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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



Stress – Finding Your Balance

Think for a moment how many times you encounter the word “stress” in a day. It could be part of your inner dialogue directly resulting from something you’re experiencing. It could be overheard in conversations around you or on TV. Let’s face it, stress (at least the kind that we’re referring to, with negative associations) is pervasive. It has such a familiar presence in our vernacular that perhaps the meaning has been diluted. Consider, though, that our body’s response to stress is instinctive. We can’t avoid it, but we can learn more about the “mechanics” of stress. With that knowledge, we can develop strategies to manage our responses.

In this article, we’ll look at stress categorically: the good (yes, some stress can be defined that way) and the bad. Awareness may be the first step to finding better balance in stressful times because we can engage in a framework to recognize triggers and return to a state of calm more quickly.

What is stress?

Stress is a normal biological reaction to anything that requires your attention or action. Our bodies can respond to the stressor physically, emotionally, behaviourally or psychologically. It’s the response to it that can have either positive or negative effects on your health. We need stress because it helps us stay attentive and decide how best to deal with threats when they arrive. But it becomes problematic when short-term stress is prolonged.¹ The conundrum is that modern life puts a lot of pressure on us. It can

become difficult to remove yourself from the everyday situations that create a stressful response. The good news is that you can learn some of the common symptoms that show your body is reacting to stress. You can also learn proven techniques that will help you alleviate the pressure and offer relief.

Different types of stress

In the 1940s, Hans Selye, an Endocrinologist at McGill University, began in-depth studies of how people reacted to stressful situations and made the connection between stress and health. His theory of General Adaptation Syndrome pinpointed three main physiological stages in what would become more commonly known as the stress response:

1. **Alarm** - The body diverts energy to enable the “fight or flight” response. Selye observed that this initial reaction left people more vulnerable to illness because bodily systems were “offline” during this event.
2. **Resistance** - The body adapts to the stressor because the alarm hasn’t subsided. Energy continues to be diverted to produce stress reactions and becomes normalized.
3. **Exhaustion** - After prolonged stress through alarm and resistance, our immune systems become ineffective and collapse. Selye indicated that those “who experienced long-term stress could succumb to heart attacks or severe infection due to their reduced resistance to illness.”²

As these studies continued, they organized stress into four primary types: acute, chronic, episodic acute and eustress.³

Acute

- Short term
- Positive or negative
- Encountered most frequently (day-to-day)

Episodic acute

- Acute stressors that become part of life
- Stressful episodes string together and are almost normalized

Chronic

- Always present and may seem inescapable
- For example, relationship stress or work stress
- May be caused by traumatic experiences as a child or adult

Eustress

- Positive stress that is fun and exciting
- Can keep you energized
- Provides you with surges of adrenaline

Why do you react to stress the way you do?

Have you ever wondered why some people can keep their cool during stressful situations while others fall apart or don't notice anything at all? Differences in the stress gene can result in someone having either an overactive or underactive stress response. So, reactions can be influenced, in part, by a combination of your genetic makeup and life experiences. Learning about good or bad stress reactions can help you understand and manage stressful situations. Stress that inspires you, motivates you, or helps you enhance your performance is generally viewed as good. On the other hand, being anxious or confused, having difficulty concentrating, or having a hard time maintaining consistent performance are categorically associated with bad stress.

What about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Traumatic life experiences can also trigger an extreme and often debilitating stress response known commonly as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While we tend to think of adults as the ones who have stress invade their lives, it's essential to consider that children are equally affected by stress. People living with PTSD may have lived experiences that cause them to react with crippling fear because of their associations with frightening or disturbing situations. Adults may find that they need to remove themselves from specific situations to avoid harmful memories and associations. Children could show sleep disturbances, fear of being alone or in certain places, or even re-enactment through play. Sometimes, we may not even be aware that a traumatic event occurred in our history. Research into trauma shows that

our bodies and brains can retain the images, sounds, smells, and emotions present at the time of the event. We can be instantly transported back, resulting in a stress response. Trauma can have far-reaching effects. Studies show that childhood trauma events can manifest as chronic stress in adulthood.⁴

What happens in your body when you experience stress?

Stress affects your body, your mood, and your behaviour. During a stress response, the following may occur:

1. The hypothalamus at the base of your brain senses danger.
2. Your nerves send signals to your adrenal glands (on top of your kidneys).
3. Those messages quickly release a flood of chemicals and hormones such as adrenaline (also known as epinephrine) and the primary stress hormone cortisol.
4. Your heart rate increases, sending a rush of blood to your muscles and other organs, preparing your fight/flight (or freeze) response.
5. Your breathing increases, and you start to sweat.
6. Your body stops all insulin production to allow your muscles to be ready to use glucose fast (to flee).

