

Taking Stress Seriously

IT IS ALMOST UN-AMERICAN to take stress seriously. While we have accepted the importance of controlling blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, diet, smoking and activity level, we are slower to admit that stress could really be a problem.

But stress can be a problem, especially when it settles into our daily lives as chronic, uncontrollable, overwhelming overload. Feelings of anger and depression can be especially damaging. The problems created by too much stress are not "all in your mind." The physical changes that occur in your body when stress becomes chronic are just as real as the changes caused by smoking or a high-fat diet.

How much stress is "too much"?

How much stress is "too much" depends upon your point of view. As Hans Selye, one of the early stress scientists, observed, "We all boil at different degrees." Too much stress for your friend might be an interesting and stimulating life for you, or vice versa.

Stress is not only about what is happening in your life, although that is certainly very important. The impact that stress has on your health is also a function of your perception— what's happening in your mind. For example, you may get anxious or angry about something that may never have happened, but the stress of that anger is very real. So are the muscle tension, digestive problems and chest pain that the anger produces. Or you may perceive a problem in ways that make you more stressed than necessary.

We really can't say how much stress is too much for any given individual. We do know that feelings of anger, hostility and despair can be harmful, so the less of these in your life, the better. Replacing them with humor, optimism and a spiritual outlook will improve your quality of life, and probably your long-term health as well.

Is tension also bad for me?

Some individuals may not feel much anger or depression, but they can still be overloaded and often feel overwhelmed, which can cause tightness while breathing. This sense of tension is bad for your health too.

Chronic stress means your body is in a constant state of arousal from the

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fight-or-flight response that gears you up to respond to an emergency. This fight-or-flight response is very useful when you need to rescue a child in danger, run to catch a bus or deliver a brilliant presentation. Our problem now is that nature never intended this adaptive response to stay turned on for more than short periods. Once the emergency is over, we need to gradually unwind and recover to an unstressed state.

How can I relax?

What's the best way to get yourself to relax? Balance is the issue. Stress does not appear to be harmful to your health as long as your body has some time each day to recover. Learning to provide a balance will greatly reduce the toll it takes on your health.

The first step in reducing stress is to figure out what is causing stress in your life and do whatever you can to address those issues. A stress-management workshop or seminar might help you learn how to change the way you respond to stress.

Lifestyle is equally important. Get enough sleep, eat well, and eliminate or reduce stress-provoking chemicals such as caffeine, nicotine and alcohol.

Make time for healthy pleasures, such as a hobby, a hot bath or a good movie. Spend time with your friends and write about your stress in a diary.

Daily exercise is the best stress antidote available. Exercise reduces feelings of stress, helps you to relax and counteracts many of the negative health effects of stress.

Exercise improves mood and self-confidence, and helps turn those stress mountains back into mole hills. **FM**

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