

Health Effects of Stress and Stress Reduction



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Did you know that our body does not discriminate between sources of stress? Whether the stress is coming from an actual event – like a car nearly hitting you – or simply thinking about the possibility of an accident – the body could react in a similar way.

In these uncertain times, stress can have a huge impact on our health and bodies, which is why it is important to be informed and learn how to manage stress in a healthy way.

What Is the Stress Response and How Does It Impact Our Health?

We are biologically geared towards survival and our minds are wired to detect any threat alert.

The stress response is the “fight or flight” reaction to such a threat. I think we all know how it feels: the sudden increase in heart rate and the rapid respirations, all meant to prepare the body with oxygen needed to suddenly move into action.

Underlying this is a shower of hormones that stimulate the body’s actions, but this also impacts other aspects of our health. We increase the circulation of adrenaline, known as epinephrine, that activates our heart rate, but it also stimulates the release of glucose and fat from storage sites as a source of fuel.

If left unchecked, a second response triggers the release of cortisol into the blood stream. Cortisol increases the amount of glucose in our bloodstream and can stimulate hunger, which can lead to eating more calories than we actually need.

Six Ways to Overcome the Stress Response

The stress response is natural if there is an actual threat in the moment. However, a chronic stress response could negatively impact our health if not managed well: affecting our weight and blood pressure.

Focusing on reducing our stress and improving our health can be accomplished with a handful of simple practices. I call them my 6 Rs:

1. Rest

First, get enough sleep! Adequate sleep is extremely helpful in calming down the stress response.

2. Relaxation techniques

Deep breathing – whether done through meditation exercises or while you are doing yoga – the key is slow, intentional deep breathing!

3. Recreation

Keep active while practicing social distancing – whether that means a walk or reading a book. Taking time for yourself doing something you love to do that involves some form of activity (mental or physical) is helpful!

4. Relationships

Staying connected is so important. We are meant to be in community. We may be physically isolated but that does not mean we need to lose our connections to others. Telephone or video calls can be a great way to stay connected.

5. Routine

Yup, in the midst of change why add another one. Stay consistent. Suddenly need to work from home – then get up at the same time, set up an office and work like you normally would.

6. Reframing

Reassess the perceived stress so it no longer is viewed as a threat. You may need the help of a coach to help you through the practice of first identifying why something is viewed as a threat and then placing that into a context that is helpful.

How Stress Impacts Your Body

Acute stress can be both helpful and harmful to our body. It can be helpful as it forces us to be vigilant in protecting ourselves and our loved ones. It can be harmful because it causes our blood pressure to rise and our heart rate to increase: not good for those who have an underlying cardiovascular disease.

However, what is of greater concern is a state of chronic stress. In this state, the body is continuously activated, resulting in elevated blood pressure and weight gain, which are factors in cardiovascular disease.

Additionally, cortisol is known to reduce the production of our immune protective cells known as lymphocytes. In the acute phase, we may actually see an increase of these cells, but as we move to a more chronic state of stress the cortisol release leads us to a decrease of lymphocytes making us potentially more susceptible to ineffectively fighting off infection.

Ultimately, make sure you are taking a holistic approach to health: manage stress, eat healthy, keep in touch with your loved ones, and exercise at home regularly.