

NEW-LIFESTYLES STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOUSM STRESS MANAGEMENT FACTS

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In today's multi-tasking, fast-paced world, stress has graduated from a mere buzz word to an accepted part of our daily lives. We can't open a newspaper or magazine without seeing something written about stress and its effect on our health and wellbeing.

While a few individuals have learned to thrive in our stress-induced culture, most of us have not. We are stressed out, worn out and (most of the time) not happy about it.

What is stress?

Stress in many situations is not a bad thing. It is one of our body's natural biological reactions to a threatening situation. The stress response, also known as the "fight or flight" reaction, is caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. During a stress reaction, the pituitary gland sends off an alarm to the adrenal glands signaling them to release hormones like adrenaline into the body. These hormones help to focus our concentration and increase our response time, agility and strength—in essence, preparing us to fight or flee a dangerous situation. After the perceived threat dissipates, hormone levels and other biological processes return to normal.

In this way, the stress response is designed to help us escape a burning building—not to constantly adapt to changes in daily life. The stress response becomes harmful to the body and can cause physical symptoms when it

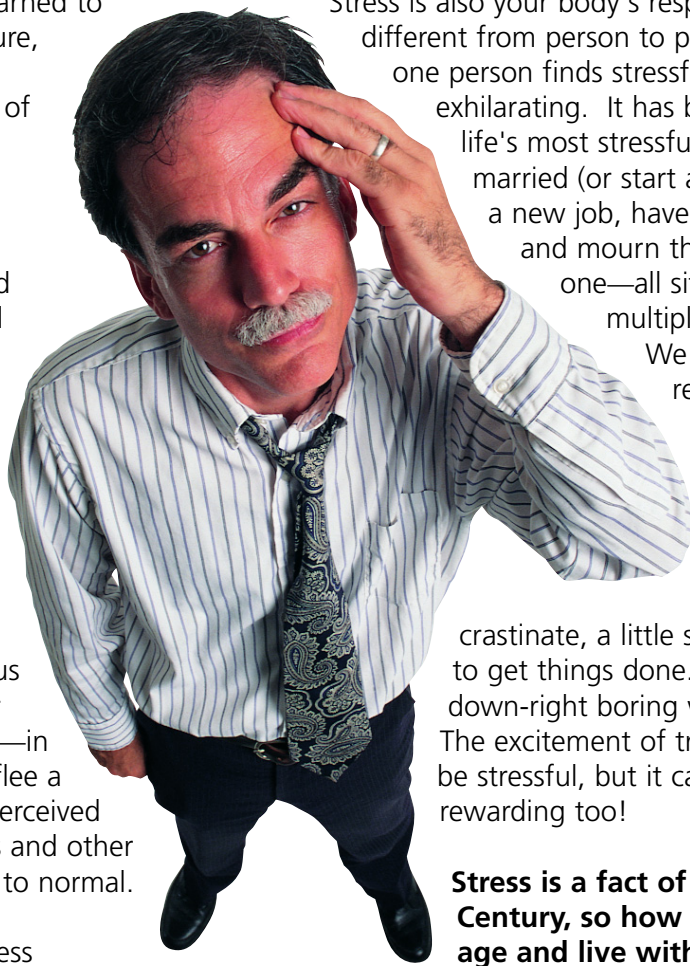
goes on for too long. If the anxiety and pent-up energy caused by the stress response isn't released, stressful situations start to pile up on one another and your body has no time to recover. This long-term activation of the stress-response system can disrupt almost all your body's processes, increasing your risk of obesity, insomnia, stomach complaints, rashes, headaches, heart disease, stroke and depression.

Stress is also your body's response to change. It's different from person to person—a situation that one person finds stressful, another may find exhilarating. It has been said that some of life's most stressful times are when we get married (or start a new relationship), start a new job, have a baby, buy a house and mourn the death of a loved one—all situations that involve multiple, complex changes. We experience stress as we readjust our lives and accept new challenges.

Stress may have a bad reputation, but not all stress is bad. With our human tendency to procrastinate, a little stress helps motivate us to get things done. Life would be dull and down-right boring without some stress. The excitement of trying something new can be stressful, but it can be tremendously rewarding too!

Stress is a fact of life in the 21st Century, so how do we learn to manage and live with stress?

Since stress is unavoidable, it is important that we arm ourselves with techniques and strategies to manage and reduce the amount of stress in our lives. Here are some healthy, positive approaches to minimizing the negative effects of stress.



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Try to recognize when you are feeling stress and take note of the situation and the source.

It goes without saying that the easiest way to manage stress is to find and address the source. Is there something you can do to eliminate, change or reduce the stressor? Of course, this is not always possible—or easy. In many situations, you should try to recognize what you can change and what you must accept. You will find that many times the only thing you can change about the stressor is your reaction.

Shift your outlook and change your reaction to the stressor.

If you are someone who sees the glass as half empty, try adapting your attitude to seeing the glass as half full. A positive approach will help you to stay light and keep your spirits high when life's storms are threatening on the horizon. Developing realistic expectations is also key in reducing stress before it strikes—not always expecting life to go as planned will help you to calmly roll with the punches.

What is cognitive reframing?

Cognitive reframing is a technique used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to help an individual gain a different, more positive perspective. It involves changing the meanings placed on events so that more reasonable emotional reactions and behaviors follow. Instead of taking a negative approach to understanding a situation, you modify the way you look at it. For example, instead of seeing the break up of a relationship as a personal failure (and a big stressor), you would start to look at the break up situation as a positive learning experience.

Exercise is often the best medicine. Being physically active can help you to prevent stress and to get rid of it by expending pent-up energy and anxiety brought on by the stress response. Getting in better shape will help you feel better overall, as physical activity benefits both the body and the mind.

Learn techniques to relax. Meditation, yoga and tai chi are great ways to learn to focus your mind and to block out all of the outside intrusions causing stress in your day. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and guided imagery are also excellent ways to relax and manage stress. Progressive muscle relaxation involves systematically tensing muscle groups one at a time and then relaxing them. Guided imagery is a visualization technique in which you practice deep breathing while closing your eyes and visualizing a peaceful, relaxing place or scenario.

Some other great ways to reduce or manage stress include:

Limiting caffeine intake

Owning a pet

Taking leisure time for yourself

Laughing aloud until your sides hurt

Listening to your favorite music

Writing or journaling to express pent-up emotions

Getting organized to reduce unnecessary clutter

Improving time-management skills and learning to prioritize things that demand your attention while putting the "other things" aside

Learning to say "no" in order to prevent over-committing and over-extending yourself

Getting a good night's sleep

Eating well-balanced, nutritious meals

Developing a support group of friends and family



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