

# Coping with Stress



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Did you know that regularly practicing meditation can dramatically improve your health by removing the amount of stress you carry in your body? Our modern western lives can be fairly stressful. Most of us have jobs, families to take care of, homes to maintain, appointments to keep and finances to juggle and if we don't, the stress of unemployment, loneliness, boredom or homelessness are even worse!

If these simple functions of living a contemporary life are not enough to create stress, many people have what we might refer to as personal problems as well. These might include relationship difficulties, health issues, financial struggle, family problems and the list could go on and on. For many people, stress has come to be accepted as a normal part of everyday life.

Clinical research has proven that stress is a major contributor to poor health. When we are stressed our bodies are in the Fight-or-Flight response and many of our normal bodily functions are altered in anticipation of massive action (fighting or fleeing.) Because most of the stressful situations we encounter today do not require a physical response from us, we stay trapped in the Fight-or-Flight response for prolonged periods. This is what we perceive as being stressed out.

The Fight-or-Flight response is intended to give us a sudden burst of additional strength when we are presented with a dangerous or life threatening situation. As soon as a threat is perceived, the part of our brain known as the Hypothalamus releases a powerful chemical cocktail that rushes through our bodies, preparing us to either fight for our lives or run like the wind to escape the danger.

Adrenal secretions flush into the blood stream; Our heart beat speeds up, blood pressure increases and our pulse rate increases. We take in less oxygen and breathe faster (shallow breath.) Blood vessels dilate for increased blood flow to muscles. Blood and glucose rush to the muscles to provide additional strength. Our digestion slows down or ceases completely. The pores of our skin open up

and we begin to sweat (air-conditioning.) Sexual function ceases. There is an acceleration of instantaneous reflexes. Pupils dilate and the tear ducts stop producing tears, our vision becomes narrowed and our brain function becomes limited.

These are just a few things that happen in our bodies when we go into the Fight-or-Flight response. If we are ever faced with a wild animal to outrun, they will be most helpful in our survival! The problem is the Fight-or-Flight response is activated by perceived danger. That could mean a bill turning up in the mail, a traffic jam, a difficult client on the end of the phone or any number of other daily occurrences that do not require or even allow for an active physical response from us.

So while the Fight-or-Flight response is a healthy natural, short term state and a wonderful survival tool it is not a healthy state to be in long term. Because our modern lifestyles provide us with many challenges that we perceive as danger but require no physical response, we go into the Fight-or-Flight response often and stay there much longer than nature intended. This is where stress becomes unhealthy.

When you are stressed you may be aware of how your body feels. You may experience butterflies in your stomach, a prickly sensation on your skin, muscle tension (tensed like a coil and ready to spring into action!) You may get itchy eyes, perhaps you perspire and your heart may race. You may find your breathing is shallow and jagged and you may even have slightly blurred vision. This is because you are experiencing the Fight-or-Flight response.

When we remain in the Fight-or-Flight response for prolonged periods our bodies are unable to function in the way nature intended (in the relaxed response.) We are placed under stress...think on that word. It is an engineering term that means tension, pressure and strain.

After spending a while in the Fight-or-Flight response we start to experience health problems because the body is not being permitted to function correctly.

Some of these health issues include: vision and eye problems, weight problems, heart disease, alcohol and drug dependencies, anorexia, anxiety and panic disorders, asthma, allergies, skin diseases, cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic muscle pain, constipation, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome, depressed immune system, increased likelihood of colds and infection, depression and suicide, diabetes, difficulty maintaining sexual arousal, loss of libido, difficulty urinating, bladder infection, bladder disease...

Wait there is more! Erectile dysfunction; Fibromyalgia; Headaches (and migraines); Heart disease /heart attack; High blood pressure; High cholesterol; Hypertension; Joint Pain; Multiple Sclerosis; Muscle stiffness; Backaches and neck pain; Sleep disturbances; Stroke; Ulcers and digestive disorders.

