

## What exactly is Stress?

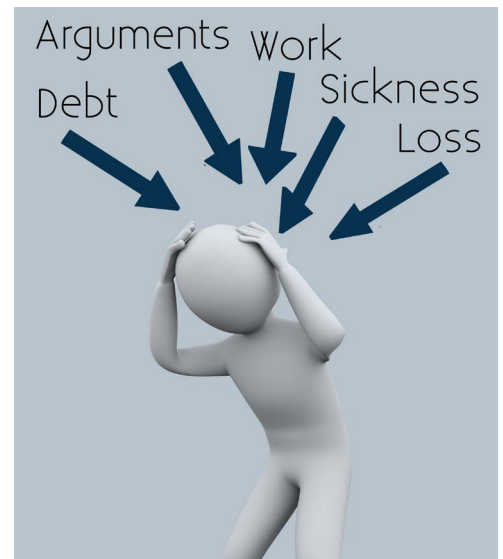
### Is All Stress Bad?

Good or bad stress is here to stay. Good? Yes, stress can be good for you.<sup>1</sup> Acute stress for major life events like having a baby, getting married, or starting a new job are all normal and even healthy. Stress can make us more aware and in tune thus make better decisions.

When is it not good? When it is continual, chronic, and/or having a negative impact. Chronic stress may be one of the biggest factors in increasing the risk of several diseases relating to inflammation like MS, Crohn's, heart disease, fatigue, fibromyalgia. It's even been linked to breast and other cancers. Dr. Gabor Mate has documented several cases of this in his book, "When Your Body Says No." When stress is prolonged that is when it creates problems such as fatigue, poor concentration, depression, anxiety, tension, irritability, anger, muscle pain, increases inflammation (risk of all kinds of disease) and even lowers the function of the brain.<sup>2</sup>

So what is stress? Your car breaks down on the freeway? Your doctor says, you need surgery? Believe it or not, these are not stress, but rather they are stressors. Stressors are things that produce a reaction in your mind and body. This reaction is stress. The first phase of stress is the alarm reaction with an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, and blood flow to active muscles, but with a decrease in blood flow to other areas like the kidneys. This is the flight or fight response, and when it is short term, it is not harmful. But if our reaction is prolonged that's when it can cause problems. Our reaction is based on our coping mechanisms. That is why two people can go through the same event and one person experiences chronic stress or even PTSD (the very extreme end of the stress spectrum) while the other person has no lasting ill effects. Our thoughts and self-beliefs dramatically influence how we experience life emotionally.<sup>3</sup>

A stressor can be in any form. Physical - a dog bite, mental - death of a friend, chemical - caffeine, poor diet, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Anything that causes you to negatively react to your surroundings. If your coping skills are really poor, you can even have a stress reaction for so long you don't remember what caused it leading to generalized anxiety or even panic attacks over seemingly minor things. You may need professional help in this case to dig deeper into the root cause.



## Reducing Stressors

So how can you reduce stress? Identifying your triggers is an important first step. What is causing you the most distress? Get them all down on paper and be specific. I can't tell you how many times clients have been amazed at how helpful writing it down is. Please don't go on until you've done this step.

Write out your most common stressors.

Look over this list. Are there any you can eliminate or reduce? How do you know? Examine your life priorities. Sometimes stress can reveal we are not putting our own values in order. We may be caught up in other's ideas of what life should look like. We may also discover we expect too much of ourselves. What is realistic for you to accomplish? Prioritize the important things and put those into the schedule first. Then add the necessities - food, sleep, exercise, and work. Proper time management can help reduce stress.

List stressors you can reduce or eliminate:

How will you do this (be specific!!! What needs to change in your life?):

## Soothing Solutions



Of course we can't avoid all stressful events in our lives. There are many things we don't have control over. We can use various Soothing Solutions to help mediate those stressors. We are all unique and so you may need 1, 5, or all of the ideas listed below. There may be some things that help you that are not listed as well. Each one is a study in itself, these are just listed here to wet your appetite.

