



STRESSED OUT



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Stressed Out

"The beginning of a habit is like an invisible thread, but every time we repeat the act, we strengthen the strand, add to it another filament, until it becomes a great cable and binds us irrevocably, thought and act."

Orison Swett Marden

We are all faced with stressful situations at certain points in our lives. How does that stress manifest in you? Do you turn to comfort food, run to the hills, reach for the bottle or lift heavy weights?

How you respond as 'a stressed person' very much depends on your previous experience and responses to stress. In essence, our stress response has been learned, moulded and practised over several years.

Stress is the body's response to any adjustment that necessitates a change or reaction. The body reacts to these changes with either a physical, mental or emotional response and occasionally a combination of all three. There is no getting away from the fact that stress is a natural part of everyday life and fortunately we have evolved to both experience and react to both positive and negative stress. Our brain and autonomic nervous system have a hard wired built-in stress response that causes physiological changes to allow the body to combat stressful situations. This stress response, also known as the "fight or flight response", was a key element in the evolution of humans, enabling them to escape danger and hunt for food.

Our environment has changed dramatically, but stress still plays a role in our life and for some of the time it can have a positive impact, keeping us alert, motivated, and ready to avoid danger. Psychologists refer to “good stress,” as “eustress”. If you have ever ridden a rollercoaster, parachuted from a plane, or been on a first date, you will have experienced this stress. Feelings of excitement, quickening pulse and hormones surging, minus the threat or fear!



There are many triggers for this good stress, and it keeps us feeling alive and excited about life. Stress, however, turns out to be negative when an individual or group must cope with continuous challenges devoid of respite or relaxation amid the period of stress. Consequently, prolonged activation of the stress response leads to physical, mental and emotional deterioration.

To override stressors, we have learned to react and respond to stress in different ways, hence the habitual cravings for food, or the need to exercise. Therein lies a solution; if we can learn to respond one way (habit), evidently, we can also learn how to reprogramme our minds and practise an alternative way of behaving (new habit).

Habits are created via a process called ‘context-dependent repetition’. This scenario may seem familiar and explains succinctly how a habit is formed. Imagine that each time you get home from work, you pour a glass of wine. When you first drink the wine upon getting home, a mental link is formed between the context (getting home) and your response to that context (drinking the wine). Each time you subsequently pour a glass in response to getting home, this relationship intensifies, to the point that getting home happens to prompt you to pour a glass automatically.

Devoid of much prior thought, a habit has formed.

Our habits are automatic and are not governed by conscious thought, memory or willpower and therefore, they are prone to stick around for a while. An example that many of us are all too familiar with is food cravings. The intense desire for a specific food can at times seem uncontrollable and unsatiated until the craved morsel has been consumed.

It is thought that a food craving last only about 3-5 minutes and that we each experience these cravings in different ways. Our cravings are often for junk or processed foods that are high in sugar, salt and fat.

These cravings form a major stumbling block for those trying to lose or maintain weight or follow a nutritious and healthy diet. Food cravings can derive from an imbalance of hormones, such as leptin and serotonin, and are formed in regions of the brain that are responsible for memory, pleasure, and reward. It is also possible that food cravings are a consequence of the endorphin release which takes place after eating and mirrors the traits of addiction. Add to this the emotional attachment that comfort eating brings, which in turn compounds our stressed response stimulating the emotional eating/craving cycle.

A 2014 study of sweet cravings in women under stress ⁽¹⁾, discovered that stressed women are more prone to cravings for sweets than women who aren't stressed. The study also found that eating due to stress was the likely cause of weight increase and a larger hip circumference.

Even without extra food cravings, stress may be at the root of weight gain and changes in body composition. Researchers have revealed that elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol, may result in increased fat deposits in the abdominal area rather than in the hips. This abdominal fat has been referred to as "toxic fat," since abdominal fat is strongly associated with the development of cardiovascular disease, including heart attacks and strokes.

Replacing habits or cravings can be difficult, especially those that involve food, as they have become part and parcel of your day and may be linked to other long-term habits or routine.

