

Managing Stress

Simple steps to limit excess tension

By Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy

"There is more to life than increasing its speed."
— Gandhi

Do you have trouble sleeping? Do you often feel irritable? Have you lost your appetite, or can't stop eating? You might be stressed out. If you are, you are not alone. We are clearly more out of balance than our grandparents. We work longer, sleep less and are overloaded by information and technology. Antidepressants and anti-ulcer medications remain the top drug categories in the United States, with sales of more than \$27 billion a year and growing.

Is more, or faster, really better?

Stress is a part of life, and the "fight or flight" mechanism gears the body up to deal with it—at least on a short-term basis. Adrenaline is released, blood flow is diverted to the brain and large muscles and the liver increases its output of blood sugar to furnish more fuel for energy. After the threat passes, your body relaxes again.

Some stress can actually be beneficial. It can motivate you to finish a pending task, or prompt you to move faster along a dark street. However, the danger with contemporary stress is that it tends to be emotional rather than physical in origin, and is thus more persistent. Chronic stress can cause insomnia, hypertension, severe acne, backaches, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, infertility, strokes, heart attacks and depression.

Managing stress is key to a balanced life. The following actions can help you take control. Choose what

works for you.

- **Talk** – Call a friend or family member. Talk to your pet. Vent via e-mail.
- **Write** – Keep a stress journal. Note what triggers your anxiety.
- **Breathe** – Take a few deep, diaphragmatic breaths through your nose, exhaling slowly.
- **Meditate** – Close your eyes. Let your breathing become slow and steady. Focus on one thing, e.g. a word.
- **Exercise** – Move your body each day. Run, go to the gym, take a yoga class, or simply dance.
- **Pray** – Keep the faith! A Dartmouth Medical School study found that those who derive strength from their religious faith generally have less fear, anxiety and stress.
- **Play** – Devote at least half an hour each day to something you love to do. It will release the buildup of daily tension.
- **Laugh** – Laugh deep from your belly. It will stimulate the circulation, energize the lungs, lower blood pressure, alleviate depression and release endorphins.
- **Visualize** – Create a mental image of a situation in the way you would like it to happen. It will increase your confidence.
- **Plan** – Prioritize your activities for each day. It will help you set boundaries and say no.
- **Simplify** – Define the *essentials* of what you need to live with joy. Then, clear away the excess—thoughts, things, commitments, relationships and debt.
- **Sleep** – Make sleep a priority. Most adults need about 7.5 to 8 hours of



Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy practicing yoga.

uninterrupted sleep a night.

- **Think positively** – Use affirmations to tune your mind to the positive. Replace negative thoughts with uplifting ones.
- **Eat mindfully** – Eat a variety of whole, healthy foods regularly, and limit the intake of sugar and refined carbohydrates.
- **Escape** – Take time off. If you can't take a vacation, go for a walk, get a massage or take a bath.
- **Scream** – If all else fails, scream. It is a great way to draw oxygen to the brain and can be a lot of fun!

There is no way to completely eliminate stress. Instead, your goal should be to limit excess tension and to keep your reactions under control. If things become too overwhelming, get help from a health-care provider. **TSJ**

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