other chemical dependence. Dependencies and addictions are expressions of stress.

The level of stress in your life also influences your dietary habits. It is important to establish and maintain sensible eating habits, avoiding junk foods and minimizing the consumption of sugars and sweets. Emphasize food that you like and that is good for you.

Once you form appropriate eating habits, work on establishing and maintaining a body weight that pleases you. The best results are accomplished by a combination of proper eating habits and exercise. An aerobic exercise such as jogging, stationary bicycling or treadmill walking will help you maintain proper weight and body composition. Exercise will not only build your health to a high level, but physical conditioning will also elevate your mental and emotional outlook on life.

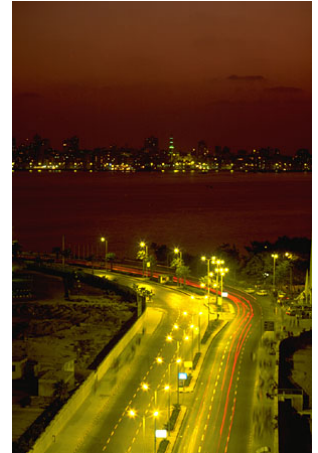
Frequently the work environment is a significant contributor to the amount of stress in our lives. If you are happy and satisfied with your job, you will have less stress. Conversely, stress is the natural result of meaningless work. Do not let your work dominate your life. Endeavor to achieve a work/play balance.

It is important not to allow your life to become lopsided in any area. Always seek new challenges and rewarding experiences in every facet of your life. Find self-renewing opportunities and open yourself to new experiences. Engage in relaxing pastimes: especially those offering tangible rewards or evidence of accomplishment.

Assume more responsibility for your own health care. Investigate various alternatives to pharmaceutical drugs such as herbal or homeopathic remedies, chiropractic, etc. Many doctors are now embracing a holistic approach to wellness and will be open to discuss various options with you. Finally, have an annual physical examination and consult with your physician as necessary. The end result is peace of mind. Leaving troubling situations unresolved creates needless worry, and worry by definition, is stress.

RELAXING YOUR BODY AND MIND

Once you have made the appropriate changes in your daily habits and your overall lifestyle, you will still need to practice specific exercises designed to eliminate the residual tension in your body. Scientific studies show that deep relaxation techniques and other exercises are effective in releasing this tension. There are four general areas:



Stress is a result of our environment and physical well-being

“The most important factor in learning to manage stress is cultivating an awareness of how our beliefs determine our behavior and how our thoughts can create or eliminate mental and physical stress.”



Stress can be positive or negative, or in some instances, both stressors can be present simultaneously

“Cued Relaxation techniques consist of Thought Stopping, Self-Talk and Meditation”



Once mastered, meditation can be effectively utilized in even a chaotic environment

1. **Cued Relaxation:** this technique relies on “cues” – signals that trigger specific responses. It consists of three distinct methods: Thought Stopping, Self-Talk and Meditation.

Thought Stopping

Each of us, at one time or another, has had unproductive and unpleasant thought; this is negative thinking. Such negative thoughts are counterproductive and use substantial energy. Further, negative thoughts are unnecessary; they do not lead to problem solving. They usually produce additional anxiety and tend to become “layered” – one negative thought feeding on a previous one or generating a succeeding one – creating ever more stress.

You must learn to break this habit of thinking; the habit changes when you stop the chain of negative thoughts. Start by paying close attention to the steady stream of thoughts flowing through your mind. When you recognize a negative thought, say “stop” aloud, and interrupt your train of thought. Once the negative thoughts are effectively shut off, replace them with memories of pleasant or pleasurable experiences or visions of peaceful scenes. This reinforces the stopping of negative thought and helps you feel more relaxed and able to cope with the situation.

Thought stopping is particularly pertinent when dealing with negative thought associated with a past event that cannot be changed, and event that is unlikely to occur, or a repetitive self-defeating image.

Self Talk

Once the negative thoughts are successfully stopped and replaced with pleasant images, the next step is to change your Self Talk, that portion of the steady stream of thoughts (of which you have now become aware) that you have specifically about yourself. As you become more aware of negative self-statements, you will be better able to not just stop them, but to convert them. Success in this area is critical for optimal health.

Thoughts frequently become automatic. On the average, most individuals have over 50,000 thoughts per day; most of these thoughts are the same thoughts they had the previous day. Thoughts are extremely important because they are the link between the external situation and your emotions and feelings. The content of your thoughts is directly related to your level of mental physical health (self-esteem).

The goal is to create alternate solutions. Instead of negative thoughts, you must seek positive and original replacement ideas. Positive affirmations are helpful. Rather than think, “I can never do that”, replace the thought with “I can” statements. Tape written statements to your bathroom mirror where you can read them each day. Remember that each thought is contingent on either conscious or unconscious choice; you control your thoughts or they will control you.

Meditation

The final step in this process is meditation: taking time to get in touch with the spirit that is “between the thoughts” – that part of you that is you. Meditation reunites the soul with the spirit. It is a process similar to quiet prayer, resulting in a relaxed body and an open mind.

To meditate effectively, assume a comfortable, relaxed position in a quiet environment. Fix your attention on an object or symbol and assume a peaceful attitude. Regulate your breathing, concentrating on slow, deep breaths. Practice positive self-talk as you slowly breathe out.

