

## NATURAL APPROACHES TO STRESS MANAGEMENT

Dr. Steven Clark, Chiropractor

Everyone deals with stress in their life. You can't avoid it, but you can learn how to cope with it, and minimize its effect on your health and emotional well being.

For many millions of years, our bodies' response to stress increased our odds of survival. Adrenaline increased our strength and heart rate dramatically, allowing us to fight off, or run from danger. This is commonly referred to as the "fight or flight response".

These days, our stress rarely comes from physical danger. Instead, we face a much more insidious and constant kind of stress. Some common stressors include:

**Emotional stress:** This type of stress can come from our spouse, children, or co-workers.

**Financial stress:** Nearly everyone is "feeling the pinch" these days, and for many it's more like a punch than a pinch.

**Physical stress:** The types of physical stress we deal with are often job-related. Jobs that require us to be sedentary for hours at a time, or that require repetitive movements will eventually affect our bodies in negative ways.

**Chemical stress:** We are forced to deal with chemical stress every day of our lives. We are under constant assault from toxins in the air we breathe, the food we eat, and even the water we drink. In addition, we are exposed to toxins from cosmetics, cleaning supplies, and many other sources.

Let's take a look at what happens to our bodies when we're under stress. **The stress response is broken down into 3 stages:**

**Stage 1 is the alarm phase.** This happens when we are first confronted by the stress...for example, a boss yelling at us. Our bodies release large amounts of adrenaline and cortisol. This dumps sugar into our blood, dilates our blood vessels, and increases our heart rate dramatically...preparing us for a fight or flight. But since neither is an option for most of us, the stress is not resolved, and we move into

**Stage 2...the resistance phase.** Adaptation either occurs or doesn't occur in this phase. If we are able to adapt ("My boss is an idiot...who cares what he thinks"), our body can return to normal. If not ("I need this job...what will I do if I get fired?"), the stress continues, and we move into

**Stage 3...the exhaustion phase.** In this phase, fatigue, illness, depression, disease, and even death can occur if the stress is not removed or resolved.

So how can we manage stress? The pharmaceutical companies would like us to believe that drugs are the answer. And for some people, in some situations, they can help. But unless we find effective, natural solutions, and incorporate them into our lifestyle, the stress will win in the end.

So here are some suggestions, that taken together, can substantially reduce the amount of perceived stress in your life, and reduce its effect on your body and your life:

**EXERCISING:** Perhaps no other strategy will be as effective for reducing perceived stress as exercising. Exercising floods your body and brain with oxygen, helps eliminate nervous tension in your muscles, helps eliminate toxins, and releases a healthy dose of endorphins and enkephalins. You will feel better, look better, and feel better about yourself! Aerobic exercise, weight training, yoga...all can be part of your exercise program. Try to find something you enjoy, and will do regularly!

**HEALTHY DIET:** Your diet has a huge effect on the way you feel! Try to eliminate foods that trigger a big insulin spike...especially simple carbs (foods containing sugar, flour, fruit juices, high-fructose corn syrup, etc.). Minimize animal fats, use more olive oil, supplement with fish oil. Eat more quality proteins, and have small, healthy snacks between meals.

**ADEQUATE WATER:** Adequate water is essential for all bodily processes, including tissue repair, regeneration, and detoxification. Being dehydrated causes mental foginess, fatigue, lethargy, and a compromised immune system. To find a good starting point for adequate water intake, multiply your body weight by .6. For a 150 pound person, this would translate to 90 ounces of water, or about 3 quarts. You need significantly more if you're vigorously exercising. Caffeinated beverages are diuretics, and are counter-productive.

**PROPER BREATHING:** Pay attention to your breathing. Shallow breathing leads to poor oxygen supply to your entire body, and particularly your brain. Try to practice slow, deep breaths...in through your nose, and out through your mouth. Good posture is very important in this regard...it is almost impossible to breathe properly in a slumped posture. Awareness and control of your breathing is central to most relaxation and meditative techniques.

**ORGANIZATION:** It's easy to feel overwhelmed with so much to do, and so little time to accomplish it. Being organized increases your sense of control...a critical step in reducing stress. Strive to "complete the cycle" (dishes cleaned and put away, rather than dirty dishes left in the sink). Have a "to do" list, with specific time frames for each goal, if possible. Have larger goals broken down into smaller goals, again with specific time frames when possible. Review your "to do" list daily, and pick 3 things to accomplish that day...and do the least pleasant task first!

**FINDING “ME TIME”:** This can be a tough one...especially for working mothers. “Me time” can consist of exercising, a creative outlet such as painting, learning to play an instrument, listening to music, meditation and visualization, reading, or spending time with friends. This is something that needs to be scheduled!

**FINDING “US TIME”:** Having a good relationship with your spouse or partner can be a huge stress reliever. Conversely, being in conflict with them can be a huge source of stress. So schedule a “date night” at least once a week, and make it a priority! Good relationships don’t just happen...they need to be nurtured. Again, scheduling time together is key!

**BETTER SLEEP:** Inadequate sleep leads to physical and mental fatigue, irritability, high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, and a generally compromised immune system. You are much more likely to have an accident...perhaps in your car. It also leads to stimulant and simple carb addiction, depression, and weight gain. Do your best to get 7 hours or so of restful sleep. Try to keep a regular sleep schedule. Avoid chemical or mental stimulation in the evening. Minimize light and noise. Address snoring or sleep apnea issues.

**KEEP YOUR BODY “TUNED UP”:** Just as a car that’s out of alignment increases stress on the rest of the car, misalignment and dysfunction in your spine can stress the rest of your body...both mechanically, and due to impaired nerve function. Get regular chiropractic checkups!

**KEEP A SENSE OF HUMOR...LAUGH!** Laughing floods your body and brain with oxygen, relaxes tight, tense muscles, lowers blood pressure, and releases serotonin and endorphins...our “happy hormones”.

**DO THINGS FOR OTHERS:** Shifting your focus from yourself to others is a huge stress reliever! Nurture a habit of doing nice things for others. Everyone appreciates a sincere compliment, and it feels good to give one! Don’t assume that people know what you like or appreciate about them.

**THINK POSITIVELY...YOUR THOUGHTS CREATE YOUR REALITY!** One of the most profound messages Jesus left with us is “As a person thinks and believes in their heart, so shall it be”. Practice weeding the negative thoughts from your “mental garden”. Have an “attitude of gratitude”. Be proactive rather than reactive. Focus on solutions rather than problems. You don’t always have a choice about being in a stressful situation, but you always have a choice about how you will react to it.

**NURTURE A SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE:** Life is a precious gift. Try to view your challenges as opportunities for spiritual growth.