

Creating – and Recreating – Your Stress Balance

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Can there possibly be anything good about the stress in your life? The answer is: YES! Research shows that we need stress to reach our peak performance at many tasks and to earn the deep satisfaction of solving tough problems. Without some stress we stagnate. Stress helps us to stretch and grow toward our full potential.

The problem is when we feel *overstressed*, a sign that we need to develop our skills in *managing* stress. We need to develop a *balance* of the optimal amount and kind of stress to do well in life's challenges, coupled with the ability to relax deeply when we want to. Creating – and recreating – that balance is unique for each woman. That's right: we may achieve a balance that's good for us, and then our lives change, and we need to recreate a balance that works for us. So stress management is a lifelong process.

Here are a few basic guidelines most people will do well to follow. You can complement these with the added techniques that work best for you.

The essentials.....

The touchstone of effective stress management is taking good care of yourself physically and emotionally, to *prevent* stress overload. The basics:

- Eat regularly, using a healthy, well-balanced nutrition plan
- Get regular sleep (in the amount you really need)
- Exercise aerobically for at least 30 minutes, three or four times a week. In addition to many other health benefits, regular exercise reduces stress, increases energy, enhances mood, and helps us sleep better, all of which directly affect our ability to manage stress.

In his book, *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy: The Harvard Medical School Guide to Healthy Eating* (2001, Simon & Schuster), physician Walter C. Willett provides an excellent, very readable compilation of medical research that separates scientific evidence from popular trend on such important topics as carbohydrates, protein, and fats. Standing the traditional food pyramid on its head, Willett provides sensible guidelines to help you formulate an individual approach to enjoyable eating and weight management, for disease prevention and enhanced health that contribute to preventive stress management.

The next essential component in managing stress is *proper breathing*. It is easy to learn and use what another Harvard physician, Herbert Benson, called “the relaxation response,” the physical and emotional opposite of the stress response our reactions to people and events can cause.

A miracle of the human body is that it is physiologically impossible to be both stressed and relaxed at the same time. When we use proper breathing to relax, our bodies and our minds automatically become less stressed. It really is that simple! Regular practice of proper breathing – especially combined with *mindfulness* that keeps us focused in the present moment – (instead of worried about the past or the future) – employs the most powerful tools we have for managing stress and keeping it balanced at the optimal level we need for the present life challenges we face, while preventing or reducing stress overload.

Medical evidence supports the health value of daily breathing or meditation practice. Among the primary positive effects are: lowering of stress, blood pressure and pulse rate, and reductions of insomnia, pain, and anxiety. There is recent evidence, as well, of the value of mindfulness – that is, a focus on the present moment, rather than the past or future – in eliminating depression. Three excellent books on breathing and mindfulness are:

- Minding the Body, Mending the Heart, J. Borysenko (A Bantam Book , 1988)
- The Miracle of Mindfulness, T. N. Hanh (Beacon Press,1987)
- The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness (includes audio CD), M.G. Williams, J.D. Teasdale, Z.V. Segal, J. Kabat-Zinn (The Guilford Press, 2007)

Qi Gong (which means “working with energy,”) is an ancient Chinese practice that involves breathing and very slow and gentle body movements. It can be very helpful in establishing or re-establishing a state of relaxation and a feeling of emotional and physical balance. An excellent introductory DVD is Qi Gong Flow for Beginners, Lee Holden (Pacific Healing Arts).

Many local classes, coaches, and complementary health care providers also teach skills for healthy breathing as the key to relaxation. Most people enjoy developing and using these skills.

In addition to the basics above, choose additional stress management strategies that match your unique signs of stress overload or relaxation needs.....

1. Spend one hour every day doing an activity purely because you enjoy it.
2. Take breaks from challenging activities and plan vacations that rejuvenate you. (Remember that a few days in your own home can be a vacation, if you make it so.)
3. Take three minutes to watch a beautiful video that calms you <http://positivepause.com/>. Paste this link on your computer at home or work, so it’s handy when you need it.
4. Develop a support system of friends and family with whom you share joys, sorrows, and practical help.

5. Take a few minutes throughout the day to re-center yourself: focus, slow, and deepen your breathing; move your body and stretch out tense muscles; smile.
6. Distinguish between things you can control and things you cannot control. Focus your attention and energy on the former and let go of the latter.
7. Give yourself five minutes at the end of each day to write in a journal about you are grateful from the day.
8. Spend reflective time to identify the spiritual values, life activities and relationships that are most important to you. Make deliberate choices to manage your time, and focus your energies on what nourishes you, living consciously from your own center.
9. Banish perfectionism from your psyche and behavior. Everyone will feel better if you do!
10. Develop and use skills in responsible assertiveness, telling others what you want and need, asking for help when you need it, and saying “no” to requests that you don’t want to fulfill.
11. If you are aware of tension in your body or mind, follow this tip from wellness expert and massage therapist Jane Kauffman-Marinelli: to the sound of fast-paced, high energy music, vigorously shake your body all over for five minutes. Then freeze and feel the tingle in your limbs. Then dance gently to Reggae or similar music for another five minutes, in a free form that feels, good, light, and fun for you. This is a 10-minute tension-buster that leaves you smiling, and your kids will love to join in.
12. Remember: “She who laughs lasts!”

Stress doesn’t have to be our enemy. Properly managed, stress helps us perform better at challenging tasks, which allow us to feel the deep satisfaction of growing toward our potential as human beings. The key is *managing stress*, to create – and continually recreate – our own unique balance through needed relaxation.

You can take steps today to manage your stress. Feel free to call or email me if you’d like to know more about how I can help you.

Give yourself the gift of your life!

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