The intensity and duration of stress reactions can increase your risk of developing mental and physical health problems. Frequent stress can be a contributing factor to a host of health conditions, including, but not limited to:

- Diabetes – insulin resistance
- Hypertension - damaged blood vessels
- Heart attack or stroke – stress increases the risk of occurrence

Stress has also been linked to:

- Headaches
- Substance use problems
- Anxiety, depression
- Insomnia
- Weight gain
- Changes in mood, energy, and libido
- Hair loss
- Muscle tension, especially in the neck and shoulders
- Grinding teeth, gum disease
- Ulcers and digestive system issues such as diverticulosis/diverticulitis

What are some of the best things to do to reduce stress quickly?

Remember that our stress response floods our bodies with chemicals and hormones. We need to flush them from our systems to counteract the effects of the fight/flight/freeze response to regain control. There are three actions that may provide almost immediate relief.

- The first is to move. Exercise releases endorphins into your bloodstream even after only one minute of activity.
- The second is to become aware of the connection between your mind, body and breathing. Meditation and other mindfulness practices such as yoga and tai chi teach you to introduce calm voluntarily by becoming more aware of your senses and body movements.
- The third is to listen to calm music to lower blood pressure and reduce cortisol.

What are some ways to manage long-term stress?

You can take a proactive approach to manage stress by setting boundaries in your work, personal life, and community. These tend to be sources of acute or chronic stress. Taking stock of how you feel, then adjusting your behaviours can eliminate or alleviate self-imposed pressure. One clinical psychologist observed that “we don’t help anyone by getting burnt out and needing care ourselves. It is what makes these boundaries so important. We have to decide how much we can give to our friends, family and communities before we stop to recharge our own batteries with time away.”⁵

- Consider planning your tasks and finishing your workday at a specific time. You can also commit to eating well and exercising by scheduling time for them in your calendar and tracking how frequently you complete them.
- On the personal front, be aware of friends that drain you. When you find that you are always the one who is listening, let them express themselves but tell them that they need to reciprocate. You may also feel better by reducing the amount of time you spend viewing screens and aimlessly scrolling through social media posts. Instead, get in touch with your creative side. You’ll feel more productive and reward yourself with personal growth.
- Many times, we’re stretched too thin. Allow yourself to skip community events guilt-free. Take up a new hobby or permit yourself to do something you love in the time that you would have spent doing something else. You don’t need a full social calendar. If something makes you feel uneasy, listen to your instincts. It’s okay to disconnect or change the format.

What about the often-elusive notion of balance? Is it achievable?

We’re told that it’s crucial to find a balance between our work and personal lives, two competing priorities. There are times when one will demand more time and attention than the other. It may not be entirely realistic to imagine that you can devote equal attention to both. Instead, consider that finding balance may not be the ideal approach. Focusing on finding harmony so that everything in your life can co-exist can be a less stressful approach. The notion of harmony “invokes the idea that you should enjoy work and life at the rhythm that makes the most sense for you and what’s taking place in your life at any given time.”⁶ A happy product of shifting the focus from balance to harmony is a revival of creative thinking, problem-solving, and planning, reducing procrastination and learning to be better at asking for help.

Harmony also gives you room to find your passion. For example, you can envision your dream job, but also consider doing something that you always wanted to try but talked yourself out of doing. You can also revisit some of your favourite things. Think about what you enjoyed when you were young. Consider trying something related but different from something you already know how to do. These visioning exercises allow you to flex your brain to find some inspiration.

Good wellness practices and habits can help

When you strive to incorporate better wellness in your life, you become more self-aware and better able to control responses and reactions. It’s developing a habit of being kind to yourself, otherwise known as self-care. Start by reviewing how much you are taking on. Could you do things differently? Perhaps more leisurely? Consider whether you need to be the one doing a particular task. You can start by building good habits systematically to help you reduce stress, such as:

Get good sleep. Good sleep hygiene includes having a calm space and a dark, cool room. Set yourself a respective bed time and remove electronics to reduce blue-light emissions and radio frequencies that can affect your brain and your ability to get to and stay asleep.

Nutrition. Avoid caffeine, especially before bedtime. Instead, try drinking green tea, which releases theanine to calm your nervous system.

Exercise. Working out doesn’t need to be done in a big session at all. Just move! Even 10 minutes at a time can add up over a day. If you can’t find 10 minutes, go for a two-minute walk.

Try some **balanced breathing** techniques to relax. Start by inhaling through your nose for a count of four, then holding that breath for another four-count. Then release that breath through your mouth for a count of eight. Repeat the process several times for the greatest benefit. It is an excellent way to reduce your heart rate and blood pressure.

Find something to **laugh** about. It helps reduce stress by bringing air into your body and reducing tension in your circulatory system and muscles.

Singing has been proven to reduce cortisol and help you feel more relaxed. It can also boost your mood, increase your brain activity, and control your breathing.

Finally, don't underestimate the power of a good conversation. Talking to friends about what's causing you stress can be helpful as you can hear different perspectives and recommendations that you may not have considered. There's also merit in "talking" to yourself through journaling. Over time, you can reflect on earlier journal entries.

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