

Destressing For Stressful Times

(Part 1 of a 2 part series)



by David G. Edelson, M.D.

Few would argue the statement that we live in one of the most stressful times in history. At the primary care division of HealthBridge, more than half of the problems we encounter every day are stress-related. Stress can affect our physical and mental health in many ways. But before we can talk about how to reduce stress, we first need to better understand what it is and where it comes from.

In very general terms, stress may be thought of as any force that pushes our bodies out of balance, forcing us to find a way to adapt to restore the natural equilibrium of health. Think of optimum health as a pendulum hanging over a small circle. When all is in balance, the pendulum stays within the confines of the circle. But when too much force is applied from one direction, the pendulum begins swinging wildly about. In order to restore the balance, an opposing force must be applied to bring the pendulum back to the center and hold it there.

Stress in our lives may come in many forms. We most commonly think of the many emotional stresses we encounter, such as job stress, relationship problems, or difficulties with our children. But we often neglect the various physical stresses in our lives, such as noise, extreme heat or cold, lack of sleep or even physical pain. All of these cause our bodies to react, but typically in ways that have unpleasant consequences.

Interesting enough, not all stress is bad. Take exercise, for instance. Cardiovascular exercise, such as running or walking, forces our bodies to adapt by increasing heart rate and blood flow to muscles. Anaerobic exercises, such as weight lifting, cause muscles to increase in size and strength. These are forms of physical stress that can compel your body to adapt in a manner that will improve your overall health and fitness.

In fact, the effects of stress on your health can be thought of much in the way a muscle in your body reacts to exercise. Should you exercise constantly without ever stopping for a rest, your muscles would begin to fatigue and eventually break down, just like a marathoner hitting the wall. However, should you never exercise and constantly remain sedentary, what would happen to your muscles then? Paradoxically, the same thing! Your muscles would begin to atrophy, reducing in size and strength. So how do we keep our muscles in optimum health? By balancing episodes of intense, but measured exercise, with periods of rest

and guided relaxation.

This is exactly the ideal formula to apply for dealing with stress in our lives. Too much stress without any break or relief will cause elevated levels of stress hormones in the body, such as cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine. You will feel anxious, tremulous, have difficulty sleeping, and may even experience depression. Over time, these can cause your body to have a decreased immune response, and can eventually result in anything from recurring colds or flu all the way up to heart attacks or cancer. But to live a life without any stress or challenges could have equally devastating consequences on your health. We've all heard stories about people who have worked diligently and in excellent health all their lives, only to retire and see their physical condition literally fall apart. How do we explain this phenomenon? Just like the guy who lays in his recliner all day watching TV will see his muscles atrophy to jelly, complete lack of physical or emotional stress in our lives can cause our bodies to deteriorate dramatically. Stress should be thought of *just like exercise!* The optimum situation would see periods of measured stress followed by periods of focused relaxation. Following this simple formula will improve your overall physical and emotional health for life.

Now let's try to use this principle to design a blueprint on how to best overcome the constant barrage of stressful forces in our daily lives. Firstly, it is important to realize how easy it is to become overwhelmed by the stresses of modern day existence. Let us remember that our nervous system was designed to perform a limited number of tasks. From a strictly evolutionary point of view, we are programmed to find food, seek shelter, protect ourselves from danger and procreate to maintain the species. That's pretty much about it! The caveman and woman certainly had stresses in their lives, but they were pretty much limited to those few categories.

