



X-Plain[™]

Managing Stress

Reference Summary

Introduction

Stress is a physical and emotional reaction that everyone experiences as he or she encounters changes in life. These reactions can have positive or negative effects.

Stress has positive effects when it makes us deal constructively with daily problems and meet the challenges. Stress has negative effects when it becomes continuous. Such negative effects can lead to depression, heart disease, and sometimes cancer.

This reference summary explains the difference between positive and negative stress and presents tips for managing negative stress.

What Is Stress?

Many scientists see stress as a reaction of our body to sudden changes in the environment. Just like animals, people need extra energy to stay and fight or run away when faced with danger. The body's normal reaction to a somewhat dangerous situation is an increase in heart rate and muscle tension and a higher blood pressure.



Nowadays, people are not faced with the same dangers of long ago, like battling with wild animals to save their families. However, we are faced with situations that make our bodies react similarly, with faster heartbeats, tense muscles, increased blood pressure, and sweating. Such physical and emotional reactions help us by increasing our concentration and other bodily functions in order to prepare for a challenge.

After meeting a challenge, the body relaxes as the heart rate, muscle tension, and blood pressure return to normal. This gives the body a chance to recover physically and for the person to feel emotionally rewarded for overcoming the challenge.

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The fact that people get a little sweaty and their heart beats faster before a presentation or a test is an advantage that helps them succeed. These types of situations are called “challenges”, “good stress”, or “acute stress.”

When situations that cause physical and emotional stress reactions are non-stopping or perceived as non-stopping, the body never gets a chance to relax. This causes constant tense muscles and a “knotted” stomach. This type of situation is called “bad stress” or “chronic stress”.



Risks of Stress

Never-ending stress can lead to a variety of diseases. It can lead to high blood pressure, which can cause heart problems including heart attacks.

Stress can also lead to migraine headaches, back pain, ulcers, and sometimes cancer.

Several studies have associated stress with a weak immune system. The immune system is responsible for fighting diseases and germs that invade the body. With a weakened immune system, a person with chronic stress could become ill more often.

People who experience chronic stress may try to relieve it with illicit drugs, smoking, or alcohol. Stimulants like these may seem like they reduce stress but the feeling of relief will only last for a very short period of time. In the end, the stress will only get worse as the person becomes addicted.



Symptoms and Causes

A stressor is a situation that causes stress. It is important to identify what causes stress in order to try to control it.

Situations that cause stress may not be very obvious. Moving into a newer, bigger house is a positive and exciting event but may also create unexpected stress from all of the changes that also happen.

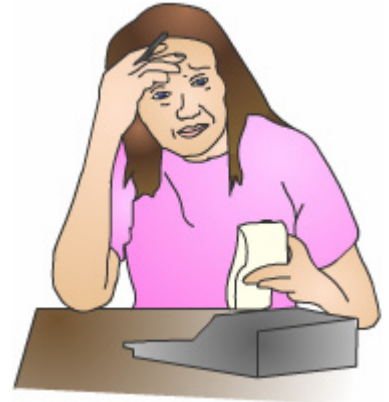
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When people are under stress they may experience:

- Headaches
- Tense muscles
- Shaking hands
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Heartburn

Stressed people may also feel:

- Nervous
- Fearful
- Confused
- Worried
- Irritable
- Hostile
- Unable to concentrate



Usually these feelings cause changes in behavior such as snapping at others, having accidents, and compulsively tapping fingers.

All stressed people do not share these symptoms and feelings. Situations that are stressful for some people may be enjoyable for others. Public speaking, meeting with the boss, and job interviews are a few examples of situations that are stressful for some but exciting for others.

Once you realize that you are stressed, it is important to figure out what is causing your stress. What situations cause you to be stressed? What situations produce changes in your body, feelings, and behavior? Can you list 7 things that make you feel stressed? Feeling overwhelmed, either at work or at home, makes a lot of people feel overly stressed.

Uncertainty of the future can cause stress. Not knowing what is going to happen after you lose a job, after you get married, or after a child is born are all examples of how uncertainty can affect us.

It is helpful to classify the stressors into 3 categories:

- Accidental hassles

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- Major life changes
- Ongoing problems.

Accidental hassles are temporary but can cause significant stress. Examples are losing the house key, a flat tire, missing the bus, or getting a traffic ticket.

Major life changes can include positive events as well as negative ones. Examples of positive events are marriage, graduation, starting a business, or the birth of a baby. Negative changes include events such as death in the family, losing a job, or divorce.

Ongoing problems include stressful situations such as an unhappy marriage, unstable job, poor relationship with a family member or a coworker, or accumulating debt.



Preventing Stress

There are several things you can do to prevent stress. The following are 10 common tips for preventing stress.

Avoid controllable stressors.

