

# Anxious about stress? Calming the beast.



Health Matters

By Kerry Sauser

Stress. Anxiety. Nerves. We may call it by different names, but we all experience stress in some way or another, and we certainly can't help hearing about it these days. Stress is discussed daily in the news, but is there really any reason to worry about it? After all, none of us can make stress disappear from our lives, wish it to or not.

You might be surprised to learn that our reactions to stress are much more than the emotions we experience as the result of a frightening, threatening or dangerous situation. Stress triggers what is classically called the "fight or flight" response in the body. There was a time when we could either stand and confront danger or run away from it. (Think saber-tooth tiger days!) In response to that threat, our bodies would release hormones like adrenalin and cortisol—speeding the heart rate, slowing digestion, channeling blood to major muscle groups and changing many of our nervous system functions. These changes gave the body a boost of energy and strength to enable us to survive a threatening encounter. When the danger had passed, our bodies relaxed and returned to normal. For modern day threats (think angry boss, financial burdens, bad drivers), fight or flight is not appropriate, yet our body still physically prepares us just as if we were facing that saber-tooth tiger.

The experience of stress in itself is not bad, as long as one has a chance to recover from it. In fact, even good events cause stress, and sometimes stress is the extra

kick that allows us to accomplish important tasks. The real problem is, with more and more stress coming at us from every direction, we never get to "come down" from it. In such cases, the body cannot optimally perform "regular" functions like digestion, elimination, healing and sleep because it's still directing energy for a challenge. The initial effects may be minor, with symptoms like indigestion or a headache after an argument, but the long term effects are major, even debilitating. Chronic stress taxes nearly every part of the body, from decision making processes to bones, liver and cells. "You get headaches, your libido drops, your memory goes and you're excessively tired" says Dr. Roberta Lee, MD, author of *The SuperStress Solution*. Other serious health conditions influenced by stress include: depression, diabetes, hair loss, heart disease, hormone imbalances, hyperthyroidism, obesity, obsessive compulsive disorder, sexual dysfunction, sleep disorders, ulcers and cancers—to name a few. And, as for many chronic diseases, symptoms vary from person to person.

Luckily, there are many ways to deal with stress. First, determine if stress is adversely affecting your life. Seems simple, but when stress is chronic, a person can get to a point where they are not aware of it. It doesn't always feel bad and can be undetected. In addition, blood sugar imbalances and chronic inflammation are often hidden contributors to chronic stress, due to their role in triggering the release of cortisol, a major stress hormone.

You can quiz yourself to determine your stress level. Many quick assessments are found on the internet—try the simple one at [www.MayoClinic.com](http://www.MayoClinic.com) (search stress assessment). More importantly, if you think stress is affecting your health, have your cortisol levels checked. Cortisol tests are a common tool used to assess the level and type of stress experienced. For instance, low cortisol is

a sign of adrenal exhaustion or burnout. High cortisol indicates an acute stressor like chronic inflammation or a problem with lowering the stress response back to normal levels. Treatment is different for different types of stress, so it's important to have an informed diagnosis to help your practitioner recommend a proper approach.

Cortisol can be measured from blood, urine or saliva, but saliva testing is accurate and convenient. Samples are typically collected four times throughout a normal day: upon rising, mid-morning, mid-afternoon and before bed; results are compared to optimal cortisol levels. Several other stress hormones may also be tested from the saliva, including DHEA, melatonin, and sometimes testosterone and estrogens. Information about the additional hormones provides the practitioner even more thorough information for targeting treatment.

Lifestyle changes are critical in counteracting the negative impact of chronic stress. Treatments should address a combination of sleep habits, physical activity, diet, work, relationships, relaxation, and even approaches to finances. In the end, success is in the individual's hands. Small adjustments made in day to day habits will result in big health benefits.

Here are eight things you can do today to reduce the negative effects of stress on your life:

1. Eat regularly, especially breakfast, to keep blood sugar steady and digestive stress at bay. Include a bit of protein, add fiber and reduce sweets and fats.

2. Breathe. Deep breathing is one of the fastest and easiest ways to reduce stress. Pause and take three slow steady breaths at the top of each hour. You'll be

surprised at the difference it makes in your day.

3. Sleep at least seven hours a night. Reduce noise and distractions an hour before bedtime and maintain a regular sleep schedule.

4. Exercise moderately, and build it into your schedule. Stretch at your desk or park farther from the grocery store to get in some extra walking. Remember, you should feel rejuvenated, not exhausted after exercise.

5. Relax. Take an hour off to get a massage, take a walk in the park, read a good book or do something creative.

6. Recognize the things that are truly in your control, and forget the rest.

7. Take Control of your finances. Create a plan to stabilize your financial situation and stick with it.

8. Thank and Forgive. Gratitude and forgiveness are truly therapeutic. They have been proven to calm the parasympathetic nervous system—and positively impact electromagnetic heart impulses.

Most importantly, make sure whatever you do to offset stress feels good, because happiness is the best de-stressor of all!

Until next month...Heal well, Be well...naturally!

K.S.

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