

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress literally means tension. It puts the body in a state of readiness.

Stress prepares the body for action:

- The heart rate increases
- Breathing accelerates
- Muscles tense



These physical reactions are activated by the **adrenaline** hormone. It prepares our body to resist upcoming threats. This is also known as the 'fight or flight' response.

Stress makes us run when we are being chased or keeps us focused when we are facing a difficult task. When the threat or difficult task is over, our body returns to a normal state. We experience a sense of relief: the tension disappears.

We do not only experience stress in reaction to real dangers, for example when a car approaches us. We also react to threats which have not yet taken place, threats we are expecting. The idea of turning up late, completing an exam or not being able to finish a task is already enough to become stressed. The disadvantage in these situations is that the body prepares itself for action for no reason. The energy builds up in our body. This can be noticed when we feel tired or exhausted in the evening without having done much physical exercise that day.

Stress can be both positive and negative. Sometimes we need stress to successfully complete a task or goal. It makes us more alert as well as sharpens our senses so we perform better or put up a better defence when facing a threat. Stress is a normal reaction experienced by everybody.

However stress lasting a long time becomes unhealthy stress.

Take the following stressful situations:

- “What happened to me?”
- “Why is this happening to me?”
- “My assistant is sick.”
- “Will the carer be here in time?”
- “Will I be able to get out of bed tomorrow?”

We might not notice our body reacting to these signals while the adrenaline rages through our body. Often it does not even bother us, but it does impact our body. How often do we not hear stories about people dying prematurely because of a heart attack? When your life is dominated by stress signals, the body no longer has the possibility to recover. This is what we call unhealthy stress.

Stress is provoked by a stressor.

A stressor can be anything. Some examples can be:

- A life-changing experience
- Small, daily irritations such as a traffic jam
- Worrying about a physical symptom or the future

Not everybody reacts the same when in a stressful situation.

The amount of stress one experiences depends on how the stressor is perceived and whether one can control the situation.



It is important to note that people do not only react to stress at the time the stressor appears. The reaction can also appear when the stressor has already disappeared and

the tension decreases. A well-known example is having a headache during the weekend or at the start of the holidays.

What are the side-effects of stress and how can I know that I am too stressed?

Everybody experiences different side-effects. One person might feel tired, someone else depressed. Others temporarily develop high blood pressure, experience palpitations or tension in the chest, have muscle pain or start to hyperventilate. Longterm stress can even lead to a heart attack or increase the risk of developing diabetes.

How to deal with stress?

- Reduce the stress factors in your life. Some examples: instead of taking that difficult-to-handle wheelchair, choose a more user-friendly model; search for tools to

maximise the abilities you still have by using speech generating devices, a chin-controlled wheelchair, etc. In other words when a body function disappears, replace it as soon as possible with an aid. When you start to feel frustrated you can consider to adapt your home or to keep away from non-accessible shops or restaurants. Last but not least do not be scared to further extend your social network.

- Make yourself more resistant against stress factors. Some examples: enough sleep, a healthy diet, talk to close friends to channel your problems, learn to relax more. Which form of relaxation you choose is very personal. One person might benefit from travelling while somebody else prefers to relax in the sofa with a good book. No matter what you prefer, it is important to try something else to break the daily routine. However avoid venting stress by looking for other stressful situations.
- Relaxation exercises and general relaxation can be a sufficient outlet for some people. However it is important to do it on a regular basis.
- Take up a hobby. This will allow you to regularly distract yourself from stressful situations.
- Adopt a positive mindset. Everything has a negative and positive side!
- If you are finding it difficult to stand up for yourself and often feel like a victim, develop your assertive communication skills. An assertiveness course can help.
- Learn to enjoy silence.
- Remain as independent as possible from others
- Do not run away from your problems, but solve them as quickly as possible.
- Try to understand why you let yourself get carried away. What are your motives? Do you like to feel appreciated, appreciated for who you are and not because of your disease? If that is the case, try to find out why you depend so heavily on the opinion of others. Do you consider yourself important enough? Do you believe you are doing a good job or do you judge yourself continuously? If you take these questions as a starting point and work towards a solution, there is a big chance the stress will disappear.

And the list with coping mechanisms is much longer! You decide which solution suits you best.

