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Reviewed by NASW Office of Social Work Specialty Practice Staff

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Introduction

As you wait impatiently in the crowded supermarket check out line after work, your daughter calls on your cell phone, announcing that she needs a costume for a skit tomorrow in school. How can you possibly appease her, finish the work project you stashed into your briefcase because you couldn't complete it in the office, prepare a meal for your family after negotiating through a traffic pile up on the interstate, and even attend a heated community meeting tonight? Face it. You are stressed.

So is everyone around you these days, or so it seems. Blame it on the pace of 21st century American living, our outlandish expectations or our attempts to cram far too much into a day. The reasons are myriad.

Even the magazines you happen to scan at the check out line affirm this, with their screaming cover lines promising ways to alleviate your stress, "Banish stress NOW!!"

What Is Stress?

Frequently is referred to as the "fight or flight" reaction. The stress response happens automatically when you feel threatened. For primitive humans, the stressor would have been a lunging tiger. For us, it could be a demanding, angry boss, a sudden blinding rainstorm when you're driving on crowded highway, or hearing bad medical news about a beloved family member.

While experts have made huge advances in the study of stress, they are still baffled by it. Most puzzling is how its effect on our bodies is based upon how we perceive stressful situations. Some stressors can help us in performing at our peak ability; other stressors can be debilitating – it's all in the eyes of the beholder.

When you feel threatened, your pituitary gland, located at the base of your brain, responds to a perceived threat by speeding up the release of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH), which signals other glands to produce additional hormones. It's as if an alarm system has gone off in your brain. This system is alerting your adrenal glands to unleash a flood of stress hormones into your bloodstream. These hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline, speed your reaction time, increase your strength and agility and hyperfocus your concentration.

When it's over, is it really over?

You may argue that once the initial stress-inducing event is over, you feel better. Normal, even. Maybe so. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Chronic stress takes a cumulative toll on your body. Here's how.

After you have faced a stressful situation, cortisol and adrenaline levels in your bloodstream decline. As a result, your heart rate and blood pressure return to normal and your digestion and metabolism resume a regular pace. But if stressful situations accumulate, one after another, your body has no chance to recover. This ongoing activation of the stress response system can disrupt all your body's processes, increasing your risk of obesity, digestive upsets, heart disease, insomnia and depression.

The Impact of Stress on the Body

- **Cardiovascular system** – High levels of cortisol can raise your heart rate, increase blood pressure and blood lipid levels. These are risk factors in heart attack and strokes.
- **Immune system** – Did you ever wonder why you appear to catch more colds and come down with other infections when you're stressed? Chronic stress tends to weaken your immune system making you more susceptible to whatever is "going around."
- **Nervous system** – If your flight-or fight response system never shuts down, stress hormones can produce constant feeling of helplessness, anxiety and impending doom.
- **Digestive system** – Is it any surprise that you you'll be stricken with a bout of diarrhea or a queasy stomach when you're under stress? This happens because stress hormones slow the release of stomach acid and the emptying of the stomach. The same hormones also stimulate the colon, which speeds the passage of its contents.

Self-Help Strategies

You can do many things to help alleviate or quell stress without medications or intervention, starting simply with breathing.

Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and try to answer this question. When was the last time you felt truly relaxed? What was happening in your life? Very likely you were in a quiet, comfortable place where there was no pressure to do anything, and you could sit back and enjoy the day. You felt peaceful and at one with the world. For most people, that's the definition of a vacation.

Think of it this way: Your body needs a vacation every day. Here are some ways to achieve that.

- **Deep Breathing** - When we are stressed, our breathing becomes shortened to the point that we can hyperventilate if we are faced with acute stress. Counter the natural instinct by deliberately taking four deep breaths every time you feel stressed. Slowly breathe in through your nose, hold it for five seconds and then release the air through your mouth.
- **Exercise** - Ongoing muscular tension goes hand in hand with chronic stress response. Counteract it by taking a brisk walk, playing a round of tennis, swimming a few laps. The goal is to keep your body limber and moving. For a more relaxing form of exercise, consider taking a yoga class or even tai chi.

Many gyms, community centers and adult night schools offer classes in this increasingly popular disciplines.

Set aside at least 10 minutes of your day to simply sit and be. It's easier said than done, yet the benefits are tremendous. Meditation practices are equally helpful in teaching people how to quiet their thoughts and totally relax.

Keeping Diaries and Journals

Some people find solace in the privacy of their journals or diaries. Studies have shown that writing about stressful events or even huge, traumatic experiences can help to alleviate the stress and even improve the immune system. Again, community colleges, adult night schools and sometimes

even hospitals offer classes in “ journaling” or therapeutic writing.

If you find that despite your best efforts to get a handle on things in your life, stress seems to be overtaking you, impeding you from living as you’d like to, making you feel chronically tired, or hopeless, a social worker may be able to help.

The goal of meeting with a skilled social worker would be to guide you to come up with a workable plan to help reduce or alleviate the stress in your life. This may entail psychotherapy to help you determine the source of the stress.

For further helpful information, visit these sites

- [National Women’s Health Information Center](#)
- [National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine \(NCCAM\)](#)

Related Articles:

- [About Stress Management](#)
- [Stress Management Current Trends](#)
- [Stress Management: Your Options](#)
- [Stress Management: How Social Workers Help](#)
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