

Increase Your Energy, Vitality, and Productivity by Harnessing Stress Effectively

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“The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one.” – Mark Twain

Stress can be debilitating, both physically and mentally. Where anxiety results from emotional blocks that can be treated with counselling, stress comes more directly from external pressures and can be treated strategically. Stress, as Mark Twain points out, comes from not coping well with what is on one’s plate. Personally, I think stress makes us rush at a problem like a Jack Russell instead of approaching it carefully like a St. Bernard.



We can all learn from Abraham Lincoln who said: “The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.” The term ‘stress’ originated about 50 years ago, coined by the famous Hungarian endocrinologist Hans Selye who made the connection between stress and illness. He discovered that it didn’t matter whether stress was positive or negative; if the nervous system is too stressed to cope with the demands it faces, it starts to disrupt the homeostatic system, which can lead to both mental and physical diseases.

In a recent study, Dr. Matthias Nahrendorf and his team at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School found that medical residents working in hospital intensive care units had elevated levels of white blood cells, which indicates a boosted immune system response to stress. This in turn can lead to artery inflammation which causes clots to break loose, obstruct vessels, and trigger heart attacks. Some people seem to have more capacity to cope with stress than others, but some just conceal it (we sometimes read about someone retiring and dying soon after from a heart attack).

Stress is dangerous in other ways too. A person might binge eat, drink too much alcohol, gamble, or shop to alleviate stress and any of these, of course, compounds the problem. In short, stress is not an illness of the soul but it can certainly become an illness of the body.

STRATEGIES TO HARNESS STRESS

The issue, as with food and drink, is not elimination but management. After all, stress has an important role to play in our lives because it gathers intense energy in the face of real danger. So we don’t want to disable the stress button entirely. However, what most of us suffer from is the habit of stress, and this is seriously problematic because it damages our focus on what exactly we want to achieve. Imagine a beautiful race horse with all that spirit and energy that needs to be

controlled in order to win the race, and then imagine that same horse with no control over its energy. The horse will get winded or break a leg or both.

Stressful responses can become a habitual way of dealing with everyday situations, a coping strategy to handle the onslaught of stimulation that is constantly thrown at us. Everywhere we go, on the streetcar, bus, and streets we are bombarded by sounds and sights clamouring for attention. Over time, the stress response becomes the way the body automatically handles everything – both bad and good. So, how can we harness this powerful energy to work for us instead of against us?

Plan regular escapes – To manage stress it is vital to keep balance in one's life, to do something that takes one out of the grind and pressures of every day. A patient of mine took this kind of action when she found herself under continuous pressure. She took up dancing and became a ballroom dancer. Dancing transported her into another world with fancy costumes, make-up, chandeliers and, mostly, the delight of moving to music. An hour or so made her feel as though she had been away in fairy land for weeks and, when she returned to her life, her stress was gone.

Bring pets into your life – If you can't do ballroom dancing, try babysitting a dog or cat. There is now scientific proof that animals can and do play a huge part in calming those around them. Animals are appreciative, present, loving, nonjudgmental and well – perfect! They are used in nursing homes, children's homes, hospitals, and universities for students facing exams. Animals have a lot to offer.

Discover the value of time – Like people with terminal illnesses, one can focus quite deliberately on the value of time. I remember one patient who seemed to have chained his briefcase to his wrist and would not be parted from it. Stress was coming off him in waves. I could not treat him because he had an immediate and inescapable excuse to evade and avoid every positive suggestion I made. Finally, I gave him a prescription that did not amuse him. I will never know whether he followed it because he never returned. My prescription? That he spend an hour every week at a cemetery in order to meditate on where he was going to end up soon if he didn't accept help. After all, he had life now, life made up of many valuable moments that would never return, and he might deal with his stress and be altogether happier if he lived every one of them as fully as possible.

Meditate – This can be as simple as sitting for five to ten minutes a day “stilling” the mind, literally imagining the mind like a still pond with no ripples. Another method is to imagine one's thoughts whirling like the blades of a fan. Focus on trying to slow the blades down until they have stopped and you will find your mind is calm as well.