Diet:

- Eat like a king in the morning, like a prince in the afternoon and like a begger in the evening. Sounds like a cliché? Maybe, but it holds a valuable truth.
- Take your time to eat. Avoid eating behind your desk. Eating deserves your attention. In addition you need

your lunch break to get away from everything for a moment.

- Do not forget to eat. Even when you are at work. You do not gain anything by skipping a meal as it has a negative impact on your concentration.
- Fruit remains a healthy snack option. Maybe you can agree with a colleague to buy fresh fruit for the week.
- Avoid heavy meals, especially if you need to maintain your productivity in the afternoon. If you do decide to enjoy a heavy meal, chances are you will nod off anyway.
- Drink a lot of water and limit your coffee intake. This of course does not mean you should avoid coffee at all cost. One cup does not hurt and will even give you an energy boost.
- Do you rapidly feel your energy levels dropping? A piece of chocolate or a cola can do miracles. But do not exaggerate!
- It is likely you do not feel like cooking when coming home exhausted. However try to avoid ready meals and microwave dishes.
- Try to switch coffee with herbal tea.

Social contact:



Making time for downtime and hobbies has the same impact as sport to reduce stress. The possibilities are again unlimited: reading a book, playing computer games to increase concentration,...

- Keep in touch with family, friends, acquaintances. A simple phone call often suffices to take your mind off things.
- Do not bottle up stressful experiences, but share them. Social isolation – at home and beyond – only increases the tension.
- Make a conscious effort to maintain your social network and to expand it when you can.
- If you feel really down, get help. Talking to your GP for example is a good start.
- As tempting as it can be, do not take out your stress on somebody else.

Sleep:

It is not only important to adopt a healthy and balanced diet; getting enough sleep is also key when you are looking to tackle stress!

TIPS

- Go to bed at a reasonable hour. Eight hours of sleep is well worth it.
- When you cannot get to sleep a night cap can help. However be careful with alcohol. It can make it easier getting to sleep, but at the same it can disturb the actual sleep. A cup of herbal tea or a glass of warm (hot chocolate) milk are better options. This as milk contains calcium and the amino acid tryptophan. Avoid coffee before going to bed.
- Switch off everything that can trigger stress in the two hours before going to bed. So do not work, but read a good book instead. Listening to your favourite CD or meditate can also help you relax.
- Do you wake up in the morning with sore muscles? Consider changing your pillow and/or mattress.
- Make sure your bedroom is not too warm. A colder environment makes it easier for the body to absorb oxygen.
- Change your sheets regularly. It is a great and relaxing feeling to get into a fresh and clean bed.
- Your bedroom is an environment to unwind. Do not quickly read through a file when you are already in bed.
- Sleeping pills are not a long term solution. They do not treat the cause of your insomnia nor can they guarantee good quality of sleep.

Breathing:

- Breathe! It sounds obvious, but it not always is. While at work people have the tendency to breathe at a fast and shallow pace. But breathing correctly is actually very important to maintain your energy flow.
- Feeling stressed? Try to stop what you are doing for 30 seconds. Breathe in and out. Depending on how you feel, you can use that time to get your thoughts straight, empty your mind or relax by imaging a white beach or cosy outside terrace.

- It is even better when you can take a deep breath outside. Taking a stroll during your lunch break can do miracles.
- The success of relaxation exercises demonstrates people's eagerness to get back in touch with their breathing.



Lifestyle:

Relaxing is key: relaxation therapy and yoga for example. Sofrology, meditation, breathing techniques, reflexology, luminotherapy, massages and balneotherapy can really help.

- A nice bath with your favourite oil is an ideal moment for relaxation. Just make sure you do focus solely on that. Put the book or magazine you wanted to read aside.
- Scents are becoming more and more important. The use of aromatherapy – with scented candles, perfumes and air diffusers - is growing. Lavender, for example, is known for its immediate relaxing effect.
- Green brings calm. Plants have the same effect. It therefore does not hurt to decorate your desk with a plant (maybe even from your own garden).
- Do not forget to enjoy life. Work is an important part of your life, but it is still work. Learn to put things into perspective.
- Laughing is healthy as it allows you to let go.
- Not everybody is a positive thinker by nature, but with a bit of training everybody can become one.

Translation: **Lynn Osten**