

Dr. Artemis Morris, ND, L.Ac
Medical director, Revive Wellness Center
867 Whalley Avenue
New Haven, CT 06515
203-387-1540
www.revivewellnesscenter.com
drartemis@drartemis.com

Stress: What it does to your health and what to do about it

80 % of illnesses are due to stress. Hans Selye, MD was the first to characterize the physiological effects of stress on the body and describe how stress can lead to infections, illness, disease, and even death as he presents in his book The Stress of Life (1956). Since the 1950s, there has been a flood of research on the effects of stress on the body, including the birth of a new field called Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI). Hans Selye described the stages of stress that our body's experiences as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS).

Psychological stress, toxins, nutrient deficiencies, thyroid and sex hormonal imbalances, inflammatory proteins (cytokines), and pain are some of the signals that lead to the stress response. Physical ways of stimulating the stress response include environmental toxins (pesticides, heavy metals, chemotherapeutic agents, pollution), pathogens (bacteria, viruses, spirochetes, parasites, yeast), pharmaceutical drugs, allergens, dietary and nutritional imbalances, hormonal imbalances, and intense physical labor. The mind produces psychological stress that leads to the stress response. The physiological effects of stress are produced by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) of the body that is responsible for secreting hormones, such as cortisol. There are 3 stages of stress on your body according to the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) of Hans Selye.

Stages of Stress and what it does to your body.

Stage 1. Alarm. This is when you experience stress and it produces the “fight-or-flight” reaction in your body, but you are able to bounce back. At this stage your body produces adrenaline which increases your heart rate, channels blood flow to the muscles and away from the digestive tract and immune system and cortisol levels increase temporarily to rebalance your system. At this reactivity or alarm stage the bursts of stress, such as, exams or holiday preparations, can deplete your immune system and lead to colds and flus, heart palpitations, and temporary difficulty sleeping.

The best way to combat stress at this stage is to make sure you are eating well, avoiding immune depressants, such as, refined sugars and “junk” food, take plenty of time to rest, learn coping skills, exercise, and engage in stress reducing activities. A good multivitamin with optimal amounts of Vitamin C, B complex, and magnesium will provide the co-factors necessary for your body to “bounce-back” after acute stress.

Stage 2. Resistance. At this stage you are experiencing chronic daily stressors that you can respond to, but, require you to function at a hyper-vigilant level. Examples of this chronic daily stress includes the constant demands of work, children, financial, and relationship stressors that make you reach for more stimulants or simple carbohydrates

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for a quick fix. During this stage your body is producing more cortisol and other hormones (prolactin, adrenalin, etc) to keep up with the chronic stress, but, at a price. Chronic stress can lead to depression, chronic anxiety, addictions, chronic and acute pain, fibromyalgia, chronic insomnia, hormonal imbalances (thyroid disorders, PMS, high FSH), digestive disorders (IBS), non-specific fatigue, chronic sinusitis, bronchitis, and colds, and be a factor in the development of autoimmune disorders. The adrenal glands which produce cortisol are also responsible for helping to balance hormone levels during menopause, thus, being in stage 2 of the stress response contributes to more intense symptoms of menopause.

This is also the stage where chronically high cortisol levels can make it difficult to lose weight, put on the pounds around the middle of the belly, and lead to insulin resistance and Diabetes.

Stage 3. Exhaustion. In the previous stage the body was hyper-reactive to keep up with the chronic demands and effects of stress on the body, at this stage you have depleted your resources and the adrenal glands that produce cortisol are exhausted so your cortisol levels are below normal and you and your body are exhausted. It is more difficult to “bounce back” to normal functioning than it is in the previous Resistance stage because your energy reserves have been depleted and it will take longer to get you back to health. At this stage, you **must** take a vacation. Common disorders at this stage are fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple chemical sensitivities, autoimmune disorders, chronic depression and anxiety. In this stage that if you have not yet been diagnosed with something, such as, a thyroid disorder or insulin resistance, you will have “unexplained” fatigue and pain.

The good news is that even if you are in the exhaustion stage, there are many tools that Naturopathic medicine and oriental medicine can offer to bring you back into balance if you provide a commitment to healing yourself.

What to do about stress:

There are three main tools you have to deal with the 3 stages of stress and they involve the body, mind, and spirit.