Identify and eliminate stress triggers – As with organizing our priorities and tackling them one at a time, we can identify and then deliberately discard our causes of stress. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, in his famous book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, tells the story of a businessman who felt besieged by stress from all sides. To cope with it, he made a daily habit of writing down anything that caused him stress at work. At the end of each day he would carefully read the list he had written, crumple it up and throw it in the waste basket with the words “my day is done.” He would then leave for home stress-free.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) also offers effective treatment. Thomas Edison said “The doctor of the future will give no medicine, but will interest his patient in the care of the human frame, in diet and in the cause and prevention of disease.” Brilliant words from a far seeing man, but acupuncture was a few thousand years ahead of him in this way of thinking.

An old Chinese saying claims that “a calm heart is the best medicine.” In fact, there is a category of herbs in the Chinese Herbal Materia Medica called Substances that Nourish and Calm the Spirit. When dealing with a stressed out patient, a Chinese medicine practitioner will make up a list of raw herbs for the patient to cook, which might include: Semen Biotae Orientalis that helps palpitations and calms the heart; Radix Polygaliae Tenuifoliae that calms the spirit and quiets the heart; and Caulis Polygoni Multiflori that nourishes the heart and blood to calm the spirit. These herbs are never used alone, but mixed with other kinds of herbs that help the qi and nourish whichever organ is depleted.

The use of Acupuncture for reducing stress involves insertion of tiny needles into numerous points that are reputed to calm the mind (heart) and help to move the liver Qi or energy and blood. In fact, research has proven that a skilled acupuncturist can calm the body and mind in a matter of minutes by shifting the patient from sympathetic dominance (overdrive) to parasympathetic dominance (rest and relaxation). Since the body heals itself most effectively when in a state of deep relaxation, it is essential that a stressed out person find the most effective strategies for unwinding and relaxing.

Traditional Chinese Medicine is based on movement and balance – movement of the Qi (energy) and blood, and the balance of the Yin and Yang. Yin represents the cold, dark, watery side of the body, and Yang represents the hot, dry, and light side of the body. The liver stores the blood and regulates its volume while the heart governs blood – these two activities must be harmonized or there will be dizziness, excessive dreaming, anxiety, insomnia, “busy thoughts,” or depression. The problem is that the liver qi is very reactive to emotions and stress; it reacts by stagnating (getting stuck) which can result in symptoms such as high blood pressure, headaches, irritability, eye pain, difficulty breathing, poor digestion and, in women, painful menstruation. Medication can certainly help these problems, but not necessarily get to the root of them. I find that people under stress tend to hold their stomach muscles tight and to breathe fast and superficially, which gives the body the message that it needs to be alert for perceived danger. I will often place a heavy book on the abdomen during treatment to make my patient aware of any tightness and speedy or superficial breathing. The book helps in two ways: its weight places the emphasis right where it should be, and it focuses the mind on the abdomen instead of on busy thoughts. It kind of harnesses the thoughts down to the solar plexus. This can also be done at home. It can take as little as five minutes and is especially effective with insomnia.

THE ROLE OF DIET

A good diet is imperative if one really wants to lessen stress. Caffeine, alcohol, and sugar may seem to ease stress but in reality they are compounding the problem and should be used as treats rather than as daily staples. Caffeine and alcohol stimulate liver qi, which is already overacting. The oil of the coffee beans dampens the appetite, which makes the body crave sugar. Sugar

causes dampness accumulation, which can make one feel sluggish and tired and leaves one craving coffee to perk up the system. Instead, start the day with hot water and a squeeze of fresh lemon juice. Fresh lemon is famous for being rich in vitamin C and antioxidants. It purifies the blood and improves sleep. It also keeps the system alkaline. Drinking this in the morning, and even throughout the day, will over time lessen the craving for caffeine and sugar. Give it a try for six weeks and see how you feel. Try to keep the diet bland with foods such as wild fish, organic chicken, aduki and kidney beans, and lots of stir-fried, steamed, or baked vegetables. A couple of squares of dark chocolate can be a nice treat at the end of the day.

SAVOUR YOUR MOMENTS

With all these strategies at play, we need always to remember to live as much as we can in each moment. I remember a television interview with a famous philosopher whose name escapes me. It was many years ago. He was in his late 80s and the interviewer asked him what he would do if he were given one wish. The philosopher, without hesitation, replied: "I would stand on a street corner holding out my hat and collect people's wasted moments." Working on my own stress, I aim to have no moments to put in his hat.

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Published in *Vitality*, February, 2014