Stress Busters to Stay Lighthearted

Breakfast, traffic jams, overloaded inboxes, meetings, doctor's appointments, grocery shopping, dentist appointments, cooking, cleaning, laundry, sleep. Sound familiar? Life in the fast lane can not only be exhausting, but unhealthy causing high blood pressure, fatigue, headaches and depression. Even more troubling are the effects on your heart: while short bursts of stress can give your body a quick boost, over the long run it wears away at your ticker increasing your chances of heart disease, hypertension and clogged arteries. Below are some quick tips that can help keep stress in check and your heart light.

Spot the signs. Learning to listen to the stress signals your mind and body are sending can save your heart and mind problems down the road. Stress triggers the release of steroid hormones and cortisol which over time damage heart function. Physical stress symptoms caused by the same hormones include: insomnia, headaches, back, shoulder or neck pain, fatigue, heart palpitations and upset stomach. Poor concentration, depression, mood swings and feelings of nervousness are all emotional signals that you're in stress overload. Combat minor symptoms with a relaxing routine, whether it's yoga, singing in the shower or a massage.

Get support. Ask family or friends to help run errands or watch the kids while you get some housework done. If you care for an older relative, look into respite services. Have friends with children? Take turns babysitting so you can get out with your partner. Assign each family member household chores from tidying up the living room to taking out the garbage. If balancing work and home seems overwhelming, seek help from a professional who may be able to help you uncover ways to reduce and manage stress and its symptoms.

Know your limits. Your co-worker asks you to stay late to help out (for the third night in a row) and your sister keeps nagging you to baby-sit. Learning to say "no" is crucial when you already have a full plate. Set boundaries by deciding in advance how much time you can commit to home, work and outside activities and stick to them. Then, when you've already given it your all you won't feel guilty (politely) turning down invitations that overextend your agenda.

Manage work. Good scheduling is the best way to rein in time-eaters. Allocate a realistic amount of time for each project and concentrate on one task, rather than trying to do five things at once. Let go of perfectionist control issues, by enlisting the support of colleagues who are willing to help you complete tasks. Finally, find a daily ritual that helps you decompress before arriving home-whether it's a quick walk, a workout, listening to music or reading a book on the commute home.

Plan and organize. Disorganization breeds anxiety, so map out a strategy that keeps your ship sailing smoothly. Make meals on the weekend and freeze them for later. Lay out clothes and pack lunches the night before. Can't remember the last time you watched a movie or took a walk with your partner? Set a weekly date for some time alone together. Stop worrying about the dishes and make a point of spending quality time with your kids each night. Staying connected with family and friends will help keep you focused on what's really important.

Switch work off and socialize. The age of technology held the promise of ease, speed and more free time. But the reality is that e-mail, text messaging and mobile phones are making it more difficult to escape work. In fact, recent research shows the digital age is creating psychological distress and decreasing the quality of home time. The negative emotional affects can contribute to irregular heart rhythms and reduced estrogen levels in women as well. Try turning off the technology when not at work and reconnect to the world face-to-face through hobbies, volunteer work, spiritual involvement or meeting with friends. Studies suggest strong social connections help you cope better with stress, keep you emotionally and physically healthy and may (in men specifically) actually help protect the heart from cardiovascular disease.

Have fun. Laughter is truly the best medicine. It releases endorphins-feel-good chemicals produced by the body 10 times more powerful than morphine-and decreases stress hormones. So if you're wound up so tight that a jack-in-the-box has nothing on you, take a break. Get some laughs at a stand-up comedy show or get in touch with your inner child by scheduling a fun 'play date' with your family or friends each week. Keep weekend plans to a minimum so you leave time for a little spontaneity. With so many commitments, it's easy to forget the things we enjoy most-fun, friends and family.

Ensure that taking time out to relax and rejuvenate isn't a guilty pleasure. After all when you're at your best physically and emotionally, you're more engaged and valuable to those around you. Day-to-day stresses are a never-ending roller coaster and finding strategies to achieve work-life balance can take some time and effort.