

Stress, it is a fact of life, we can't avoid it. How then do we learn to live with it?

Stress comes in many forms, a hectic work day, another traffic jam and endless tasks at home. Our response to these stressors can manifest in a multitude of physical responses, including increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, headaches, dry mouth, poor digestion, and frequently pain, usually noted in the back, neck and joints.

Prolonged stress is associated with mood disorders particularly anxiety and depression, as well as fatigue, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, decreased ability to concentrate and the abuse of alcohol, tobacco and drugs both legal and illegal. Over the long term, chronic daily stress is thought to impair immune function placing us at risk for infections, and may also contribute to heart disease.

With all the potential outcomes from stress it is clear that learning to live with stress is of paramount importance to health and well being. Multiple techniques are available for stress reduction and it is up to each individual to find what works best for him/her. However, in general, exercise, a healthy diet and regular sleep habits are of critical importance.

Exercise is a natural mood enhancer; it helps relieve anxiety and agitation, in addition to the other health benefits of lower blood pressure, stronger bones and weight control. In one study, exercise was found to be comparable to a common prescription for the treatment of depression. Ideally everyone should get regular aerobic exercise 3-4 times weekly for at least 30 -60 minutes at a time. If you are just getting started, see your doctor.

Additionally, adopting techniques such as yoga, and meditation can be useful adjuncts to cope with life's daily stressors. Taking a few minutes out of every day to slow down, practice some deep breathing techniques and gentle stretching can be very beneficial. I recommend to my patients to set aside some personal time each day to focus on slowing down. Find a hobby to help you unwind, gardening, reading, painting, anything you find relaxing.

Regular sleep habits are also key to well being. It is important to go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Avoid strenuous activity, alcohol, or work before bedtime. Instead prepare for sleep by finding a relaxing activity to help slow you down, such as a warm bath, or reading. Avoid anxiety producing activities. As I tell my patients, no bill paying before bedtime. The bedroom should be a sanctuary that is quiet and peaceful away from the stresses of the outside world, it is not the place for your home office.

Although we may not be able to eliminate stress, we can learn to live with it. Incorporating healthful habits into your daily routine is the first step to tackling life's many stressors.

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