

Stress Less for Success

by Marta Wilson

Have you ever wondered if we have a stress epidemic on our hands? If so, you are not alone. The U.S. Center for Disease Control reports that over 50% of all deaths before the age of 65 are due to stressful lifestyles. Research from the American Institute of Stress indicates that two of three visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related illnesses. Do statistics like these indicate that we need to stamp out stress? Not exactly; the stress we experience on a daily basis is a normal fact of life. People have been stressed throughout history. It is how we handle stress that is critical. The way we manage stress can determine whether we feel overwhelmed or in control and whether we experience illness or good health.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Walter Cannon, a physiologist at Harvard, coined the term fight or flight around 1900. Fight or flight describes the natural response that prepares us to take action to protect ourselves from danger. It is necessary for survival, and it is automatic. When we feel threatened, our bodies literally prepare either to physically defend ourselves or to run as fast as we can to safety. During the fight or flight response:

- vision and hearing sharpen;

- pain-killing endorphins flood the body;
- blood flow is redirected out to the muscles;
- breathing quickens and heart rate increases;
- stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are activated;
- energy (sugar and fatty acids) flows from storage into the bloodstream to provide fuel to muscles; and
- the immune system, restorative healing processes, digestion, and sexual interest become reduced or suspended.

GOOD STRESS OR BAD STRESS

There is a crucial difference in brain function between good stress (the challenges that mobilize and motivate us) and bad stress

(the threats that overwhelm, paralyze, or demoralize us). The

brain chemicals that generate enthusiasm for a challenge are different from those that generate fear of a threat. In many cases, whether we experience enthusiasm or fear is a matter of choice. Studies show that those who choose to react

to stress with hardiness bear the physical burden of stress much better,

coming through with less illness. Hardiness is the capacity to stay committed, feel in control, and be challenged. Rather than feeling threatened by stress, people who



exhibit hardiness see work as strenuous but exciting and see change as an opportunity to seize rather than as an enemy to fear. One person can see a situation as a devastating threat while another individual sees it as an invigorating challenge.

Whether or not we have a fear response involves two factors: a) physiological arousal and b) thoughts that interpret our situation as threatening and attribute our arousal to the emotion of fear. The actual situation often has little to do with our emotional response. Our evaluation of the stimulus and how we label our body's reaction are the real forces that determine what emotional response we will have.

This accounts for why the same person who is exhilarated by skydiving may leap to a chair shaking and screaming in terror when he sees a mouse on the floor and get angry when his girlfriend serves him chocolate birthday cake. In all three situations he experiences the fight or flight response, but he attributes it to three different emotions. In the first case, while skydiving, he labels his physical sensations as excitement. In the second case, seeing a mouse, he remembers being bitten by a small animal as a child and labels his sensations as fear. In the third case, receiving the chocolate cake, he believes his girlfriend is being thoughtless because she knows he is allergic to chocolate and labels his sensations as anger. Therefore, we need to keep in mind that what seems threatening can be met instead with energy and enthusiasm. This often requires a conscious mental shift in how we view our world.

THE MODERN STRESS HABIT

Managing stress can also demand that we make conscious behavioral shifts. The first step for many of us is to allow more time to release our

tension and fully relax. Tension release and relaxation are the natural, restorative responses after a stressful experience. Research shows that after our primitive ancestors battled lions, tigers, and invading tribes they truly relaxed. They played games, enjoyed family and social relationships, and they got enough sleep. They also regularly entered very deep relaxation states as they gazed deeply into the flames of their campfires. This permitted the body and nerves to rest and return to normal. Relaxation also allowed stress hormones to be flushed away instead of lodging in muscle tissues and organs where they have a toxic effect.

The traditional stress cycle requires relaxation. Unfortunately, many modern lifestyles do not allow for this. After a tense experience, many of us move immediately to the next one, not pausing to return to a normal relaxed state. This lack of relaxation is particularly hard on our bodies and leads to chronic stress. Many illnesses have been linked to chronic stress such as heart attacks, high blood pressure, rheumatoid arthritis, ulcerative colitis, asthma, and migraine headaches. What goes on in our minds affects what goes on in our bodies.