By the way, these are not to simply distract you but to help give you rest from the stressor and even guide your mind to a more positive outlook on your life in general. Taking your mind off your stress gives your mind and body a chance to unwind, but this is not about ignoring your feelings or your own troubles. You still need to deal with your negative thoughts and feelings, but in a productive way, not obsessing over them.

**Exercise:** You knew that was coming right? Exercise has been studied over and over for its health benefits. There are many reasons exercise helps to

reduce the effects of stress and it even helps reduce stress itself. When we are active we tend to be more healthy. Being physically healthy helps us emotionally.

“Few things are more stressful than illness. Many forms of exercise reduce stress directly, and by preventing bodily illness, exercise has extra benefits for the mind. Regular physical activity will lower your blood pressure, improve your cholesterol, and reduce your blood sugar. Exercise cuts the risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, colon and breast cancers, osteoporosis and fractures, obesity, depression, and even dementia (memory loss). Exercise slows the aging process, increases energy, and prolongs life. Except during illness, you should exercise nearly every day. That doesn’t necessarily mean hitting the gym or training for a marathon. But it does mean 30 to 40 minutes of moderate exercise such as walking or 15 to 20 minutes of vigorous exercise. More is even better, but the first steps provide the most benefit. Aim to walk at least two miles a day, or do the equivalent amount of another activity. You can do it all at once or in 10 to 15 minute chunks if that fits your schedule better. Add a little strength training and stretching two to three times a week, and you’ll have an excellent, balanced program for health and stress reduction.”<sup>5</sup>

**Nature:** A lake side picnic, a hike to a waterfall, walking along a creek, all provide several health benefits. Getting fresh air in nature is a great tool to reduce blood pressure and reduce the effects of stress. Air blowing over moving water is rich in negative ions which are linked to reducing chronic depression and elevate mood in general.<sup>6</sup> Nature has several other healing properties we are not sure how it all works, only that it does.<sup>7</sup> The sun itself has benefits for mental health including increasing serotonin (the happy hormone) and vit D.<sup>8,9</sup> You can see why community gardening is taking off. So many benefits!



**Sleep:** Sleep is needed in the production of melatonin, which is vital in the body’s arsenal of stress coping mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> Poor sleep has been linked to several mental health issues.<sup>11</sup> Do your best to get your own optimum levels of rest usually 6.5 to 8.5 hours. BUT don’t worry about your sleep. A recent study showed people who worried about sleeping poorly scored worse whether or not they actually had insomnia or other sleep issue. What we think matters so much more than we realize! Prof. Lichstein states, “There are clearly people with poor sleep who are relaxed about it,” “They just let it “roll off their back, and they are at low risk for impaired functioning.”<sup>12</sup> If you have having trouble sleeping try the deep breathing technique under “mindfulness”.

**Simplify:** Clutter takes up space and time. Excess stuff can be physical, too many clothes, or mental, baggage from years gone by. Unload every unnecessary thing. Do a little each day, start in your favourite room. Excess stuff can also be connected to poor time management. Ever find yourself feeling rushed trying to get out the door because you can find your keys? Well organized closets also have a calming effect on the mind. Pantries and fridges that are kept in good order help with meal decisions.

It may seem like a low priority to tackle the junk draw but if your half your house looks in the same condition you may be adding unnecessary work and stressors into your day. Having less stuff = less decisions and in a world of decision overload we can use all the help we can get. The Mayo clinic reports, “If the constant stream of things to pick up around your home leaves you feeling anxious, you’re not alone. Objects have the power to do just that. In fact, when working couples gave tours of their homes, women who used more words describing

clutter and disorganization also tended to show levels of the stress hormone cortisol, suggesting chronic stress. On the flip side, those who described their homes as being restful or talked about their beautiful outdoor spaces were less stressed and reported less sad feelings as the day went on.”<sup>13</sup>



**Music:** Not only does singing or listening to music help re-direct negative thoughts, but making music can of itself improve mood, cognitive function, and can even reverse stress genes.<sup>14</sup> Music is a powerful tool, when used appropriately. Don't listen to 'my honey done me wrong' songs if you are stressed about your relationships! Instead, listening to upbeat, happy music that is empowering or listen to classical music which also strengthens the frontal lobe.