Earlier we discussed how pouring a glass of wine on getting home from work, created a link and a habit. In situations like these, as well as removing the temptation, it is beneficial to create new habits and routines. Simple solutions include taking a new route home from work or stopping for a quick walk before entering the house. Once in the house, look for other distractions; exercise; take a shower; or call a friend. Remember that the urge only lasts for around 5 minutes and these suggestions may help distract you long enough for your craving to subside.

It is important to clarify that there is a difference between a craving and addiction. Although common pathways in the brain are thought to be responsible for the sensation of pleasure derived from food intake and drug use, addiction differs from cravings significantly. Addiction is typically characterised by the uncontrolled consumption and the existence of withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety and irritability.

You do not have to behave like this just because this is how you've always behaved or reacted. Your past actions don't have to be your future actions. Just because your brain is used to doing something doesn't mean you can't teach it how to react differently – but first, you need to see that you have a choice.

When we do things like this for the first few times it can feel a bit strange, but if you practise you can learn how to choose your reaction rather than your reactions choosing themselves.

Your ability to deal with stress is far superior when you are fit, healthy relaxed and well rested. Life will inevitably throw problems your way, so if you are already exhausted and overwhelmed, any little glitch has the potential to throw you off course and straight towards the refrigerator. Exercise, sleep, and other healthy lifestyle habits will help you get through these difficult times.

Make daily exercise a priority.

Physical activity has always been recognised for helping improve mood and energy levels. Studies have now shown that just a small amount of gentle / moderate exercise can sufficiently boost levels of serotonin and endorphins (2). Thus, boosting feelings of well-being and happiness as well as helping your brain regulate sleep, appetite and stress.

**Aim for 8 hours of sleep every night.**

Sleep is at the cornerstone of good health and considered vital in helping your immune system perform at its optimum level, yet two-thirds of adults in the developed world fail to obtain the recommended 8 hours sleep. When you don't get the sleep you need, your body is more likely to crave sugary foods that will give you a quick energy boost. Getting plenty of rest will help with appetite control and reduce these cravings.

Drinking plenty of water.

One of the easiest ways to reduce food cravings is to make sure you are hydrated throughout the day. Unfortunately, hunger and thirst can produce similar sensations in the brain, resulting in confusion and mixed outcomes. Keeping hydrated also helps the body clean out toxins, which may also improve your overall well-being.

Make time for relaxation.

Relaxation techniques and exercise have both been proven to help you minimise the risks of stress – and there is one particularly important factor that these two things have in common. When we are relaxed and when we exercise, we breathe deeply. By expelling our lungs fully, we get rid of the stale toxic air that often sits at the bottom of our lungs because most of us don't breathe deeply enough. Breathing deeply also slows down our heart rate, so we feel calmer and more in control. So the next time you feel your blood pressure start to rise, or your heart beating wildly, take a few moments to breathe deeply and slowly.

**Connect with others.**

Look for support from friends, family or social media networks as these have been shown to have a buffering effect on the stress that people experience. For example, research suggests that people working in stressful situations, like hospital emergency departments, have better mental health if they receive adequate support. Spending time with positive people who enhance your life will help protect you from the negative effects of stress.

It's important to recognise what kind of stress you're under, in order to effectively manage the stress. If you feel challenged but know that you can cope, understand that this is a positive form of stress. Learn to accept what is happening and maybe even redefine what you call this, in order to make a clear distinction between negative and positive stress.

Labelling it as a 'challenge', is far more constructive. You understand that a challenge will stretch you, but if falls within your capabilities to deal with it, and thus you will learn and develop stronger coping mechanisms.

This simple shift in perception of seeing stress as a challenge, may facilitate excitement, anticipation and maybe a solution. To enable this shift in perception:

- Focus on the resources you have to help you meet the challenge.
- See the potential benefits of a situation.
- Remind yourself of your strengths.
- Create a positive mindset, think like an optimist.

The more you practise seeing stress as a challenge, the more it becomes automatic and you will experience more “eustress” and less bad stress.

References

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