Men for the sake of getting a living forget to live. ~Margaret Fuller

BODY:

The effects of stress on the body are aided by eating healthy, taking vitamins to replace the nutrients used by your body during the stress response, using adrenal adaptogens, exercising, and getting Acupuncture to rebalance the HPA axis.

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A healthy diet means eating vegetables, fruits, whole grains, protein (beans, nuts, fish, poultry, meat sparingly), some dairy products if you tolerate them, and good fats, such as olive oil. Avoid refined sugars, “junk” food, additives, preservatives, high fructose corn syrup (it increases your risk of developing diabetes), and hydrogenated or “trans” fats.

Vitamins important for dealing with stress because they are used during the stress response include: B vitamins, Vitamin C, and magnesium.

Adrenal adaptogens are natural products which increase the body’s resistance to stress due to any cause (physical, chemical, psychological) and are nontoxic. Adrenal adaptogens increase physical and mental stamina and performance, reduce the incidence of infection, protect the body against radiation damage and side effects of chemotherapy, increase resistance to chemical carcinogens, have a harmonizing effect on body and the endocrine and immune system.

The most common adrenal adaptogens include the ginsengs, Panax ginseng and Panax quinquefolius, Eleutherococcus senticosus, Glycyrrhiza uralensis (licorice root) and glabra, Withania somnifera (ashwaganda), and Ginkgo biloba.

The ginsengs are also helpful for reducing blood sugar in diabetics and have been found to shorten the duration of colds and flu. Eleutherococcus is especially helpful for increasing stamina for athletes and is not as stimulating as the other ginsengs. Licorice root is also good for preventing ulcers, reflux disease, is antiviral and antibacterial, and should be used with caution in people with high blood pressure. Ashwaganda is an herb from India that also helps make some cancer therapies more effective, in addition to its general adaptogenic effects on the effects of stress on the body. Ginkgo is also good for memory, ringing of the ears, and has been found to work as well as some medications for anxiety. As always, consult your Naturopathic physician before trying any herbs or supplements to guarantee safety of product in combination with other things you may be taking, efficacy of the dosage and quality of the product, and individualize your treatment plan to minimize side-effects and increase efficacy.

For fast-acting relief, try slowing down. ~Lily Tomlin

MIND

Stress is actually a perceived emotion. What this means is that you do not have to let psychological stress lead to the stress response in your body, such as, not letting the fact that you hate your daughter’s boyfriend lead to an anxiety attack. Most of us have a lot of work to do in order to reach the enlightened stage where we are in a constant state of contentment, no matter what happens. Emotions are a normal part of being human and

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exist to help us recognize what we may need to change in order to deal with life's challenges. Crying actually releases endorphins, the feel good chemicals, to soothe our grief. The first step to dealing with the emotional response is fully experiencing it and then developing coping skills or a change in attitude to address the stress. Psychological stress is helped by cognitive behavior psychology, therapy, social support, meditation, and books on how to not let stress lead to a vicious cycle by being present, such as, The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle. Everyone will need to find the method that works best for them in how to deal with psychological stress.

The 5 Elements of Chinese medicine explain how each of the emotions will create patterns of imbalance in your body. Worry will lead to digestive disorders, anger and frustration will lead to chronic aches, pains, and headaches, lack of joy and spiritual connection will lead to heart troubles and anxiety, grief will lead to immune system and lung problems, fear will lead to reproductive and urinary tract imbalances. Because each of these emotions is associated with an element and each of the elements interact with one another, imbalances in any one of these areas will affect the other areas. Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine bring harmony back to these psychological and physical imbalances.

Ancient systems of dealing with psychological and physical stress include meditation, yoga, dance, and Acupuncture.

Give your stress wings and let it fly away. ~Carin Hartness

SPIRIT

Regardless of belief, prayer and trusting in a spiritual force have been shown to help deal with the stress of life. Feeling a connection to a common source and to each-other is the hallmark of religions and philosophies worldwide. Feel free to explore books, practices, or communities that help to put your stress and worries into perspective and allow for social support.

The mark of a successful man is one that has spent an entire day on the bank of a river without feeling guilty about it. ~Author Unknown

Wishing you stillness in the center of chaos.

Sincerely,

Dr. Artemis Morris, ND, LAc