**Volunteer Work:** Really, you want me to ADD more stuff to my life!!! Well, you might have to eliminate something else, say 2 hours on social media or TV. Volunteers report a much higher sense of peace and happiness than people who do not volunteer. This can take your mind off your own problems and see there is a lot more going on in this world than your backyard. It can help give you perspective. Work at a soup kitchen, visit shut ins, help someone with limited mobility, and so on.

**Spiritual Empowerment:** When POW's are asked what is the most important thing that got them through, often "faith in God" is the answer.<sup>15,16</sup> Faith is not about religion. One can be spiritual without being religious. And for those who do believe in "God", faith is only helpful if you are serving a loving, powerful God. If your God is a tyrant or is powerless to help you, tough luck. Faith is not about forcing yourself to believe a Bible verse and feeling guilty if you do have stress, anxiety or sadness. It is about developing a relationship with a being outside yourself that can provide a source of comfort, love, and power.

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness or active meditation is very popular these days. In 2018 Harvard has this to report, "We're talking about moderate effect size, on par with other treatments, not better."<sup>17</sup> So, don't feel bad if mindfulness doesn't work for you. Like ALL of the tips in this booklet, there are limitations to any one approach. It may not work for you, for this situation, or it may need to be combined with others to be effective. We are complex and need a multifactorial approach. What we do know is active meditation is more beneficial than traditional meditation where you try to 'empty' your mind. This is a relief to Christians, but more than that it is the link between prayer and mental health. Prayer, is a form of active meditation. You'll need to incorporate prayer or mindfulness into your daily routine. It requires consistency to get results.<sup>18</sup> There are many ways to practice mindfulness but in it's simplest form it's about awareness. Noticed what you are feeling in this moment? What thoughts are you having? What is going on around you? (For Christians, add this question. Are you feeling prompted to pray for someone or something in particular?). Once you notice what you are feeling and thinking pause and dwell on it for just a min or two. Now you can do some deep breathing.

**Deep Breathing:** There several ways to do deep breathing, here is JUST one that's been used in conjunction with relaxation.<sup>19</sup> Breath in as deep as you can through your nose hold it for a count of 20 (as fast as you can count) then purse your lips and blow it all out. Do 30 times (about 5 minutes). FREE video demo and explanation here: [bit.ly/deepbreathing20](http://bit.ly/deepbreathing20)

**Recreation:** Take a trip. Sometimes we need perspective and we simply need a break. If you find you are worse during vacation you may be experiencing burnout.<sup>20</sup> If you are exhausted even doing the things you love



or on a vacation this is a red flag. If you can't control irrationality, anger, or sadness, it's a red flag. Talk to a health professional, there are many issues that can cause exhaustion but one often overlooked is mental distress and or burnout. Do not be ashamed to ask for help. EVERYONE experiences some form of anxiety, depression, grief, or stress and MOST people can benefit from talking to someone about it. Let's throw out the labels, and the fear, and move forward to having whole health body and mind.

**Sabbath:** While this may seem like a Jewish or religious activity, a day of rest from the cares of the world is one of the factors in longevity and health according to the study down by Harvard in the National Geographic.<sup>21</sup> Taking time out to relax each week has been shown to help people not only live longer, but have a higher quality of life. You don't have to cram something on your task list in every day. It's ok to have a day off, in fact, it's vital for your health. You'll be more productive in the long run. There will always be laundry, cleaning, fixing, shopping, running around, to do. Those never go away, so do what is meaningful to you and then fit in the rest during the week. This is the day to really embrace the most important priorities in your life, like friends and family.

**Gratitude:** An Attitude of Gratitude can go a long way. Being thankful is a great tool for stress management. Get a journal and write something each day you are thankful for. Gratitude has been shown helpful for physical and mental wellness. Here are 7 scientifically proven benefits as seen in Psychology Today:<sup>22</sup>

1. Gratitude opens the door to more relationships.
2. Improves physical health - fewer aches and pains.
3. Improves psychological health - increases happiness and reduces depression.
4. Enhances empathy and reduces aggression.
5. Grateful people sleep better.
6. Gratitude improves self-esteem.
7. Gratitude increases mental strength - reduces stress and helps overcome trauma.