Today, we experience nearly the same reaction to being trapped in traffic as our ancient ancestors did when coming face-to-face with wild lions. However, anthropological studies show we experience much more chronic stress than our ancestors because we do not relax enough. Also, social and legal conventions usually prohibit acting on our fight or flight response. So, often we stew in our own juices and make ourselves sick.

Chronic stress has become a national convention and unconscious habit. For instance, we do not take enough vacations. We reward each other for burning the candle at both ends. Movie

and television characters make it seem normal to live life with chronic stress. And, many of us enjoy the exhilarating rush of endorphins that accompanies the stress response. Our habituation to stress is so complete, so taken for granted, that we don't even question it. We accept it uncritically. However, we can kick the stress habit progressively and naturally by re-establishing the traditional stress cycle in our lives. Remembering to relax and take care of ourselves are important steps to success.

KICKING THE STRESS HABIT

Following are ten tips to help you manage chronic stress.

1. *Take care of yourself.*

- Get more sleep.
- Stop to eat a nutritious lunch.
- Drink water throughout the day.
- Find little ways to be good to yourself.
- Don't hop on the bus, Gus. Take a brisk walk!
- Dress in layers to be prepared for various temperatures.
- Leave your work station during your lunch break, even if only for 15 minutes.

2. *Don't worry. Be happy.*

Smiling is magic. First, it releases chemicals in the brain that make us feel better. Second, studies show that people actually and involuntarily mimic a smile when they see it. So, when you smile, not only do you feel better, the people around you will smile and feel better too. And, of course, laughter is the best medicine. Stock up on humorous materials (individual cartoons, cartoon books, joke books, etc.) and keep them handy. When feeling stressed, pull them out and have a good laugh. If appropriate to your work environment, post a daily cartoon in the break room.

3. *Relax, Max!*

Yes, you can do yoga at your desk, and no one will think you've lost your mind. Here are some easy ways to instantly relax when you get too uptight:

- Keyboard Calisthenics - squeeze fists tight; stretch fingers wide; interlace fingers and rotate hands; make it a habit to constantly stretch your hands and wrists.
- Neck Rolls - drop your head to one side; keeping your head down, slowly roll it to the other side; switch directions and repeat; slowly find the tight spots.
- Feet and Ankles - while you talk on the phone, stretch your legs out and rotate your ankles and feet. Notice your attention increase as you stretch.

4. *Notice early warning signs.*

Like the dashboard warning lights in your car, your body and mind will also alert you when you're getting too close to the red zone. Be aware of your earliest symptoms of stress (tightness in neck or shoulders, irritability, headache, anxious feeling in stomach, etc.) and make it a point to slow down, relax, and de-stress right away before the problem gets any worse. If you repeatedly ignore your stress symptoms, you may find yourself blowing a gasket or experiencing a total breakdown.

5. *Manage your time.*

First and foremost, don't rely on your memory. Write down the things you need to remember, preferably in one planner (paper or electronic). Think about what is important but not urgent and make time for it. You'll feel less stress when you have a plan for putting first things first.

6. Keep cool, but do not freeze.

Maintain a calm manner. Instead of viewing a problem with another person as something to fear or battle, view the problem as a puzzle to solve: gather information, look for resources to help you, generate a variety of possible solutions, decide on a plan of action, try something else if that plan doesn't work. Keeping cool helps us to put preoccupations aside for the time being, staying flexible in our own emotional responses. In fact, a study of middle- and upper-level managers found that those rated best as communicators shared the ability to adopt a calm, composed, and patient manner, no matter what emotional state they were in. They put aside the imperatives of their own feelings, even when turbulent, in order to make themselves fully available for others. As a result, these managers were able to take the time needed to gather essential information and find a way to be helpful. They exercised emotional control and kept cool so as to stay open to what they were hearing and fine-tune their responses.

7. Do unto others...

Be sensitive and considerate about the talents, limitations, failings, and anxieties of others. Do not succumb to opportunities for humor at the expense of others. Be compassionate, and give support freely during others' times of need. Be patient and understanding. Appreciate others as real human beings with feelings and needs for self-esteem and recognition. Be interested in their thoughts, their circumstances, their families, and their futures.

