

“Why stress less? ...because you can't always change life situations, but you can change how you react to them.”

Why do we need STRESS in our lives?

Search the term 'stress' on the internet today and it is one of the most widely debated, growing concerns of our time. Strategies to manage, rethink and restructure our lives to avoid and reduce stress abound.

Yet stress isn't all bad. We need stress. It is a basic biological response to life which we share with all animals. It gets us up in the morning, it propels us to make decisions and act for our survival. So what's gone wrong?

To understand this, we need to take a step back from our day to day lives and put stress as we know it, back into perspective.

In the face of imminent danger, stress is our innate survival mechanism - a critical biological response to a perceived threat.

Well known as the 'Fight or Flight Response' (Dr. W.B. Cannon), this is a hard-wired, primitive reaction. It initiates a rapid and dramatic cascade of physical and psychological changes that prepare the body to fight or run:

- A surge of stress hormones
- Breathing and heart rate become more rapid
- Blood is shunted away from digestive and reproductive organs and directed to our muscles and limbs ready to run.
- Constriction of our blood vessels.
- Mouth feels dry, our hands and feet become cold
- Pupils dilate and sight sharpens
- Impulses quicken, aggression increases
- Awareness of danger intensifies
- Our rational mind shuts down as we narrow our focus on what can harm us in the short term.

Once immediate danger has passed, our body and mind should return to a state of calm, rest and recovery. Often referred to as the 'Relaxation Response' (Dr H. Benson) this is characterised in part by:

- Paced, regular breathing and heart rate
- Relaxed muscles
- Organs and blood vessels functioning normally; normal digestion and reproduction
- Sense of calm and clear thinking
- Improved memory and concentration
- Easier, restful sleep



In his (2000) book "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers", Prof. R. Sapolsky, of Stanford University brilliantly describes how in the life of an animal in the wild, the Stress Response is perfectly adapted to dealing with imminent danger such as a predator. For the zebra, the Relaxation Response quickly takes over after danger has passed and it swiftly returns to a state of calm balance and normal functioning. Thanks to our predecessors in the wild, our bodies are still marvelously equipped to deal with this kind of emergency if we need it to - but how often is that?

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“If we don’t face immediate, mortal danger every day, why is it that for many of us, our bodies and minds are stuck in a constant, unhelpful cycle of stress?”

To answer that question, take a moment to consider these strangely familiar facts in the context of your own life:

- Our brains have developed an amazing capacity to switch on a major stress response with our own thoughts and emotions.
- We can become seriously stressed just by thinking about something that has happened in the past and no longer exists in the present.
- We can switch on and remain stuck in a constant state of stress by imagining or anticipating events that might or might not happen in the future.
- Most of us struggle to switch off those thoughts and continue to worry, unaware that in our stress state, our rational thinking is shut down, clouding our judgement.
- We often react to relationships, work or other practical matters in our lives with the same physical stress response as we would need to defend ourselves against a life threatening attack
- Many of us adopt unhealthy and often destructive habits, for example smoking or overeating, to manage our stress.
- The pace of our lives means that most of us are no longer aware of what it feels to be in the Relaxation Response and don't know how to get there.

Medical research clearly shows that living our lives in this constant state of imbalance is affecting our health.

Excessive, prolonged stress without rest and recovery is damaging our bodies and our psychological wellbeing:

- Heart disease, hypertension
- Lower immunity
- Exacerbated autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and thyroid
- Exacerbated gastrointestinal problems
- Sleep problems such as insomnia
- Diabetes and asthma
- Fertility problems
- Eating and skin disorders
- Anxiety and depressive disorders
- Premature aging

What is your stress story?

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