

Stress – What is it and What Can I do About it?



I am reminded time and time again in my work that stress plays a huge part in absolutely everyone's life. A lot of people don't think so; however when you are reminded that our bodies are not designed to deal with the stimulation of our modern lives it starts to make a little sense.

So, what exactly do I mean when I use the term stress? Do I mean a life changing situation that you feel ill-equipped to deal with? Well, yes, obviously that is stress but it's at the higher end of the stress spectrum than most modern day stressors.

To give a very basic explanation of what stress is, it is something (a stimulus) beyond your control, which provokes your mind and body to act in a certain way. Reactions may be physical, mental or emotional.

Everyone has heard of the fight or flight response; you are exposed to an external stimulus (for example a noise), your sympathetic nervous system kicks in and you are prepared for action. In prehistoric times, and even for some modern day situations, this would involve defending yourself, or running away, hence fight or flight.

When you consider that our brain and body process any unexpected sound, light, movement etc. in the same manner, it starts to become clear that our bodies are exposed to more stress than we may at first have realised. Now obviously, different levels of stressor provoke different levels of response, but when you bear in mind that our mind and bodies are constantly exposed to stressful stimulus (the phone ringing, the doorbell, someone drops something in the office, someone raises their voice etc.) it becomes easier to understand why our systems are finding it more and more difficult to deal with what might seem a fairly easy situation for example meeting a deadline (yet another stressor).

I see many ways in which stress affects people, and there are a myriad of symptoms to be on the lookout for. Being predominantly a body therapist, I often see the first signs of a stressed out system manifesting as tight shoulder and neck muscles. This is often made worse by long hours sitting at a computer, poor posture, driving etc. My advice, no matter what the symptoms, is always the same. You need to do something to counteract the stress!!

So what can you do? I have been reflecting on this over the last week with various people, and I don't think there is a one size fits all solution, but you may want to consider some or all of the following:

- **Gentle exercise** – helps to counteract some of the stress hormones in your system and obviously keeps you fit and healthy. Try walking, jogging, swimming, yoga, stretching, cycling, or whatever it is that helps you to relax whilst exercising your body.
- **Eating the right foods** – Ensuring you eat a healthy, balanced diet will help to keep your body in tip top condition, which gives it more resources to draw from when dealing with stress responses.
- **Breathing** – controlled deep breathing, taking the breath down into the diaphragm, in through the nose and out through the mouth encourages your parasympathetic nervous system responses to kick in. This results in lowered blood pressure and more effective digestion.
- **Taking some you time** – anything that encourages relaxation and does not involve stimulus which may stress the system, again helps to counteract any stress hormones in your system. Try taking a bath, reading a book, listening to some soothing music, meditation, watching a funny or uplifting film. Just try to make sure you won't be disturbed while doing these things.
- **Make sure you are getting enough sleep** – The amount of sleep required differs from person to person, however you should aim to feel refreshed upon waking. If you don't this either means you are not getting enough sleep, or it is poor quality sleep and you should try to do something about this. Try to make sure you have at least a one hour period where you can wind down before going to sleep, this will help the mind to quieten down which in turn aids restful sleep.
- **Exposure to light and dark** – This is especially important during the darker months. Your body instinctively responds to light and dark stimulation. It relies on exposure to sunlight to produce vitamin D (an essential vitamin for health), and as darkness draws in your body is prompted to begin resting which allows you're body the time it needs to restore itself. Making sure you are getting outdoors on a daily basis during daylight hours (even if you can only manage 10-15 minutes) will help to ensure your vitamin D levels are topped up. Dimming the lights on an evening, and if you have problems sleeping avoiding too much exposure to sunlight during the afternoon and evening, will encourage your body to start its natural resting and restoring processes.
- **Complementary Therapies** – Many complementary therapies will help to counteract the negative impacts of stress on your body. Most encourage you to relax, promote endorphin release which counterbalance stress hormones, and some even encourage a detox action.

You can contact Rachel at Physis Health & Wellbeing Ltd to find out more about complementary therapies and how they can help you to combat your stress.

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