

OUTSMARTING STRESS

Stress – we all experience it, we all complain about it, we all create it. Every stimulus causes stress. It is simply the body's physical, mental and chemical reaction to life's events and circumstances.

Stress is not in itself a problem, but your reaction to it can be. Stress is just a teacher. It is simply trying to inform us what is and is not working for us. We need to pay attention. Pleasant, joyful, life-affirming stimuli generate *eustress*; painful, irritating, traumatic and destructive stimuli generate *distress*. Both forms of stress, when unmanaged or out of balance, can lead to a variety of unpleasant, unhealthy conditions.

If we don't deal with stress, it WILL deal with us. Unmanaged stress leads to fatigue, anxiety, depression, hypertension, cardiac problems, stroke, and autoimmune disorders, among other problems. Fortunately, even simple changes in lifestyle or attitude can help reverse or avoid the effects of chronic stress.

Here's an exercise that can help alleviate the effects of stress. When something happens that causes you to feel stressed, take a 10- or 15-minute break and try this:

1. Sit comfortably in a quiet environment. Close your eyes or just relax your eyelids.
2. Breathe normally, but notice the natural inflow and outflow of your breath.
3. Gently notice any areas of tension in your body as a result of the stressing event. Imagine you can "breathe into" those areas, but don't try to force any change.
4. Reflect on the event that activated your stress. Notice the thoughts you have about the stressful event, but don't attach to those thoughts. Allow them to drift through your mind like clouds drifting overhead. Force nothing to stay and nothing away.
5. Notice whether the degree of stress you feel was heightened by the thoughts you have about the triggering event. Is it possible you may be making the stress worse by telling yourself a story about what happened to you? Release any thoughts you have about the event – imagine them drifting away. You still know the event happened, but the story you tell yourself about it just drifts away.
6. Notice how you feel in your body, and now relax. Then focus on an affirming word, such as "love" or "peace" or "calm". Some traditions suggest mantras, like "Om" or "Aah". Repeat it silently for several minutes.
7. If your attention drifts, bring your focus back to your breath and the word.
8. Notice your body's response. Don't do anything, just notice.
9. At the end of 10-15 minutes, gently bring yourself back to your surroundings and open your eyes. Stretch big, like a cat waking up.
10. Notice how you feel now, and whether there is any difference from when you began this exercise.

When an exercise like this is practiced daily on whatever stresses you, you'll likely notice subtle differences in your mood within a week. Within a month, you will probably have a much better reaction to what stresses you. A stress-free life is neither healthy nor possible, but well-managed stress can bring new energy, deeper awareness and more aliveness to your life.