

Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

Harnessing Stress

Stress has become a fact of life, and for some, the daily norm. Although occasional stress can help improve our focus and performance, living with chronic stress can backfire by causing anxiety, depression, and serious health problems.

Understanding who we are, knowing our major struggles, putting them in perspective, and taking action can help us deal with stress. The following strategies can also improve stress tolerance and help lessen the effects of stress on our health.

Think Positively

“Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into positive,” said Hans Selye, author of the groundbreaking work around stress theory. When optimism is hard to muster, cognitive-behavioral therapy, which trains people to recognize negative thinking patterns and replace them with more constructive ones, can also help reduce the risk of chronic stress and depression.

Get Out and Enjoy Nature

While modern civilization has made our lives more convenient, it has deprived us of an essential source of stress relief—connection with nature. Studies show that interacting with nature can help lessen the effects of stress on the nervous system, reduce attention deficits, decrease aggression, and enhance spiritual well-being.

“Smell the Roses” for Better Mood

Aromatherapy, or smelling essential plant oils, recognized worldwide as a complementary therapy for managing chronic pain, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and stress-related disorders, can help you unwind. Orange and lavender scents, in particular, have been shown to enhance relaxation and reduce anxiety.

Relax with a Cup of Tea

During stressful times, coffee helps us keep going. To give yourself a break, however, consider drinking tea. Research shows that drinking tea for 6 weeks helps lower post-stress cortisol and increase relaxation. Habitual tea drinking may also reduce inflammation, potentially benefiting your heart health.

Laugh It Off

Humor relieves stress and anxiety and prevents depression, helping put our troubles in perspective. Laughter can help boost the immune system, increase pain tolerance, enhance mood and creativity, and lower blood pressure, potentially improving treatment outcomes for many health problems, including cancer and HIV. Humor may also be related to happiness, which has been linked to high self-esteem, extroversion, and feeling in control.

Build a Support System

Relationships are also key to health and happiness, especially for women. Women with low social support, for example, are more likely to increase blood pressure under stress. Loneliness may also contribute to stress in both men and women, also leading to poorer outcomes after a stroke or congestive heart failure. On the other hand, active and socially involved seniors are at lower risk for dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. Social support also helps cancer patients to boost the immune system and maintain a higher quality of life.

Employ the Relaxing Power of Music

Music, especially classical, can also serve as a powerful stress-relief tool. Listening to Pachelbel’s famous Canon in D major while preparing a public speech helps avoid anxiety, heart rate, and blood pressure, which usually accompany public speaking.

Singing and listening to music can also relieve pain and reduce anxiety and depression caused by low-back pain. Group drumming also showed positive effects on stress relief and the immune system. Music therapy can also elevate mood and positively affect the immune system in cancer patients and reduce fatigue and improve self-acceptance in people with multiple sclerosis.

To help people deal with stressful medical procedures, music can help reduce anxiety before surgery. When played during surgery, it can decrease the patient's post-operative pain. Aiding recovery, a dose of calming music may lower anxiety, pain, and the need for painkillers.

Calm Your Mind

In recent decades, many forms of meditation have gained popularity as relaxation and pain relief tools. Focusing on our breath, looking at a candle, or practicing a non-judgmental awareness of our thoughts and actions can help tune out distractions, reduce anxiety and depression, and accept our circumstances. In cancer patients, meditation-based stress reduction enhances quality of life, lowers stress symptoms, and potentially benefits the immune system.

Guided imagery, such as visualizing pictures prompted by an audiotape recording, also shows promise in stress relief and pain reduction. Based on the idea that the mind can affect the body, guided imagery can be a useful adjunct to cancer therapy, focusing patients on positive images to help heal their bodies.

Enjoy the Warmth of Human Touch

Just as the mind can affect the body, the body can influence the mind. Virginia Satir, a famous American psychotherapist, once said that people need 4 hugs a day to help prevent depression, 8 for psychological stability, and 12 for growth. While asking for hugs may not work for some, massage can help us relieve stress and reduce anxiety and depression. Massage has also been shown to reduce aggression and hostility in

violent adolescents, to improve mood and behavior in students with ADHD, and to lead to better sleep and behavior in children with autism.

Massage has other therapeutic properties, as well. Regular massage may reduce blood pressure in people with hypertension and may lead to less pain, depression, and anxiety and better sleep in patients with chronic low-back pain. Compared to relaxation, massage therapy also causes greater reduction in depression and anger, and more significant effects on the immune system in breast cancer patients.

Give Exercise a Shot

To get the best of both worlds, affecting the mind through the body while getting into good physical shape, try exercise. In one study, a group of lung cancer patients increased their hope due to exercise. Exercise can also reduce depression and improve wound healing in the elderly. Tai chi, which works for people of all ages, may enhance heart and lung function, improve balance and posture, and prevent falls, while reducing stress.

No matter what stress-relief methods you choose, make it a habit to use them—especially if you feel too stressed out to do it. As someone once said, the time to relax is when you don't have time for it. ■

For more information on what stress is and how it affects our health, go to www.acatoday.org/jaca and find the Dec. 2006 issue.

For references, go to www.acatoday.org/jaca.

ACA American Chiropractic Association

For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, go to the Patient Information section on ACA's Web site at www.acatoday.org or call 800-986-4636.

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