These are just the dis-eases conventional medicine is now accepting to be caused through stress. It is by no means a comprehensive list!

It is also difficult to run your life effectively when you're trapped in the Fight-or-Flight response. Other than generally not being or feeling healthy, it also causes a lack of motivation or enthusiasm. It makes thinking clearly or laterally difficult and has you on the edge of your seat! Not great for relationships or creativity. Not good for anything really except running for your life or fighting for it.

When we eliminate the amount of stress we have in our lives we begin to experience better health and happier lives. It is simple.

Next, I am going to give you a list of very easy things you can do every day that will significantly reduce the amount of stress in your body and help you to be and feel a lot healthier and much happier very quickly!

Most people will discuss stress and depression as being a natural and normal part of human existence in our modern society. Few are even vaguely aware that while we have little control over the hectic pace of our world, we do have ultimate control over how stress affects us on an individual level.

When the prolonged effects of stress finally take their toll on mental and physical health, most people will seek help from their doctor and while many doctors are opening their minds to a wider variety of natural treatments like meditation, yoga, aromatherapy, etc...most visits to a G.P where stress, anxiety or depression are involved these days, will result in antidepressants being prescribed. In many cases antidepressants are the only treatment used, providing a band-aid solution

while the root of the problem is seldom addressed. From the perspective of long term holistic health, the use of antidepressants alone to treat stress related disorders inevitably leads to a wide range of ongoing and often catastrophic problems. Because the issues that are causing the stress do not magically go away and the patient does not learn the skills required to better manage stress in the long term.

There are many very effective, holistic ways to reduce the effects of stress in our lives. Two of the most obvious and easily accessible are meditation and exercise. Both disengage the Fight-or-Flight response and when used together will make a substantial difference to our health and happiness.

This does not necessarily mean you must sit in the lotus position and think nothing for twenty minutes every day, nor do you need to rush out and get a gym membership. Meditation and exercise can both be much more fun than that!

Movement meditation is a fantastic way to combine meditation with exercise. Giving you great mental, physical and spiritual benefits, as well as being fun and saving your precious time by multitasking.

Another wonderful side effect of practicing meditation to manage stress is that you not only reduce the amount of stress in your body (and your mind) at the time you are meditating but you are also training your brain to be calmer and therefore you will have a greater capacity for handling potentially stressful situations before you actually become stressed.

Two great movement meditations are walking meditation and dance meditation. They are both pretty much exactly as they sound. To practice walking meditation, simply go for a brisk walk.

While you are walking try to focus your mind on the moment (Zen...the NOW) notice your surroundings; the trees, the birds, the flowers. Tune in to your senses and notice the smells, sounds, colour, the light and shadows.

Each time your mind wanders into thoughts outside of the moment (the past or the future) just gently bring it back to the experience you are having right in that moment. You can also use your walking meditation to focus your mind only on the things you are grateful for or practice a mantra or repeat positive affirmations over and over again as you walk. As long as your mind is focused and you are in the now, you are meditating.

While you practice positive affirmations or gratitude as you walk, you are also getting another bonus! You are actively reprogramming your mind to focus on positives and as the brain loves habit, you will find this positive way of thinking will start to infiltrate your mind at other times when you are not consciously trying to focus. It is of course essential to ensure your walking meditations are done in a safe place. You don't need to be contending with traffic or other dangers, so a park, beach or walking track are perfect natural meditation places.

Other walking meditations include focusing on your breath as you walk...observing the air as it enters, fills and leaves your lungs or focusing your attention on your feet as they step, touching the earth and lifting back up into the air again. Dance meditation is similar except you do it at home in the privacy of your lounge room or bedroom, crank up your favourite music and dance! It is naturally difficult to think outside of the moment while you are dancing. Allow yourself to become completely lost in the music. Let your body move any way the music takes it.

You can also use mantras, affirmations, chants or gratitude to help focus and develop a more positive mind set. So go ahead, dance like no one is watching!

Namaste  
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