8. Tailor your work area to reduce chronic stress.

Keep your work area organized to avoid confusing clutter. Use file folders and keep them alphabetized for quick access to necessary information. Display a postcard or photos from your vacation on or near your desk to remind you to take a vacation break from it all (in your

mind) for a few minutes each day. If appropriate, use earplugs when things get too noisy. Keep certain necessities at work in case of emergencies: money, toiletries, umbrella, tie, pantyhose, etc. Sit in a comfortable chair with armrests. Reduce eye strain caused by glare by making sure you do not have a bright light behind you that shines on your computer screen (use a snap-on anti-glare filter over your screen if needed).

9. Make improvements at work.

If you have ideas for improvements, either take action on them yourself or offer your suggestions to those who are in a position to take action. Chances are your suggestions will be appreciated by others, but if your suggestion is turned down, don't take it personally. Perhaps the timing isn't right yet, or maybe your boss just isn't as perceptive as you. In either case, keep looking for ways you can make things better for yourself and others at work.

10. Put serenity at your fingertips.

Make yourself a serenity bag. Gather relaxing items and keep them near you at work or other stressful situations. Include items such as:

- a stone to remind you of nature;
- an apple for nutrition and energy;
- a postcard with beautiful scenery;
- a relaxation tape or compact disc;
- lavender oil or other aromatherapy;
- water to keep you from dehydrating;
- a stress ball to relieve tension in your hands;
- ear plugs for times when the noise level is too high;
- a toy such as silly putty, a slinky, or a matchbox car;
- books such as *Stressbusters*, *Office Yoga*, and *All Stressed Up*; and
- hard candies for sitting with eyes closed until candy and stress melt away;

STRESS CHECKLIST

Following is a list of symptoms of chronic stress. Please check all that apply to you. Some symptoms may be relieved by the tips and techniques shared in the “Stress Less for Success Workshop.” Others may result from illness. It is always a good idea to touch base with your physician if you have concerns.

Physical Symptoms

- Changes in appetite
- Changes in eating habits
- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Muscle tension
- Body muscle aches
- Feeling tired due to lack of sleep
- Feeling tired due to worry
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Weight change
- Increased colds, flu
- Heart pounding
- Prone to accidents
- Skin rashes
- Increased blood pressure
- Increased back pain
- Racing heart
- Start crying easily
- Ringing in the ears
- Shakiness/tremors

Emotional Symptoms

- Feeling pressured
- Easily irritated, upset
- Nervous anxiety
- Impatience
- Angry outbursts, temper
- Ready to explode
- Lonely, less intimate with others
- Bored
- Generally feel bad
- Depression
- Easily discouraged

- Little joy in life
- Feeling that no one cares
- Empty, lacking direction
- Less compassion for others
- Difficulty forgiving others

Behavioral Symptoms

- Restlessness
- Self-destructive behavior
- Bossiness
- Critical attitude
- Compulsive teeth grinding
- Argumentative
- Stubborn
- Change in sex drive
- Confrontational
- Difficulty completing tasks
- Passive then aggressive actions
- Less contact with friends
- Reduced strength, vitality
- Nail biting
- Hair pulling or twirling
- Pacing the floor

Cognitive Symptoms

- Trouble thinking clearly
- Forgetful
- Difficulty making decisions
- Thinking less efficient
- Thinking more disorganized
- Making poor judgments
- Loss of sense of humor
- Loss of creativity, imagination
- Constant worry
- Runaway thoughts

RESOURCES

All Stressed Up: Maxine's Thoughts on Life's Little Irritations illustrated by John Wagner

Don't Do. Delegate! The Secret Powers of Successful Managers by James Jenks and John Kelly

Fight Fat after Forty by Pamela Peeke

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity by David Allen

Instant Relaxation Technique and Training Program by Mike Cohen

Life is Not a Stress Rehearsal: Bringing Yesterday's Sane Wisdom Into Today's Insane World by Loretta LaRoche

Office Yoga by Darrin Zeer

Stress Busters: Tips to Feel Healthy, Alive and Energized by Katherine Butler

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay

The Survivor Personality by Al Siebert

Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: An Updated Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping by Robert M. Sapolsky

Working with Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman

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