

PUTTING AN END TO STRESS



We face all kinds of stressful situations every day. Say you're late for an appointment: you may notice that you're getting hot and sweaty, or feeling impatient or a sense of urgency.

These reactions are totally normal and come from fearing the potential consequences of being late. There's really no avoiding stress – it's simply part of life. It can be defined as a reaction to an event that throws the body out of balance. Exactly how the body reacts varies from one person to the next, since we all respond differently to a given situation. Of course, a situation is only stressful if

we perceive it as stressful! In other words, the way we view something will determine how we react to it. If we are afraid or think we won't have the resources to deal with a situation, we are sure to feel stress very quickly.

Pain and stress

Pain itself can be stressful. There is so much fear and worry associated with pain, especially the fear that it will never go away. This kind of stress can affect people in different ways. Ordinary life can be stressful too; the stress related to occasional problems and difficult situations can also affect the intensity of pain and sometimes diminish the effectiveness of treatment.

How the body reacts

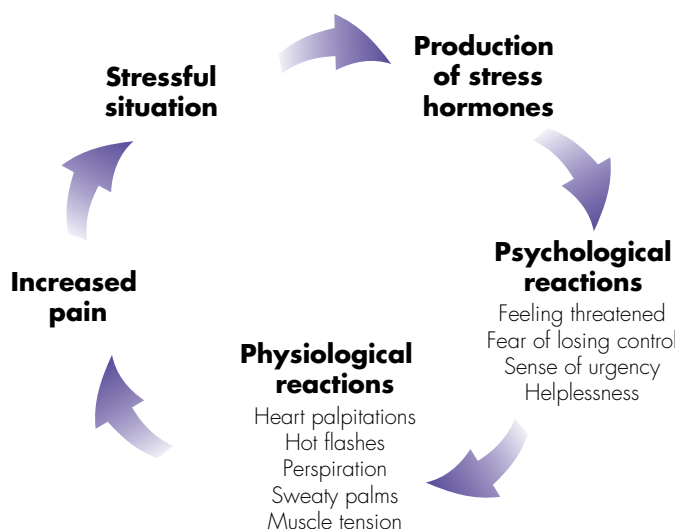
The first signs of stress are often physical. Our bodies are designed to react to stressful situations with a “fight or flight” response. That translates into an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, faster breathing, heavier perspiration and greater muscle tension.

There's really no avoiding stress – it's simply part of life.

Positive and negative stress

The birth of a child, preparing for a trip or a new job, and other pleasant events can make us feel excited and full of confidence. This is a helpful, positive kind of stress that allows us to move forward or simply be well prepared to deal with the situation.

Then there's negative stress, which leaves us feeling threatened and out of control. When such feelings persist and we cannot cope, the impact on the body's reaction can be frightening.



How to combat stress

1. Use your energy in other ways

When faced with stressful circumstances, the body mobilizes a huge amount of energy to deal with the situation at hand. One way to manage stress is to spend that energy productively, which diminishes the production of stress hormones and eases physiological reactions, such as muscle tension.

2. Learn to breathe in order to let go

Slow, deep abdominal breathing (from the belly, not the chest) allows you to restore balance and harmony so that your body can relax and let go of the muscular and psychological tension it is holding. This clears your mind and gives you some distance from the situation you perceive as stressful.

3. Be active

Physical exercise of any kind, including walking, running, dancing and playing sports helps get rid of the excess energy generated during stressful times.

4. Regain control

In order to regain control over yourself, you need some quiet time to think about what's happening and figure out exactly what is making you feel stressed. Remember that we feel stress when we believe we do not have the resources to deal with a problematic situation. A thoughtful analysis can give you the tools you need to solve problems and get through a difficult time with the least possible stress. That, in turn, helps you regain control of the situation – and yourself!

The following questions can help you understand why a particular situation is causing you stress:

- Is there another way to look at the situation?
- Is my perception of the situation correct?
- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- What advice would I give a friend in the same situation?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?
- How likely is it that this worst-case scenario will play out?

Be strategic

Once you have analyzed the situation carefully and identified specific problems, you have to take action. It is only by taking action that you can make the changes that will help you.

Make a list of all the things you could do that would allow you to view the situation differently and help you solve the problem i.e. "Nobody calls me anymore":

1. I could get help and talk to certain people;
2. I could change my attitude or the way I view things.

Simply being prepared and having a few options available helps the brain reduce the perception of threat and allows you to see a situation as a manageable challenge.

The importance of a healthy lifestyle

There are many things you can do to keep your body in balance, minimize the impact of stress, and enjoy an optimal quality of life:

- Have a healthy diet;
- Maintain a good balance in your everyday activities (work, recreation and rest);
- Limit your intake of caffeine and alcohol;
- Avoid smoking;
- Exercise every day;
- Prepare yourself for important meetings or appointments;
- Maintain good sleep habits;
- Keep personal relationships cordial;
- Practise relaxation techniques.

Unfortunately, life will always present us with difficult and unforeseeable situations that must be dealt with. But strategies like the one presented here can help you overcome problems and allow you to say: "I'm taking charge of my pain AND my stress!"