

Don't Stress Out—Stay Healthy and Bright This Holiday Season

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The holidays are upon us and for many this perennially “festive” time of year can also be the most stressful time of year. Stress is generally perceived as negative, but in fact acute stress can be quite positive in healthy doses. Stress can energize, exhilarate, promote creativity, and help to motivate. However, when it gets out of control and becomes chronic it can have a profound impact on our health—physical and mental.



Since stress is not a commodity, we cannot give it nor can it be given to us by someone else. We conjure and create our own stress reactions, based on our approach to life, our past experiences and the convictions we hold. Like a finger print, our stressors are individual. The good news is that because we are the authors of our own stress, we can also edit and delete, or, at the very least, condense it.

What Happens To Us When We Feel Stressed?

Our bodies are constantly trying to keep a balance or “homeostasis” when a physical or mental event threatens this balance we react to it and the process of “fight or flight” begins. Although this primitive and automatic response was helpful when we fought saber tooth tigers, we no longer need it, nonetheless, it still occurs even if the threat is only perceived, like a deadline or a traffic jam.

When the fight or flight process takes over, adrenalin is secreted and a series of physiological events occur to prepare our bodies to either stay and fight or flee the situation. This surge of adrenalin causes our thoughts to become fragmented and scattered and our concentration is broken. The adrenalin also increases our heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and breathing. Recent studies reveal that chronic stress manifests an increase in clotting factors, most likely to protect us in case we bleed from the fight with that “holiday stress” saber tooth tiger. As well, studies show chronic stress can disrupt fat and sugar metabolism, potentially leading to cholesterol and diabetes problems down the road.

How to Reverse the Negative Effects of Stress

The good news is that since our body is always trying to achieve balance it has the ability to negate the fight or flight process by initiating the relaxation response. The relaxation response immediately lowers blood pressure, pulse, respirations and muscle tension and reverses the other deleterious changes that stress can cause. The best part is we can initiate the relaxation response at will anytime we want to decrease our stress level.

A significant number of studies have proven that by turning on the relaxation response through simple exercises such as controlled breathing, mindfulness activities and relaxation techniques, we can turn off the negative health effects of stress. See also:

<http://www.massgeneral.org/news/releases/070208benson.html>.

Daily Relaxation Response Strategies

Make a plan to practice two or three of the following relaxation response strategies each day. Simply put, you cannot be relaxed and stressed at the same time!

If you have 15 minutes:

Practice reframing skills by asking yourself:

1. What is really happening?
2. Why am I threatened by it?
3. What impact will it have on me in an hour, a day, a month or year?
4. What can I do to make the situation a positive challenge?
5. Can I break it down into workable segments?
6. What resources can I tap into to help me?

If you have 10 minutes:

- Take a slow walk and pay attention to the sights and sounds and the weather around you with each step. Mind your breathing pattern and try to walk as slowly as possible.
- Sit comfortably in a chair or, if possible, lie down. Slowly inhale for a count of four and hold for one second then exhale for a count of four. As you breathe, try to make your lungs fully inflate and focus on having your belly rise with your breathing instead of your chest. Think “calm in” and “negative out”
- Stand up and do a series of stretches from head to toe. Try some of these desk side exercises from Intel: <http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ihtIH/WSIHW000/7165/8254.html> to use every day.

If you have five minutes:

- Set your timer for five minutes. Then, focus on a place or a time when you felt totally comfortable and at ease. Close your eyes and conjure up every detail of the place, the way it looks, the sights, sounds, smells. Paint each detail in your mind's eye and while doing so breathe deeply.
- Systematically tense and relax each muscle in your body starting at your toes and moving upward.
- Color a mandala: http://www.coloringcastle.com/mandala_coloring_pages.html

If you have only one minute:

- Look out of a window and trace the shape and every detail of a tree, bush or building with your finger. It helps to close one eye to focus on the object.
- This works best with a small piece of fruit or a raisin. Put the food in your mouth and chew it very slowly to make it last for a minute. Focus your thoughts on how the consistency of the food changes with each chew and the different layers of flavor that you taste.

The more you practice these strategies, the more in control of your stress you will feel!

More Stress Management Resources:

Stress, depression and the holidays--12 tips for coping
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress/MH00030>

Tips for Reducing Holiday Stress

<http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/features/tips-for-reducing-holiday-stress>

Ten Relaxation Techniques to Reduce Stress on the Spot

<http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/features/blissing-out-10-relaxation-techniques-reduce-stress-spot>

Self test - Resilience: Build skills to endure hardship

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078>

Positive Thinking: Practice this stress management tip

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/positive-thinking/SR00009>

Reduce, Prevent, and Cope With Stress

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm

Have a happy and healthy holiday!

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