

Stress Management from http://www.healthpsychology.net/Stress_Management.htm

What is STRESS?

With every major event in our lives, (a health problem, the birth of a child, or a new relationship), there are changes that require us to mobilize resources and make adjustments. Some events such as deadlines, competitions, and confrontations may produce feelings of eagerness and excitement, particularly when we think that we have a chance of overcoming the challenge. The arousal you feel when you try to meet these challenges is considered healthy. However, when a situation or event is perceived by a person as being overwhelming, beyond their abilities to cope, and threatening to their well-being, it is considered "stressful". Stress can result in feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. Stress can also affect work performance and relationships.

The Fight or Flight Response:

Stress is related to a primitive system in our body called the "fight or flight" response. It is called this because it provides the strength and energy to either fight or run away from danger. The changes that occur when this system is activated include an increase in heart rate and blood pressure (to get more blood to the muscles, brain and heart), faster breathing (to take in more oxygen), tensing of muscles (preparation for actions like running), increased mental alertness and sensitivity of sense organs (to assess the situation and act quickly), increased blood flow to the brain, heart and muscles (the organs that are most important in dealing with danger) and less blood to the skin, digestive tract, kidneys and liver (where it is least needed in times of crisis). In addition, there is an increase in blood sugar, fats and cholesterol (for extra energy) and a rise in platelets and blood clotting factors (to prevent hemorrhage in case of injury). Although this system was adaptive in the past (for hunting), it is not always beneficial in today's modern society. In fact, when this system is turned on for long periods of time it can have harmful effects on the body (e.g., decreased immune function, heart disease).

Common sources of STRESS:

Below are listed potential external (things outside of you) and internal (things within you) sources of stress. While reviewing this list ask yourself if any of these are sources of stress for you.

External stressors include:

- Physical environment: noise, bright lights, heat, confined spaces.
- Social (interaction with people): rudeness, bossiness or aggressiveness on the part of someone else.
- Organizational: rules, regulations, "red tape," deadlines.
- Major life events: death of a relative, lost job, promotion, new baby.

- Daily hassles: commuting, misplacing keys, mechanical breakdowns.

Internal stressors include:

- Lifestyle choices: caffeine, not enough sleep, overloaded schedule, unhealthy diet.
- Negative self-talk: pessimistic thinking, self-criticism, over-analyzing.
- Mind traps: unrealistic expectations, taking things personally, all-or-nothing thinking, exaggerating, and rigid thinking.
- Stressful personality traits: The perfectionist, workaholic, have to please others.

Ways to decrease STRESS:

Now that you know more about stress and the negative effects it can have, the next thing to do is to discover ways that you can decrease stress in your life. Here are a few suggestions:

Change lifestyle habits:

- Decrease caffeine intake (coffee, tea, colas, chocolate).
- Maintain a well-balanced diet
- Decrease consumption of junk food
- Eat slowly
- Regular exercise (at least 30 minutes, three times per week).
- Adequate sleep (figure out what you need, and then get it).
- Time-outs and Leisure time (do something for you everyday).
- Relaxation exercises (e.g., breathing practice, imagery).

Change stressful situations and how you approach them:

- Time and money management.
- Assertiveness (rather than avoidance or aggressiveness).
- Learn appropriate use of problem-solving coping skills

Change your thinking:

- Realistic Expectations (when expectations are more realistic, life seems more manageable)
- Keep a sense of humor. It's important to be able to see the humor in the things we sometimes say and do.
- Have a support system (speak with someone or write down your thoughts)
- Reframe negative thoughts so that you focus on the positive (half full vs. half empty)
- Challenge catastrophic thinking using cognitive restructuring.