

# SELF CARE AND STRESS REDUCTION



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## CARING FOR OURSELVES AND FINDING WAYS TO HANDLE OUR STRESSES ARE CLEARLY IMPORTANT PRACTICES FOR ASSURING OUR LONG-TERM HEALTH.

They are definitely key aspects of Preventive Medicine. Along With the right nutrition and exercise programs for our body, getting proper sleep, and maintaining a positive attitude toward our self, others, and the world. Learning the individual lifestyle path that generates health rather than disease is really the finest art of medicine and personal development, and an extremely important process in which to invest. Let's look at ways to protect our body and heart from the negative effects of stress and to create better health.

### A self-inventory

One of the first steps in stress reduction is an honest inventory of where we are. Ask yourself:

- What is my biggest life challenge now?
- Is anything very out of balance in my life? If so, what is upsetting me?
- Why don't I feel fully relaxed, happy, and able to sleep well?
- What do I need to do to restore balance?
- Is there anything I can do something about?

### For most of us, the key life challenges are in areas of:

1. Health—how we care for ourselves and the result we hu-manifest,

2. Career—what we share with the world and the support that is returned, and
3. Relationships—how we give and receive love.

If we can master these three primary areas of life, some might say we're near enlightenment.

### Expectations

One of the sources of stress is inner tension between what we expect of ourselves and what actually happens. Often these expectations are quite unconscious. It's important to identify unspoken expectations or attachments. Sometimes we need to work a little harder to bring reality in line with our expectations—and to really go for our dream.

### Letting Go

At other times, we need to develop more detachment to let go of counter-productive thoughts or desires. In this effort, a meditation practice can be very valuable. All the major religions of the world include some type of meditation or prayer. Your practice can be aligned with your spiritual beliefs.

### Types of Stress (adapted from the *Anti-Stress Program of Staying Healthy with Nutrition* textbook)

Stress comes in many forms. For example, many of us are surprised to learn that intense joy is a source of stress, but since it requires more of our body and mind, it genuinely qualifies

as stress (with an increased heart rate and the manufacture of certain neurotransmitters, such as adrenaline). Exercise can also be a stressor even though it is great for us. This is because of the repetitive movement in certain areas of the body, and because we create and release more free radicals and toxins into the blood and tissues. This biochemical process can best be handled by being sure you drink enough water and take antioxidant nutrients, such as vitamins A and C. According to researchers on stress, the most optimal combination for vitamin C is to pair it with the bioflavonoid, quercetin.

The various types of stress and some of the factors that contribute to them include:

- **Mental**—high responsibility; financial or career pressures; working long hours at mental tasks, perfectionism, anxiety, and worry
- **Emotional**—attitude toward self; issues or imbalances in our relationships; anger, fear, frustration, sadness, betrayal, and bereavement
- **Psycho-Spiritual**—issues of life goals; spiritual alignment, imbalance, or lack of spiritual nurturing; general state of contentment
- **Physical**—exercise and physical labor; pregnancy and giving birth; developmental or life changes (adolescence, menopause, and aging)
- **Traumatic**—infection, injury, burns, surgery, and extreme weather and temperatures
- **Biochemical**—deficiencies of vitamins, minerals, specific amino acids, protein, or fats and fatty acids; food allergies; genetic errors in metabolism that can result in alcoholism, other addictions, or mental illness
- **Toxic**—environmental pollutants such as pesticides, cleaning solvents, and other toxins; non-organic foods with additives; and the use of chemicals such as prescription and OTC drugs, in cosmetic and hair products, and overuse/abuse of sugar, alcohol, caffeine, or nicotine

### What is Stress?

Please realize that stress is not dictated by situations or incidents themselves; rather, **real stress comes from the way we react to the issues of our lives.** For stress to negatively influence our health, we must experience something as danger. If we experience a threat as stress, we may go into fight-or-flight mode, which shifts us into the sympathetic (adrenaline) side of our nervous system. That means our body actually prepares to battle or run, i.e. "fight or flight." Our circulation slows and there may be greater muscle tension; our digestion slows down, heart rate goes up, and we begin using up important nutrients. Often immune function is affected—our level of T-cells may even be depressed. And clearly then, we are more prone to

become ill or "catch whatever's going around."

Sometimes there's no way around stress. For example, when a child falls on the playground, or we're putting out a fire, our body prepares us for the emergency so we can respond immediately. That's the way it should be as this level of response/reaction allows us to be more alert and ready for action.

But sometimes stress is subtler—and it may be more psychological or emotional. When there really is no physical danger, our body may still react as if there is. Then, if there's no physical activity to provide an outlet for the increased internal activity, the response may remain inward and play havoc with our physiology and organs, as well as with our emotions and our mind. At that point, we run the risk of exhausting the adrenal glands and flooding our body with metabolic toxins, such as damaging free radicals (associated with the aging process and diseases such as heart disease and cancer). This example also shows the reason why "a walk to cool down" really is a good idea.

When we're under emotional or mental stress, and still stay in a relaxed mode, we can respond more calmly and experience less emotional and biochemical wear-and-tear. Then our body doesn't shift into full battle mode and begin pouring out the chemical signals that we're in danger and must react. This relaxed approach usually leads to a better outcome as well.

### Anti-Stress Nutrients

Many anti-stress formulas are based on the B-complex vitamins and vitamin C because these important nutrients are all significantly depleted by stress. In addition, stress-related problems may be compounded by deficiencies resulting from generally poor nutrition. All of the B vitamins are important here—especially pantothenic acid (B5). B5, folic acid, and vitamin C are essential for the functioning of our adrenal glands. The adrenals carry perhaps the greatest load when our body is under stress.

The B-complex vitamins are ideally taken two or three times a day, particularly when we are under a lot of stress. This is especially important if the stress lasts over a period of months—for example from a big project at work or a challenging job, a chronically ill child or parent, unemployment, divorce—any of the life events that tend to deplete us over time. It's best to take the B-vitamins before dark so that we don't become over-stimulated when it's time to wind down and relax. I do suggest more minerals in the evening, as they tend to help with relaxation, especially a calcium and magnesium supplement. However, most vitamins and minerals are best assimilated if they're taken with a meal.

*Note:* Prolonged stress or lack of sleep can lead to a myriad of health problems. If these issues do not resolve with home treatment, you may need to see your doctor or other health professional. ■

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