

Summer Edition

7 Smart Strategies for Stress Management

What is stress?

Stress is a feeling that we all experience on a regular basis. Whether we are athletes, coaches, or administrators, it feels as if it invades us no matter what we do. If I said that stress is good, some of us may be skeptical given that we associate stress with feeling uncomfortable. However, our bodies secrete stress hormone, called cortisol, so we can get our muscles moving. Any activity that we perform requires an automatic physiological mechanism to allow us to react. Being alert to the referee's whistle, running back to play defense, and sprinting the last 50 meters would be impossible to execute unless our bodies provided us with the energy to do so. However, it is a completely different experience when we perceive any one of those tasks as excessively negative or potentially threatening.



Unreasonably worrying about facing an opponent, paying excessive attention to an error, or being overly concerned about losing the lead increases our cortisol levels. The more we ruminate on the negative consequences, the higher our cortisol. Our heart begins to race, hands feel sweaty, thoughts are racing, memory recalling becomes more difficult, and our mood is increasingly irritable. Inside our bodies, our overall health equally suffers: excessive sugar is produced by the liver increasing risk for type 2 diabetes; the heart needs to work harder elevating the risk for hypertension and blood vessel problems; headaches become recurrent; our immune system becomes compromised; and, we become prone to

getting physically injured.

Stress is not a sign of personal weakness. It is a physiological response connected to how we perceive the environment around us. Rather than hoping not to get stressed out, we would be better off recognizing our bodies' stress signals in order to take pro-active approaches to deal with stress. These changes start by becoming more self-aware of situations where we tend to

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become stressed. Then, we must disengage from our typical thinking or emotional responses. Lastly, practice at least one of the seven stress management strategies mentioned below.

1. Breathe

If we find ourselves being frustrated and pessimistic, take a pause and re-evaluate what is triggering such a stress response. Going with the emotions of the moment and being carried away into a negative spiral will only increase our stress levels. Hence, take a brief pause and breathe by taking simple, but conscientious breaths. My favorite trick is to start counting backwards starting from 100 by skipping in 7s. Example: 100-93-86-79-72, etc. I don't have to reach to zero, but I stop when I get to a number where I've regained a sense of calm.

2. Use positive reframing

Reframing negative thoughts into positive ones is a very powerful tool. We often find ourselves being immersed in negativity as we picture a pessimistic outlook. Sometimes, we become so ingrained in our negative spiral that it consumes our energy and we find ourselves spreading it out to people around us. The final outcome is definitely not productive. Hence, if we find ourselves heading into a place of negativity, we can put a strong stop to it and reframe it. Most of the time, what we have negatively envisioned may not even happen. Taking a proactive action NOW can surely alleviate potential future negative scenarios. On the other hand, if there is nothing that can be done now, then worrying will only increase our stress levels. Remember, use positive re-framing when faced with a stressful situation or a negative mindset.

3. Find time to turn electronics off

Our pace of life is often quite busy. In a society where we have become so electronically dependent, we are increasingly using our computers, tablets or phones to such an extent that is rapidly becoming an addiction. We seem to have difficulty putting the electronics away. We tend to believe that unless we respond to every text or email right away, we may be socially cut-off. As tempting as it is to remain on top of every text and email, it is surely stressful attempting to do so. We must learn the difference between urgency and importance when faced with an overwhelming amount of electronic communication. Many of our messages or emails are important, but maybe just a few of them are so urgent that require our immediate attention. The important ones can wait. If reducing stress is our goal, then differentiating between important and urgent texts or emails will certainly alleviate some of our stress.

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4. Visualize a positive outcome

There is a direct relationship between how we visualize a future outcome and its eventual result. The more negativity we project, the more likely such a scenario will occur. Hence, there is no point in projecting defeat before competition started. Even if the odds are against you, give yourself the best you've got. You never know! There have been many films produced and books written depicting successful stories of athletes who beat the odds and came out winning. The silver lining of trying your best is to feel empowered by your own efforts and go home feeling proud about yourself.



5. Get a good night's sleep

Along the lines of our "electronic" life, it'd certainly help if we could turn our computer or TV off at least half an hour before going to bed. The blue light from either object triggers the brain into thinking that it is still daylight. As a consequence, the melatonin hormones, which helps us to rest, drop and our sleeping difficulties increase. At the same time, stress hormones remain elevated throughout the night. This combination of elevated cortisol and drop in melatonin makes our bodies feel tired. To compensate for this tired feeling, we tend to jump start our day by drinking coffee, which increases our stress hormones even more. Therefore, remain disciplined to shut down electronics half an hour before bedtime. Our bodies and minds will be very grateful in the morning.

6. Meditate for 10 minutes a day

Research shows that meditation has multiple benefits. It allows our bodies to disengage from our stress, produces calmness, builds our immune system, and promotes healthy hormonal balance. We would all be better off if we took 10 minutes before going to sleep, close our eyes and pay attention to our breath. Bring awareness to the inhale and exhale of each of our breaths. As we pay attention to them, we will likely notice thoughts coming up. Rather than following these thoughts, just notice them and bring the attention BACK to the breath.

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7. Make time to socialize

Last, but not least, do maintain an active social life. Engage in face-to-face interactions with friends. Go out or invite them over for a pizza, or walk instead of drive. Any activity that promotes eye-to-eye interaction directly engages the right side of our brain, which leads to emotion regulation. The more we interact with others, the better our ability to manage our stress.

The Takeaway: Stress is unavoidable, but there are actions we can take that can certainly help us to mitigate its uncomfortable effects. The mentioned strategies can help us manage stress triggers in order to have better control over our emotions. As we begin to manage our stress, the people around us will less likely react in stress. As a result, there will be less stress to manage overall. Like any new habit, it takes commitment, but once we get used to following a stress reducing routine, we will feel more energized and ready to tackle any of life's challenges.



“It’s not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it.”



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