Understanding and Attending to Your Body Under Stress

Today, people face stress on an ongoing basis in both our work and our personal lives. The source of our stresses can sometimes seem boundless—too many demands, and not enough time to meet them; unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others; and the difficulties of balancing work, family and personal life, to name just a few.

At its most basic level, stress is a response to a stimulus. The human body is designed to be able to respond quickly and intensely to stress. If, for example, you're being chased by a person or animal looking to do you harm, or are trying to hunt and kill some dinner of your own, this can be a good thing. But if the challenges you're facing are more in the order of a boss with yet another request or a spouse who can't find their keys, you're probably not well served by the body's full "fight or flight" response.

In human physiology, when faced with a fight or flight situation, the brain releases hormones into the blood. These hormones signal to the adrenal glands to send a large shot of adrenaline into the bloodstream. Adrenaline thickens the blood, making the heart beat faster, which in turn causes the lungs to go into overdrive to pump oxygen back into the bloodstream. Energy is then directed to all the vital organs as the body prepares itself for real exertion.

Modern Stress Responses

The human body is not designed to withstand the physiological effects of constant stress. After a while in such a heightened state of intense demands, the body will start to react and break down. This breakdown starts off with very low-level symptoms, such as the occasional headache or sleepless night, tension, aches, or an increased frequency or susceptibility to colds and flu. If stress continues, its effects may take a real toll on your body, mind, emotions and spirit.

It's important to note that the experience of stress has a lot to do with your perception. If something—say, for example, yet another request from your boss on an already busy day—feels manageable, there's little or no stress involved. On the other hand, if you perceive or experience the request as something you don't have the time for, or something you don't know how to do, or if you interpret a request as manipulative, cruel or thoughtless, then it feels like a stressful experience. In short, your interpretation of the stressful event—or stimulus—will determine the amount of stress you feel in response to it.

Regardless of the situation or your interpretation, the human stress response—under some conditions so adaptive—may become maladaptive if you experience ongoing and chronic stress.

As stress is a multi-faceted experience that involves your body, mind, emotions, spirit and sense of personal well-being, it's important to take a multi-faceted approach when looking to address the negative effects of stress.

10 Stress-Busting Tips

Stress can be tackled at every level by applying the following "stress-busting" tips to lessen the negative symptoms of stress, no matter what its origin or effects.

1. **Exercise.** Work fitness and activity into your daily routine. Even moderate activity for 20 minutes, three or four times a week is enough to have a demonstrable effect on your life and your stress.
2. **Eat well and stay hydrated.** Follow Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating for nutritious, balanced meals. Also, drink plenty of water (six to eight glasses a day), limit caffeine and sugary beverages.
3. **Relax.** Learn relaxation techniques for immediate as well as longer-term stress reduction. Meditation can also help settle the mind so you can think calmly throughout the day. It puts you in control of your thoughts by forcing you to be present in the moment and observe your thought processes.

4. **Sleep.** Sleeping too much, or not enough, is a sign of stress, as well as a contributor to it. Practice proper sleep hygiene, by getting six to nine hours of rest each night.
5. **Spend time with friends, family and pets.** Share your thoughts and feelings, seek support and give support. Reciprocal, respectful and nurturing relationships are essential to good mental health. Further, pets can be a source of unconditional love that ask for little and give so much back.
6. **Lighten up.** Inject some humour into every day—see a funny movie, read the comics, call a friend who always makes you laugh. Cultivate a healthy sense of the ridiculous. Consider doing something creative or just plain silly. Tickle your kids; make up a story about the man waiting for the bus, or just plain daydream.
7. **Socialize.** Find open ears and open minds; talk and share your experiences and interests. Join a formal support group, a book club, a service organization, your local place of worship, or a casual group of friends and family.
8. **Write.** Keep a diary or journal, and record your thoughts and feelings. You don't have to show anyone. The act of writing often gives us a new perspective on situations, others and ourselves.
9. **Remain positive.** Negative self-talk, over-generalizing and perfectionism aren’t good practices to keep. Learn “cognitive reframing” techniques and become a positive thinker. Be gentle with yourself, as well as others. You're only human and you're doing the best you can.
10. **Don’t be afraid to ask for help.** You can't do everything yourself, and you don't have to go it alone. If you're finding it difficult to cope, talk about it with a trusted friend, family member or counsellor.

It's simple on paper—but harder in real life. Still, every step you take to better stress management will pay dividends in the short and long term. Start by making one or two small changes, and you'll work your way up to a less stressed lifestyle sooner than you think.