



“Stress Busters” Can Clear Your Mind and Ease Pressure on Your Heart

If you're experiencing stress, it's important to identify your stressors and learn how to respond to them.

We all experience stress at some time in our lives, triggered by everything from financial worries and interpersonal conflicts to job and family demands. If left untreated, chronic stress can have debilitating effects on our health and our overall quality of life.

But despite the sometimes overwhelming nature of stress, it can be a manageable condition, often with just some positive lifestyle changes, says Susan Evans, PhD, a professor of psychology in the Weill Cornell Medical Center's Department of Psychiatry. “Stress is often accompanied by the perception that we don't have the resources to handle these pressures,” she explains. “The fact is, a certain amount of stress is natural and can be helpful to our well-being. For example, mild levels of stress may contribute to making a deadline at work and performing under pressure. However, when stress persists over a long time and/or is severe, it can take a major toll on our bodies.”



She adds that chronic stress is associated with a weakening of the immune system, damage to cellular functioning in the brain that may affect memory, damage to blood ves-

sels of the heart and brain, and atherosclerosis.

Reducing stress

Dr. Evans notes that the first step in managing your stress and gaining the proper perspective on the problem is to identify the stress triggers in your life.

For example, despite the popular perception that retirement equates to relaxation, a change in work status can be very stressful and lead to symptoms of depression and anxiety. Family demands, both in the raising of children and the caring for older, ailing parents, can contribute to many years of stress.

How we respond to those stressors and build up resilience is the key.

“For example, some people may cope with their stress by eating excessively, smoking, and/or abusing alcohol or other substances,” Dr. Evans says. “Obviously, these behaviors only serve to fuel stress rather than attenuate it. Building stress resistance would entail letting go of these maladaptive responses and incorporating more adaptive behaviors such as exercising, eating a healthy diet, adhering to good sleep habits and practicing meditation or yoga.” (For more ideas, see clipboard on this page.)

Continued ...

Hormonal influences

Making some of those lifestyle adjustments can be complicated by age-related changes, such as the hormonal changes related to menopause, Dr. Evans says. "Insomnia can be one of the symptoms of menopause which can lead to a reduced capacity to handle stress," she says.

How our bodies respond to stress is also directly related to hormones, specifically stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. Prolonged elevation of stress hormones can have negative effects on the heart, brain and immune system.

In a study published January 13, 2010 in the online edition of the *Journal of Neuroscience*, researchers found that the brains of men and

women handle stress differently. The researchers conducted magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) brain scans and found that, in premenopausal women, the activity that occurred in the brain's "stress response circuitry" (in areas including the hypothalamus and hippocampus) differed significantly from men, suggesting that hormones are involved in regulating the brain's response to stress. However, Dr. Evans says that the differences between how men and women respond to stress may diminish as we age.

"These findings may not apply to postmenopausal women, since menopause is associated with marked decreases in hormone levels, including estrogen and progesterone," Dr. Evans says.

Making changes

Many stressors in our lives can be managed. If the traffic on a particularly busy road near your home is a problem, there may be alternate routes to take or times to drive when traffic is lighter. Likewise, if being overweight is causing you stress, changes in your diet and exercise routines can make you feel better.

But if you find yourself unable to handle the stress in your life, from whatever the source, consider talking to your doctor or a therapist about the problem. Dr. Evans notes that because stress can have such a profound impact on your physical and mental health, you owe it to yourself to find ways to reduce your stress load and improve the quality of your life. 🧘