

Quit stress, and live longer

Feeling stressed or overwhelmed? Learn to relax, for an easier, extended life, writes naturopath Caroline Robertson.

DR Deepak Chopra says, “Stress is the perception of a physical or psychological threat,” with perception being the key word. Some make mountains out of molehills while others make molehills out of mountains. I recall being in a broken-down car with two friends. One was a pessimistic catastrophiser, the other a hopeful optimist. Negative Nelly got so stressed she started having chest pains, while my rose-coloured chum viewed the calamity as a comedy and laughed till road assistance saved the day.

A recipe to raise stress in a situation like this is to think of it as permanent, damaging, embarrassing, someone’s fault, and unresolvable, which all cause tense muscles, raised blood pressure, lowered immunity, shallow breathing, and increased adrenalin and cortisol, leaving us exhausted and accelerating ageing. One key to diffuse stress in such a situation is to shift our perspective:

when we focus on solutions and support, stress is no longer unsurmountable, and seeing things as ‘temporary teachers’ empowers us to persevere through problems to possibilities. Considering 99 percent of things we stress about never happen - and when they do, we handle them - why worry? Worry wastes energy and robs us of pleasure in the present.

Steps to serenity

Short-term stress speeds up our heart rate, hormone secretion, respiration rate, and circulation so we can cope with challenges. Long-term stress depletes our reserves, causing a depressed, defeated state called adrenal fatigue. Scientists recently discovered that constant anxiety ages us by lowering levels of klotho, a hormone that regulates lifespan. Klotho also strengthens arteries, protects against cognitive decline, and improves bone density. Excess stress contributes to aches, anxiety, autoimmune disease, confusion, depression, diabetes, dry mouth, fatigue, teeth grinding,

headaches, heartburn, IBS, insomnia, irritability, low libido, metabolic syndrome, muscle tightness, palpitations, poor concentration, skin issues, sweaty palms, rapid breathing, and shakiness.

Long-term stress contributes to premature ageing, diabetes, ulcers, osteoporosis, and heart disease. Stress also increases inflammation, which is a risk factor for asthma, bronchitis, immune dysfunction, cancer and infections. Most importantly, stress increases wrinkles! Psychological effects of stress can be addictions, aggression, anxiety, insomnia, guilt, depression, confusion, poor concentration, memory loss, apathy, and panic attacks. We can't avoid stress, but we can adapt to it by maintaining physical balance and a positive perspective.

Timing Manage your time by clarifying your priorities and timetable. Prepare in advance to avoid last minute rushing. Reduce responsibilities or enlist assistance if you're experiencing overload. Release unreasonable expectations of yourself and make your goal to be happy rather than hectic.

Mindful movements NLP experts estimate that we spend only about 1% of our time in present consciousness. Bring your awareness to now by noticing any tension in your body. What is your posture like? Be present by smelling, touching, tasting, hearing, and inhaling deeply. When anxiety arises, try slowly inhaling "I'm" and exhaling "OK."

Meditation vacation The mind races at an exhausting rate. Take a mental break with a meditation method of your choice. Those with a hyperactive 'monkey mind' find guided meditations anchor their awareness. Allocate at least 10 minutes daily to unwind your mind and body.

Time out Over-thinking things makes them worse. Take time out from the quandary to face it with a fresh outlook. Pursue a pleasure - art, music, massage, socialising, dancing, sport or a movie.

Smile: Smiling signals happy healing hormones and balances blood pressure. Visualise anything or anyone that makes you smile. Lift your lips in a gentle smile and send that through your body like a healing stream. Just as others respond to our loving smile, our cells soak up smiling rays, reinforcing relaxed neural pathways.

Nature's nurse The pace of nature is patience and her tone is tolerance. Soak up the energising elements of soil, sea, and sky to clear your mind and invigorate your body.

Find your Zen zone Create a quiet, serene space at home which nurtures and renews you. At least make your bedroom a dark, quiet, warm haven, filled with relaxing scents and free from electromagnetic stimulation.

Meet your needs Khalil Gibran said, "Your friend is your needs answered." Stress is your body saying it needs attention. Maybe you need rest, exercise, healthy food, silence, stillness, solitude or laughter. Ask yourself, "What do I need now?" and gift it to yourself.

Do things differently If you find certain tasks, people and situations stressful, think of ways to make them more enjoyable or minimise those stresses. Literally blow people's negativity back at them if you find you absorb their energy.

Free hugs The 'cuddle hormone' oxytocin is released with a 20-second hug. This reduces the effects of stress, including high blood pressure and heart rate.

Reduce stress stimulants Tobacco, caffeine, guarana, alcohol, and sugar all increase cortisol and adrenalin, raising stress levels. Have a natural high with cordyceps mushroom coffee, ginseng, rhodiola, withania, or liquorice: these adaptogenic herbs ease stress and instil calm and clarity. ✨

✿ Back yourself

* When you say bad things about yourself, counter them with encouraging self-talk. Right now, think of three great qualities you have and three achievements.

The more you focus on your qualities, the more they magnify.

* When worried ask yourself, "Am I alright now?" and "Will this bother me on my deathbed?" Encourage yourself with phrases like, "I'm doing well" or "It'll work out." Remember things you've survived and thrived through. Be grateful for your lessons.

* Releasing stress through activity, art, crying, or communicating can be an immense relief. If you can't find an empathetic ear, talk to qualified counsellors on free help lines such as Lifeline on 131 114 or Beyondblue on 1300 22 4636.

✿ Take a chill pill

Bush Flower Emergency Essence and Bach Flower Rescue Remedy are psychological saviours.

Lavender essential oil calms like a long bath. Increase supplements that stress compromise, including B-complex, vitamins A, C, and E, manganese, magnesium, and zinc. GABA helps shift gear from chaos to calm.

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