

STRESS



MANAGEMENT

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One of the factors of life confronting modern corporate men and women is the constant presence of stress. For many, this stress causes medical and mental health problems, seriously reduces levels of happiness and fosters a loss of work productivity. And—in the worse cases—stress kills.

Why—in an age where we have more material possessions and freedom from basic wants of food, shelter and physical survival—should stress levels be rising rather than falling, negatively impacting people and contributing to lower productivity, less happiness and ill health?

LET'S TALK ABOUT STRESS

Did you know that the human body is actually built to *profit* from stress?

Faced with danger, primitive man had two choices: to fight or to flee. In both responses, stress was a survival enhancer. Confronted with danger, the body responds by pumping adrenaline into the blood stream, which in turn speeds the heart rate, making more oxygen available for use by the muscles and enhancing the body's ability to turn fuel into energy. The result is an ability to run faster, lift more weight, fight harder, endure longer—all necessary enhancements which enabled primitive man to fight and win or to run and survive (to be able to fight another day).

This mechanism has worked just fine for most of the span of time during which humankind has inhabited the planet. It has been absolutely essential to the survival of our species, enabling our kind to successfully compete with bigger, faster and stronger competitors than we would have had we not been stressed.

STRESS IN MODERN TIMES

In modern times, however, humans have substantially less risk of being challenged by wild animals or even being attacked by our own kind. The social structures we have created and live in protect us from most of these life-threatening confrontations. It seems, therefore, that we shouldn't need to be as stressed—and we should much less need to initiate our stress responses.

Modern society, however, has created new stress inducers—and these are insidious because these stresses are relentless and often do not ever go away!

Think about it: there is not much fun to be had in being chased by a tiger who wants you for dinner—but when the tiger goes away, so does the cause of stress, and you can calm down. The adrenaline is no longer coursing through you.

Now take modern man confronted by stress at work; this stress may be caused by unceasing workload, difficult corporate policies and a relentless boss. It could be the case that the stress begins at waking in anticipation of the day ahead, continues during the car drive or other rush to work, further continues during a difficult day with many demands, continues again during a difficult commute home (where family challenges may cause different kinds of stress) and then you go to bed...only to start the process all over again the following day. Relentless, unending stress—day after day. It's no wonder then that some people develop coping mechanisms as a response: some drink, some take drugs, some overeat or eat too much sugar and fat.

Modern stress involves the same constant adrenaline coursing through the body, with the body always ready to fight or flee. But

Make a list of
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at the same time, the person impacted is sitting in an office, *unable* to fight or to flee. Under these circumstances, the stress-induced adrenaline—which was so helpful to the survival of primitive man—now causes the body to burn itself out sooner than should be the case. And, as mentioned earlier, stress can kill.

So, what are we to do? Are we doomed to this cycle? Will we all die younger?

RECOGNIZING STRESS FACTORS AND HABITS

Fortunately, there are ways to adapt and deal with stress, reduce its impact and even lower the amount of stress in life. Doing so can help you become more at peace within this new modern, corporate environment.

The first step is to figure out where you are and what your sources of stress are. Everyone is different (which is profoundly good, as the alternative would be very boring and unexciting!) Know yourself. Know your environment. What makes you happy? Angry? Sad? Stressed? Recognize and make a list of what you are doing that is healthy and unhealthy.

Once you know what makes you happy and what makes you stressed, how about trying to reengineer your life to reduce the stress sources and increase the things that make you happy?

Fat chance, you say? Don't be too quick here! Small changes incrementally and sequentially implemented can have a cumulative effect and make a big difference. A healthy lifestyle can start with one less cigarette a day, one fewer candy bar, a healthier lunch or dinner choice, substituting a glass of wine for a cocktail, using the stairs daily, and so on. You might consider doing 20 minutes of exercise, listening to relaxing piece of music daily for 15 minutes, buying yourself a pet—or even buying a convertible sports car and driving with the top down and music loud!

IMPLEMENTING CHANGES

Once you make this analysis and develop the subsequent changes you want to implement, start the process of implementing healthier choices in your life style. If you have difficulty doing the analysis, consider doing so in a peer group setting or among a circle of friends. You may also consider getting professional coaching or mentoring advice. While many people find they can figure this out on their own, many feel so trapped in their circumstances that they do not know even know where to start; hence, they need professional one-on-one coaching and mentoring support to bring about the needed changes.

Since I am writing this article, and have some experience with this, let me impart some advice on undertaking a course of changes that will help. The next pages offer suggestions for a stress reduction change regime, along with a mantra on which I base my life.

Make yourself stress resistant. Be happy. Live long and prosper!

Find a good
cause.

Take time to
meditate.

Stay
well-
hydrated.



Photos: Anita Dore

Suggestions for a Stress Reduction Change Regime*

- If you take recreational drugs, drink in excess or smoke at all, stop!
- Consider exercising daily for 20-30 minutes. Aerobic exercise, when properly done, releases endorphins that make you feel happy. Raise your heart rate to the point where you have difficulty talking, and maintain this pace by walking, jogging, stair climbing, bicycling, etc., for a minimum of 20 minutes daily, or at least several times spread out through the week.
- Consider weight training exercise to increase your muscle mass. Lifting light weights for three sets, doing 30-50 reps at a time, once every two to three days helps build muscle mass.
- Undertake a hobby, learn a language or musical instrument or do something you enjoy that takes your mind off work for one hour every day during the work week and even on weekends.
- Reduce your consumption of sugar—consider using a sugar substitute if you need the extra sweetness.
- Limit your intake of high-fat, high-sugar desserts.
- Take 15 minutes to meditate, stretch, perform tai chi or yoga, practice deep breathing or at least actively daydream.
- Stay well-hydrated: drink water often every day, and do your best to eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- Find a good cause which contributes to a better world and make a contribution of time and resources weekly.
- Read daily—and read widely to stay informed about current events, cultures, ideas.
- If the causes of stress are unacceptably high, develop and implement a plan to find a new job, partner, etc.

** It is strongly recommended that you check with your doctor before starting any exercise program.*

Read daily.

*Be at
peace with
yourself...*

*...and the
world around
you.*

A Daily Mantra

For today:

I will try to be the very best person I can be.

I will show kindness and understanding to those around me.

I will give help to those I can help.

I will forgive others (and myself).

I will not be afraid.

I will not be angry.

I will give thanks.

I will be happy, with myself and others.

I will be at peace with myself and with the world around me.

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