

Health & Harmony Counseling and Life Coaching

Transcript of a talk given at a Soroptomist luncheon

There's no doubt that stress is a part of all our lives. As women our stress has increased partly as a result of taking on a lot of nontraditional roles, and still having all the same roles as our Mothers and grandmothers. We've added coworker, boss, business owner, community leader, role model, coach, stepmother, single mother, the list could go on, and we do it all in a world that moves at a much faster pace. We all have cell phones and can be reached at any time, we have instant access to tons of info via the internet, we expect things to be done immediately, we have continual exposure to media, especially an overabundance of news which is usually negative and can increase stress, we have achievement and acquisition stress, the need to accomplish more and have more, and we are more disconnected from each other, we connect through email and text messaging, we don't live near our extended families, we move around more, we have too many choices, and we're disconnected from nature. We are surrounded by concrete, we live with air pollution, noise pollution, billboards are everywhere and now even mobile billboards on the street next to you. Think about the last time you were in nature, remember how relaxed you felt, how long ago has that been?

But as much as we talk about stress, many of us don't know that much about how it operates. In an effort to help our species survive we needed a mechanism to help alert us to danger and give us a way to react that would up our odds for self preservation. So the stress response has been honed over thousands of years of human evolution to help primitive man's ability to deal with physical challenges. Our stress today however is not an occasional confrontation with a saber tooth tiger or a hostile warrior, it's more likely an argument with a spouse, a customer, or coworker, or getting stuck in traffic. But stress response to these threats is immediate and automatic.

Physiological changes include, increased heart rate and blood pressure to increase the flow of blood to the brain for improved decision making. Blood sugar rises to furnish more fuel for energy

Blood used for digestion is diverted to the large muscles of the legs and arms to provide more strength for combat or greater speed in getting away from the perceived peril.

Even though most of our stress is not life threatening, our bodies still react with this same fight or flight response that is now not only not useful but potentially damaging and deadly.

If the cause of your stress is temporary, the physical effects are usually short term as well.

The longer your mind feels stressed however the longer your physical reaction systems remain activated and this is when stress becomes dangerous. It's not hard to see how the stress response repeatedly invoked can contribute to: hypertension, stroke, heart attack, diabetes, and ulcers

Chronic stress is associated with aging conditions such as functional decline, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, inflammatory arthritis, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers,

Stress can play a part in sleep disorders, skin problems like hives and acne, weight loss and gain, stomach problems, irritable bowel syndrome, lower sexual desire, and can increase difficulty becoming pregnant, and cause depression and anxiety, and excessive stress has been found to worsen high cholesterol, play a role in chronic pain..

Chronic stress can alter the body's immune system in a way that impair the body's resistance to infectious disease

Certainly heredity and lifestyle play a role in many of these health issues, but stress has been found to be a contributing factor.

It's estimated that up between 75 and 90 percent of doctors visits are stress related.

According to the Center for Disease Control, stress helps to account for up to half the deaths of Americans under the age of 65.

Stress is becoming the biggest reason for disability claims.

Some researchers think that women handle stress in a unique way: we tend and befriend.

During stress, women tend to become involved in nurturing activities around their family, and seek support from their female friends. Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to promote these responses. One of these chemicals is oxytocin (ahk-see-toe-sin), which has a calming effect during stress. The hormone estrogen, boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress, which blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and causes hostility, withdrawal, and anger. So women may have an advantage when it comes to coping with stress.

It's important to remember that although stress is usually viewed as a negative thing it can be positive, stress can motivate us to accomplish certain tasks, and some stress is exciting, such as having a baby, or moving into a new home. Even though these are positive events they are huge transitions and change creates stress. Some of the most stressful events are, death of a spouse, divorce or marital separation, death of a close family member, personal illness or injury, marriage, pregnancy, retirement.

How we experience stress is very individual because of what we tell ourselves about a situation. And unlike any other species subject to the stress response, humans can initiate that response simply by thinking about something. We do not need to be in the presence of an immediate threat to feel stressed, we simply have to anticipate a possible stressor, sure we might not have to deal with an angry lion now, but what if one should happen to come along. We tend to create problems when they don't exist.

This is important because if we can become aware of how we create our stress we can have some control over our stress level.

As women we tend to carry more stress than we should, often we aren't aware of our stress levels. Start to listen to your body. Where do you hold stress, headaches, feeling drained and fatigued, tightness in the neck and shoulders, in your stomach, are you feeling impatient, irritated, short tempered? Recognizing your own symptoms of stress lets you know when stress might be affecting your health.

Raise your threshold and resilience for dealing with stress by incorporating some good self care habits. Start to get 7 or more hours of sleep each night, eat healthy foods, learn to relax and take time for yourself, cut back on caffeine, smoking, monitor your alcohol intake, develop a social support system, realize that how you see things and how you handle them makes all the difference in terms of how much stress you will experience.

First and foremost –

Make time for yourself and find ways to relax –

Think of the example of being on a plane and being told to put on your oxygen mask first, you're better able to help those around you when you take care of yourself.

The ideal would be to find a few hours a week to fit in an exercise program, take a yoga class, meditate, get a massage, take up a hobby, do something you enjoy.

But

Even 10 to 15 minutes a day of personal time can help refresh your mental outlook and slow down your body's stress response systems. Close the door, Turn off the phone, do some stretching, meditate, deep breathing, take a short walk, read a book, call a friend, try visualization.

Activities that use repetitive motion or sounds such as, running, playing a musical instrument, praying, meditating or chanting a word or phrase, or knitting have been found to bring forth what is referred to as the relaxation response.

According to Herbert Benson MD. The relaxation response changes the way your body and brain react to stress, it can lower your heart rate and breathing, slow your metabolism.

In Dr. Benson's book the Relaxation Response he found that patients with heart conditions, chronic pain, insomnia and other stress related illnesses gained therapeutic benefit from – mantra meditation. He also reported the benefits of running for bringing about the relaxation response.

Practice mindfulness – A lot of our stress comes from worry about the past or concern about the future, come back to the present moment, focus your attention on what you are doing now. Become more aware. Be on auto pilot less.

Get moving – physical activity may not only relieve your tense muscles but helps your mood too, you release endorphins with physical exercise and 3 times of moderate exercise a week can make a difference.

Laugh - After laughing, you have a relaxation response (in your body). Everything goes down—heart rate, blood pressure, your muscles relax,"

Understand what you can control – Stress sometimes comes from trying to control situations or people's actions that are beyond our control. Avoidance also increases stress, recognize the choices you do have. Pay attention to what you are saying to yourself about situations, listen to your self-talk. Analyze your schedule, can you let go of something, delegate, can you say no.

Monitor your moods – If you feel stressed out during the day write down what caused it along with your thoughts and moods. This is also an opportunity to reflect on your self talk and how you view the situation, are you catastrophizing (maybe get a second opinion) Keeping a journal can be a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues.

Eat right - Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, and proteins. Good sources of protein can be peanut butter, chicken, or tuna salad. Eat whole grains such as whole wheat breads, and wheat crackers. Avoid caffeine, sugar, and fatty foods.