Make this practical:

There are many other tools for reducing stress. Start with what has worked in the past for you? What sounds the easiest to accomplish right now? Start there!

What is your second choice and how are you going to make that real for you?



Third choice?

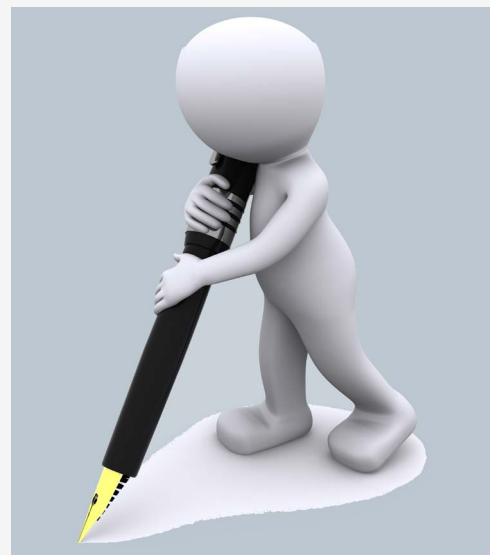
Good now you have a place to start. Now, list 10 things you are grateful for:

## Coping Skills

The third step is to tune up your thoughts about the stressors you have no control over. What we think, is what we are. Our thoughts about events affect us more important than the events themselves.<sup>23</sup> Take the time now to do some soul searching of your own. Recommended reading, “When Panic Attacks” by Dr. David Burns.

Are you adding to your own stress? Expectations, Erroneous thoughts, and Ego can all play a part in increasing stress. When doing self-examination looking at your situation and ask yourself could it be worse? Is it the end of the world? Remind yourself: You can stand it, you can get through it, this too shall pass. Negative thinking is triggered by real events. CBT research shows you can have some control how you respond to external circumstances regardless of how intense, tragic or traumatizing. Using your CBT handout (or my free ebook “The Truth Will Set You Free”) work through each of the stressors you can’t avoid.

What stressors are out of your control?



Pick ONE! What thoughts do you have around this stressor (write out negative thoughts not facts, questions, or feelings)?

What are the cognitive distortions in those thoughts ie. Overgeneralization, fortune telling, magnification, emotional reasoning, etc.?

What can you tell yourself instead?



## Lifestyle Matters

But what about the stressors that may be buried beneath our coping mechanisms. Interestingly enough we can help ourselves even if we can't identify all the stressors in our lives. Gillian Bethel, Ph.D. discovered clients at a lifestyle center were often relieved of their stress with exercise, rest, and a good diet before they even got to her for stress counselling.<sup>24</sup>

That leads us to the fourth step, which is a healthful diet and active lifestyle.<sup>25</sup> Eating a nutritious diet actually provides the body what it needs to make it resilient to stress. Low fat, high fiber, lots of fruits, grains, legumes, and vegetables. If you are lacking certain nutrients, like tryptophan for example, you can't produce the happy hormones like serotonin. You need sunlight for vitamin D and to build serotonin. Regular, moderate exercise helps to reduce cortisol levels (produced by your reaction to stress) and increases energy.<sup>26</sup>

## Summary

Not all stress is bad. Accepting healthy stress can reduce the secondary stress of feeling guilty for being a normal human being. But when stress becomes chronic or there is too much going on to reasonably deal with it can lead to all kinds of health issues including emotional strain and even contribute to physical diseases. There are several ways to cope with stress and or reduce it. Each person deals with life events in different ways but you can choose to learn a new way of approaching stressful circumstances including CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy) which helps you see things in a more realistic and healthy way.<sup>27</sup> You

You can also take a stress management seminar, look for one in your local area or ask your health coach or therapist about managing stress better. Try the self-help Stress Management course by Cameron Johnston, MscPH at: [www.BodyMindHealthCoach.com](http://www.BodyMindHealthCoach.com). It includes the book “Don’t Eat the Soup as Hot as They Cook It” as well as a stress assessment and many more tips on reducing and coping with stress.



*Note: This Handout is not intended to take the place of your doctor, therapist, or health professional. It is for educational use only.*

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