One of the many benefits of consistent meditation is an increasing amount of control over your attention. Thus you are free to choose the focus of your concentration, rather than merely being subject to environmental circumstances. Meditation has beneficial physical effects as well, such as the slowing

of breathing and heart rate, the lowering or stabilization of blood pressure, and an increase in brain alpha waves.

2. Progressive muscle relaxation

Scientific studies have found that we can achieve an increased degree of relaxation in our muscles by consciously increasing the tension in the muscle, holding the tension, and then releasing the tension completely. The muscle relaxes not just to the point before tensing occurred, but to a degree equal to the amount of tension applied. Remember Newton's Law? For each action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Progressive muscle relaxation means that muscles or muscle groups are tensed and relaxed in a pattern, or sequence. Thus, the first step may be to tense and relax the muscles in the hand, followed by the muscles in the forearm, and then the muscles of the upper arm. Each tensing is accomplished by taking a deep breath and holding both for about five seconds. The process would be repeated for the legs, torso, neck and head until the entire body has been engaged.

Individuals using this technique have reported feelings of warmth or heaviness, as well as experiencing a calming effect. Daily practice allows you to become aware of the muscles that carry the most stress. Once your body sense is established — that is, when your body understands both the procedure and the result — relaxation may be obtained by merely monitoring your breathing and telling yourself to relax.

While most of us can identify and feel the stress in our bodies, we simply fail to take the time to do anything about it. As a result, the stress becomes more debilitating. Initially, therefore, you may have to institute a formal relaxation schedule. With practice you will be able to quickly “scan” your body, examining it for areas of stress. Once an area has been identified, it is easy to direct your attention to relieving the stress through muscle relaxation. Alternatively, areas not necessary for a specific task can be relaxed, while those muscles being used can be differentially tensed and relaxed.

All of us have a few seconds many times each day in which to practice these techniques. Be aware of such practice opportunities as: waiting in line at the bank, talking on the telephone, sitting at your desk, or driving. Relaxation is a developed skill; once mastered, it can be used every day for the rest of your life.

3. Autogenics

Autogenic training has been likened to a form of self-hypnosis. By definition, autogenic means “self-regulating” or “self-generating”. Quite simply, this technique involves little more than getting into a relaxed frame of mind and giving your body a series of mental instructions.

Mental instructions are a series of verbal “cues”. For example, you might instruct your appendages and torso to become relaxed, heavy and warm, or instruct your breathing to become deep and regular. These and other instructions are mentally repeated a number of times, producing a series of physiological changes. In other words, your body “hears” the instructions and “reacts” accordingly.

It is not necessary for you to analyze what is happening to your body; it is only necessary to observe *what* is happening. As with progressive muscle relaxation, autogenics uses exercises resulting in sensations of body warmth and heaviness. Autogenics additionally uses relaxing images to expand this physical relaxation to the mind.

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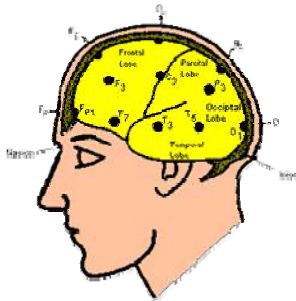
Exercise is a fundamental element in reducing stress and promoting a healthy body

4. Biofeedback

For centuries scientists and health care professionals have believed there is a direct correlation between an individual's mental state and their physical well-being. Modern science is again coming to this conclusion. Biofeedback is a tool that can be used to give measurable results of how your mental state affects your physical condition.

Biofeedback encompasses a circular path of events, beginning with the gathering of information from the body through sensors placed on the skin at various locations. These sensors measure skin temperature, heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, and muscle tension levels. The collected information is transmitted to a computer, sound device and other mechanisms, and then interpreted. Feedback is delivered to the individual in several different forms, including light, sound and displayed or printed graphs.

Because feedback is received from the processing equipment via both visual and audio cues, you can learn to lean back, relax and concentrate on changing your body condition.



Neurofeedback is biofeedback for the brain and improves cognitive function, attention, mood, anxiety, sleep and behavior.

SUMMARY

The buildup of stress is potentially deadly. It is in your own best interest to learn and apply techniques that reduce the amount of stress held in your body and mind. Your ultimate goal is to increase your feelings of well-being and reduce stress related symptoms without any conscious effort.

As with any exercise, consult your medical provider before attempting the muscle relaxation and autogenic techniques. Precautions are especially warranted for anyone having any of the following; high or extremely low blood pressure, diabetes, hypoglycemic conditions or heart conditions.

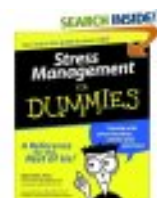
Relaxation is a learned skill; as with any skill, you must practice, practice, practice. Don't wait until you are aware of being under stress. Learn to "read" your body and respond to its need for relieving tension. Cues can be used to remember to practice, but you must eventually become whole-body connected. It is necessary to do more than think; action must be taken. The mind/body connection becomes integrated by your conscious scanning of your body during daily activities.

Biofeedback is available through medical facilities and specialized health care professionals. Because it is a medically supervised technique, it is particularly suggested for anyone with physical or health problems.

Remember that stress is a result of our environment and how that environment relates to our individual belief systems. The more important factor in learning to manage stress is cultivating an awareness of how our beliefs determine our behavior and how our thoughts can create or eliminate mental and physical stress.

There is truth to the song lyrics "Don't worry, be Happy!". Adopt it as your life's philosophy. It works!

SUGGESTED READINGS:



**"DON'T WORRY
— BE HAPPY!"**