



Stress: **How is it affecting you?**

Stress is something everyone talks about, but how much do you really understand about it? You know that it's an everyday part of modern living that can't be avoided, but most people aren't aware of the negative effects stress has on their health.

The Harvard Medical School has estimated that 60-90% of all healthcare visits are related to stress-induced conditions. Stress can be a barrier to good health, and unfortunately current pharmaceutical approaches cannot adequately treat stress-related illness. Therefore, it's important to be proactive and learn techniques to effectively manage your stress.

The stress you feel may be due to major life changes, or a cumulative effect of minor everyday hassles. Regardless of the source of stress, the response in your body is the same.

The Stress Response

When your mind perceives a stress, it creates an alarm that turns on your nervous system. Adrenalin is then released from your adrenal glands causing the "Fight or Flight Response." To our ancient ancestors, this response was very valuable in the face of danger since it helped us fight or flee from predators. And because you need energy to run away from the perceived stress, your body supplies fuel by raising your blood sugar.



While this Stress Response was an important part of our evolution, in modern times when our stressors aren't a matter of life or death, there is no need for immediate escape and so the adrenalin instead causes you to feel anxious, disrupts your digestion and elevates your blood sugar.

If your mind continues to perceive stress, the Stress Response is maintained with the release of cortisol. Cortisol keeps your blood sugar elevated and also causes constriction of your arteries, resulting in high blood pressure. Another effect of cortisol is to suppress the soldiers of your immune system, the white blood cells. This may explain why people under chronic stress are constantly getting colds and flu's.

Overall, the effects of prolonged elevated cortisol levels include:

- ⇒ Increased body fat, especially around the waist
- ⇒ High blood pressure
- ⇒ High blood sugar
- ⇒ Muscle tension
- ⇒ Digestive problems such as ulcers, diarrhea, constipation, bloating
- ⇒ Fatigue
- ⇒ Headaches
- ⇒ Sexual and reproductive dysfunction
- ⇒ Insomnia
- ⇒ Decreased immune system function



Chronic stress leads to decreased happiness and satisfaction and often increased irritability. People commonly develop negative coping patterns to deal with stress, which end up decreasing their quality of life. Negative coping patterns may include: over-eating, emotional outbursts, dependence on alcohol or drugs, smoking, over-watching TV, shopping, or feelings of helplessness.

How Can You Help Yourself?

Fortunately, there is a lot you can do. Researchers have found that when people simply *imagine* danger, the body responds identically to when the person actually encounters danger. Whenever your mind perceives a threat, the Stress Response is stimulated in your body. In modern times, deadlines, financial problems, disagreements with co-workers, competition in the workplace and demands for your time are all factors that may initiate the Stress Response. The key to understanding stress management is to realize that it's not the actual stressor that negatively influences your life, it's *how you respond* to the stressor that determines its impact on your life. It is in *your* power to turn the stress switch off, and to stop the panic message being sent to your nervous system that releases adrenalin and cortisol.

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There is also a strong link between stress and negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger. Stress is toxic to the body and is now becoming recognized as a cause of degenerative diseases such as cancer and heart disease.

~ Eckhart Tolle

How do you turn the stress switch off?

1. The first method is to **learn how to relax!** Learning techniques to calm your mind and promote a positive mental attitude are essential to turning the Stress Response off. Research at the Harvard Medical School has found that doing regular relaxation exercises results in alleviation of many stress-related medical disorders.
2. **Time management** techniques help you to manage a busy lifestyle. Learn to prioritize so that you accomplish what matters most, and try not to sweat the small stuff.
3. **Sleep.** It is next to impossible to cope with life's daily stressors without adequate sleep. Cortisol levels are naturally lowest while you sleep between midnight and 4am, so it's important to take advantage of this natural decrease. Ideally, go to bed by 10pm and to get at least 8 hours of sleep per night.
4. **Healthy Diet.** Eating fresh and delicious whole foods, rather than overly processed fast foods provides your body with the nutrients to be more resilient to stressors. It is also important to limit your caffeine intake since caffeine commonly causes nervousness, irritability, headaches, insomnia and digestive problems. As well, make sure to eat your meals in a relaxed environment. Digestive processes are disrupted when you eat while feeling stressed and this may lead to gas, bloating, diarrhea or constipation.

5. **Exercise** is the perfect preventative medicine as it normalizes levels of cortisol and blood sugar. People who exercise experience less fatigue, depression and anxiety, while they have an improved ability to cope with stressful life situations.
6. **Healing Support.** It may be helpful to support your body with specific nutrients or herbs while you're feeling stressed. As well, counselling, acupuncture and massage therapies are very helpful to induce relaxation. These treatments can treat stress-related illnesses as well as give you the energy and motivation to make the necessary life changes to manage your stress effectively.



Remember that stress occurs when you believe that you're unable to cope with a threat. Stress begins with your appraisal of a situation and whether or not you perceive it as stressful.

Since we all tend to have reflex reactions to these daily stressors, the key is to be mindful of your appraisal and to assess the situation consciously. By being cognizant of how you *choose to respond* to such situations, you can positively change how stress affects you.

So the next time you feel like you're being pulled in a million directions at once, pause to take a deep breath and ask yourself, "how do I want to react?"

To learn more about how to better manage your stress, join us for a **free public lecture**.

Everyone is welcome to attend!

Tuesday May 6th, 6:30-7:30pm
Comfort Inn, 15 Charles Street East
Please RSVP @ 416 944 9186