

## Getting Serious about Stress

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Admirably, many of us reading this article exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, abstain from smoking and drink alcohol moderately. Yet, many of us who live the active lifestyle still experience high levels of stress in our lives, periods of depression and occasional bouts of debilitating anxiety. While we accept that stress may be an occupational hazard of modern life, we may not realize it erases much of the benefits of good living. Stress lowers metabolism, increases abdominal adiposity (fat around our middle that stresses heart function), disrupts blood sugar regulation and contributes to sexual dysfunction, infertility and depression – and that’s the short list! These hazards are so serious that many fitness gurus insist that we must begin to direct the same passion we have for living an active life towards creating resources to cope with the stresses of daily living. But our modern society has a love/hate relationship with stress. We thrive on it and use it to motivate ourselves. Some may even feel that giving up stress would mean “dropping out” of the race – not an option when we have family or loved ones to support and a mortgage to pay.

To deal with stress skillfully, it’s important to recognize its rightful place in our biology. What we call “stress” - that stomach-churning, heart pounding reaction to an irritating boss or news from Wall Street - is actually a valuable evolutionary mechanism that has allowed for the survival of our species. The biological stress response is called the “fight or flight” mechanism. Long ago, human survival depended on the ability to fight or run from bigger, meaner predators. The secretion of “stress hormones” like cortisol and adrenaline facilitate physiological conditions that would allow escape from a hungry saber tooth. During the stress response, blood is shunted from internal organs to the skeletal muscles, the heart and respiratory rate increase, glucose is released from muscles and liver to fuel our muscles, platelets in the blood become “stickier” to reduce blood loss in the case of injury and non-essential activities such as digestion, physical repair and reproduction are dialed back. All fine and good when we’re talking about a tussle with a tiger but in that scenario there’s resolution –either we kill the beast, escape or get eaten. But in this age of 24/7 communication, we can see that a sustained, unrelenting stress response can severely impact our physical wellbeing.

So what’s the solution? If we’re serious about improving our overall health, we must address both our immediate response to stressful situations as well as work with thoughts and memories that sustain stress after the fact. Here are several tips for identifying and eliminating excess stress in our lives.

- Make stress reduction a part of your fitness regimen. Taking 20 minutes a day to practice stress reduction techniques will make a serious dent in your stress levels.
- Learn to breathe mindfully. The breath is a key way to “stop the bleeding” in the midst of a stressful situation. Deep, slow breathing in a stressful situation reduces the severity of the stress response.

- Practice hatha yoga. This ancient system teaches gentle stretches, breath awareness and mindfulness techniques that release tension and dis-ease in the body. Rather than “fight or flight,” yoga promotes the “rest, digest and nest” hormonal response.
- Learn to meditate. Meditation is a chance to cultivate a non-reactive mind. Often, stressful events will “re-play” during meditation, evoking their panic messages. As we learn to observe these repeat performances in stillness we short circuit their power.
- Live more simply. Holistic guru Deepak Chopra defines stress as any time that our perceived needs are not being met. Have an honest conversation about yourself about what it is you really need to be happy and try to let go of the things that aren’t so important. Recognize that all of our modern gadgets make our needs seem more immediate than ever before and try to lessen the pressure you put on yourself to respond to work and life situations in light-speed.
- Take time for deep relaxation. Practices like yoga nidra (deep guided relaxation), listening to beautiful music and spending time in nature can restore our body and mind to balance.

There’s a great saying in the yoga world, “don’t just do something, sit there!” While this advice may fly in the face of our go-go worldview, it contains deep wisdom. Stress is a reality in our lives that we cannot run away from. It’s hard-wired into our biology. Thankfully, instead of razor-sharp teeth human kind was gifted with big brains and the ability to study our own behavior. When we become aware to the negative impact of stress on our body and mind and begin to set aside time to address it, we may finally have the tiger by the tail.