Now compare that to the amount of stress we see in modern day life. While our pressures may not always be life threatening, there are certainly voluminous. Our nervous systems were really only programmed to deal with a limited number of inputs at a time. Watch the average man or woman going about their daily lives, and you will see not only the art of multi-tasking being taken to new levels, but you'll also witness the unbelievable barrage of information that each of us are forced to process in a given 24 hour period. After a while, it is a simple matter of *information overload*. How many of us have found ourselves forgetting simple things and wondering if we were on the road to Alzheimer's? Well, the good news is you are not alone! This is a classic example of too much input for the primitive nervous system to handle. Which brings us to our first tip:

1. Find ways to avoid information overload: A key point is to find ways to reduce the constant barrage of information we are exposed to. This can be as simple as turning off the TV in your house

or as tricky as delegating excessive tasks to others at work. Your mind is operating 24/7, and is constantly taking in data from the outside world. Even something as benign as listening to the radio, while you think it may be soothing, forces your mind to process large amounts of extraneous information. Try driving to work with the radio off, and you may find the quiet time allows you to reflect on your own thoughts, rather than grapple with those coming from outside of you. Once you've done this a few times, turn it back on and you'll instantly recognize the assorted distractions, whether it be from annoying commercials, loud music or distasteful talk shows.

2. Make lists and prioritize: one of the best ways to control daily stress is to make a list every morning of the things you want to accomplish. Once this is done, give each a number to gauge its priority level, say on a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 is the most urgent, 2 should get done within the week, and 3 is something you want to remember to do, but has no real urgency. Now focus your attention on getting the 1's done, and only then should you begin to worry about 2's. As for the 3's, save those for when a convenient opportunity presents itself, but don't go out of your way for a 3 when you still have a whole list of 1's and 2's! At the end of the day, cross off everything you've accomplished, and transfer the rest to tomorrow's priority list, re-rating their priority levels as need be. You'll find that this will not only act as a great reminder, but it will also allow you to keep your attention focused on your most essential responsibilities.

3. Swing the pendulum back: when you find stress pushing your pendulum, find ways to push back! At HealthBridge, we have an entire division devoted specifically to stress management techniques,

including our luxurious Elysium Day Spa. Techniques that you might try include:

a. **Massage Therapy:** for centuries, massage therapy been recognized for its health enhancing effects, including muscle relaxation, improved venous and lymphatic circulation, and the relief of general stress and tension. While different techniques are utilized for their varying healing properties, some of the best for stress management include Swedish massage, Aromatherapy massage, Shiatsu massage and Amma Therapy.

b. **Hypnosis & Guided Meditation:** Using creative visualization, simple breathing exercises and deep progressive relaxation, you can learn how to let thoughts pass your awareness without creating the stress and accompanying physical sensations and discomfort they would normally provoke. Meditation teaches you to sit quietly without distraction of stressful thoughts.

c. **Reiki Therapy:** Reiki is a Japanese word meaning "Universal Life Force Energy". Reiki is a scientific method of activating and balancing the life-force energy present in all living things. Light hand-placement is used on the body in order to channel energy to organs and glands and align the chakras (our energy centers). Reiki can help to soothe reduce pain, relieve emotional distress, and achieve better focus and clarity.

d. **Yoga:** the word Yoga means "union" or "joining" in Sanskrit. It is a form of active meditation that attempts to show the practitioner that the individual self and the totality of the universe are actually one in the same. Through a combination of postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama), cleansing practices (kriyas), and meditations.

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Saint Paul's Episcopal Church 28 Highland Road, Glen Cove

ANNOUNCES

Holy Week and Easter Worship

Palm Sunday – The Sunday of the Passion – April 13

8 am – Procession of the Palms – Passion Narrative
10 am – Procession of the Palms – Passion Narrative

Maundy Thursday – April 17

10 am – Holy Eucharist
6:30 pm – Paschal (Seder) Meal/Holy Communion
8 pm – Stripping of the Altar Ceremony
9 pm to 7 am – All-Night Vigil & Watch

Good Friday – April 18

7 am – Stations of the Cross
12 Noon – Good Friday Liturgy
7:30 pm – Ecumenical Service – First Presbyterian Church

Holy Saturday – April 19

5 pm – Lighting of New Fire/Great Vigil/First Eucharist

Easter Day – The Day of the Resurrection – April 20

7 am – Ecumenical Sunrise Service – at Morgan Park, Glen Cove
8 am – Festival Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
10 am – Festival Family Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
11 am – Hospitality Time and Children's Easter Egg Hunt

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