



Stressed Out! Manage it Better

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Hello

Too much stress is not good for you. Now I hear you saying, "Well duh Penny, I know that". But sometimes I have to wonder. Being overstressed seems to have almost become a status symbol. Somehow having too much stress in our lives is seen as evidence that we are hard-working, decent, and ambitious people. "So how are you doing?" "I am so stressed with my job and the children, and my other commitments, you know."

Note that I said too much stress. Some stress is good for you. Even moments of extreme stress may not be harmful. Our bodies are designed to deal with short periods of high stress. Think of Fred Flintstone encountering a sabre-toothed tiger. When you experience a moment of intense stress which is over after a short period, your body will release stress hormones adrenaline, norepinephrine and cortisol and prepare you for fight or flight. Once the stressor is out of the way your body can go back to normal. The problem is that for most people who say they are stressed, it is on-going stress. It is the kind of stress that does not go away after a short period of time. It is day after day after day stress, and that is the kind that are bodies are not so good at dealing with unless we actively plan ways to manage it.

Too much stress occurs when we perceive the demands of our situation exceed our resources available to cope with the situation.

1. Stress is based on perception. If you think you don't have sufficient resources, you will become stressed. It is not about what you do have in reality, it is about what you perceive you have at your disposal.
2. Stress and anxiety are not the same thing although they can be very much interrelated. Stress is overload - too much to cope with. Anxiety usually has its roots in more primal fears and typically can be traced back to biology and/or arrested developmental processes. Managing stress is important if you are anxious, but you may need more than just stress management techniques if your anxiety is disabling.
3. Both stress and anxiety are useful. If you never got stressed or never got anxious something would be wrong with you. You would probably end up dead because we need certain amounts of both to avoid danger and stay alive. Herein lies the challenge. You cannot eradicate them (nor would you want to). You need to manage them. You need enough stress in your life to be a well-functioning human being in the different areas of your life, but not so much that you become overwhelmed and function below par.
4. Too much stress precipitates the appearance of underlying mental and physical health problems. If you are stressed and you have a predisposition to an illness, then the stress is likely to bring out the illness.



How to recognise if you are over-stressed

Many of the symptoms stem from the impact of an excess of stress hormones in the body and the diversion of oxygen and glucose towards the muscles (and away from other parts of the body) to prepare you for fight or flight.

1. You are losing it. You snap at people, you struggle to control your temper, you burst into tears easily.
2. You feel light-headed. When you are stressed blood is diverted to the muscles so you can fight or flee.

3. You breathe more quickly. Your muscles need more oxygen so they can function fully, and that means more oxygen in your body which you get by breathing faster.
4. You can't sleep. A chemical process leads to us falling asleep every night. The high secretion of stress hormones interferes with this.
5. You get skin irritations, eczema or rashes.
6. You sweat a lot to keep your body temperature even while your heart and lungs are working extra hard.
7. Your vision blurs and you may get migraines.
8. You get frequent infections. One of the systems to suffer in times of stress is the immune system.
9. Your drinking and eating habits are getting worse.
10. Nothing is fun in your life any more.

Actions

Ideally you want to manage things before you become so stressed out you lose the plot. Which means the best course of action is to proactively put stress management plans in place. Make a habit of spending at least 30 minutes 3 times a week to prevent stress from getting the better of you. You can do a combination of the following depending on what works for you and what you like doing.



1. Reduce demands and/or increase resources. If stress arises from the perception that demands exceed resources then reduce your demands and/or increase your resources. Find someone to help you clean the house. Delegate work. Get an assistant. Say no. Get rid of people and activities that sap your energy. Set personal boundaries if you need to. A lot of stress can be managed by being more assertive.
2. Take better care of your body and find a way to release the excess stress hormones (such as through exercising). Eat well, sleep, take holidays, exercise, and breathe deeply.
3. Find support - personal and professional - in the form of friends, support groups. If you need professional advice then get it.
4. Manage your thinking. Make use of affirmations, visualisations, meditation, and guided imagery. You can purchase or get someone to make you CD's that help you relax and manage your thoughts. Plan to use some of these methods a few times a week for 15 - 30 minutes. Be very mindful of the things you are saying to yourself and others that could exacerbate your stress.
5. Learn to invoke the relaxation response. The relaxation response is a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress and is the opposite of the fight or flight response. See more www.relaxationresponse.org
6. Take time every week to do something you love to do - be it pampering sessions at a spa, listening to music, being in nature, attending the theatre, riding bikes, reading, playing sports, etc. Do not include slouching on the sofa in front of the TV. That is not really relaxing as the screen affects you and you want to get into a different environment.

More work you say? Remember that the better you are at managing stress the more demands you can handle. You can do more and achieve more. That means more time to spend on things you really want to do, and that means more life in your life. If you are under-stressed(?) - then get out there and do more things.