Many stressful situations can be under your control. You can avoid them completely. For instance, if shopping with your spouse stresses you, then agree not to shop together!

Plan major lifestyle changes.

Many good major changes can exert their toll. If you plan on graduating, taking a new job, getting married, and having a baby all at the same time, you are in for a lot of good but overwhelming changes when they happen together. Plan out your major changes.

Realize your limitation.

Learn how to say NO to new responsibilities that you are not sure you can fulfill. It is easier to refuse to do something than to get caught in the middle of something you cannot accomplish. It is healthier for you and fairer to the persons involved in the extra responsibilities.

Prioritize.

When faced with more than one task, prioritize! Do 1 thing at a time. Do it well and then go to the next thing! Do not rush yourself!

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Improve communication.

You can significantly prevent relationship stress at home and at the workplace if you listen carefully, smile, admit if you are wrong, give compliments, and express your feelings and thoughts assertively.

Share your thoughts.

Share your thoughts with a spouse, a parent, a child, or a friend. Get advice! Ponder it and follow it if it makes sense. They may see a way out of your stressful situation that you might not have thought of.



Develop a positive attitude.

Without a positive approach to life, preventing and managing stress is very difficult. If you think you are not in control, you are setting yourself up for failure and more stress.

Reward yourself.

Treat yourself as you successfully overcome challenges. Part of this reward should involve relaxation such as a vacation for big achievements or special treats for smaller ones.

Exercise.

Exercising is one of the most effective ways of preventing and managing stress. Start by being more physically active and exercise every other day for at least 30 minutes.

Eat and sleep well.

A good night's sleep and nutritious meals can help you develop a healthier lifestyle that is conducive to less stress.

Managing Stress

In many situations, stressors are inevitable. You can't avoid that job interview, and you can't prevent the loss of a loved one that has a terminal illness. The following are 10 tips for managing unavoidable stress. You could experiment with them and figure out the ones that work best for you.

Plan by visualizing expected events.

If you are stressed out because you have a job interview or because you have to give

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a presentation; rehearse it. Visualize it! Take time to run it through your mind over and over. By doing so, you will familiarize yourself with the subject matter and improve what you say. Most importantly, you will gain self-confidence.

Think positively.

When faced with a difficult situation, take time to put things into perspective. Ask yourself “What does this situation mean in the grand scheme of things? Is it really such a big problem?” It may be hard to know the answers to these questions unless you sit alone in a silent room and go over the situation in your mind.

Imagine potential negative big events.

If you would get laid off from work, try to imagine what you might do. If your doctor tells you that you have cancer, visualize how your life would change. The purpose here is not to think negative thoughts, but try to have a back-up plan in case things go differently than you expect.

Relax with deep breathing.

This is a normal body reaction to stress: take a deep breath. By repeatedly inhaling slowly through your nose, holding the breath for a few seconds, then exhaling through your mouth, you can counteract the fast, shallow breathing associated with stress.



Relax by clearing your mind.

As you take a break in a quiet place, force your mind to relax by focusing on one peaceful image or thought. You can also fool your mind by thinking and visualizing your favorite moments, such as a tranquil Caribbean vacation or fishing in a creek.

Relax your muscles.

Stress causes the muscles to become tense. Tightening and relaxing different muscle groups is one way of relaxing the muscles. As you practice this exercise, concentrate as you tighten a muscle for few seconds, then relax slowly and feel the difference.

Relax with stretching and exercising.

Stretching the muscles is another normal way for the body to react to stress. Stretching exercises can be done anywhere and anytime. If possible, exercising is

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also a great way to stretch the muscles while at the same time taking the mind off the stressor.

Relax with massage therapy.

Stress can cause muscle knots in the back, hands, and different muscle groups. A massage therapist can help loosen this tension. Make sure to tell your massage therapist which massaging strokes make you feel good.

Ask for help.

Ask for help in doing things that might overwhelm you. You will be surprised to find that most people genuinely like to help out. Remember, chances are that some of the people around you have had similar problems and might have found a solution for a particular problem.

Find professional help if needed.

Some people are stressed in situations that feel normal to others, such as walking alone at night, flying, being in rooms with lots of people, or giving a public speech. Avoiding these situations may not be possible. In such situations, confronting these fears and conquering them is a good alternative. Professional help may be needed to control these stressors.

Summary

Stress is part of everyone's life. If not managed, stress can lead to serious diseases such as heart disease, depression, and sometimes cancer. It may also lead to drug and alcohol abuse.

Preventing stress is easy with some changes in lifestyle and a more positive attitude. When stressful situations are encountered, several techniques are available for making the body and mind relax. By trying some of the techniques offered in this summary, you may be able to reduce unneeded stress and enjoy life to its fullest!

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