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# M E S S E N G E R

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## Supporting a Healthy Organization

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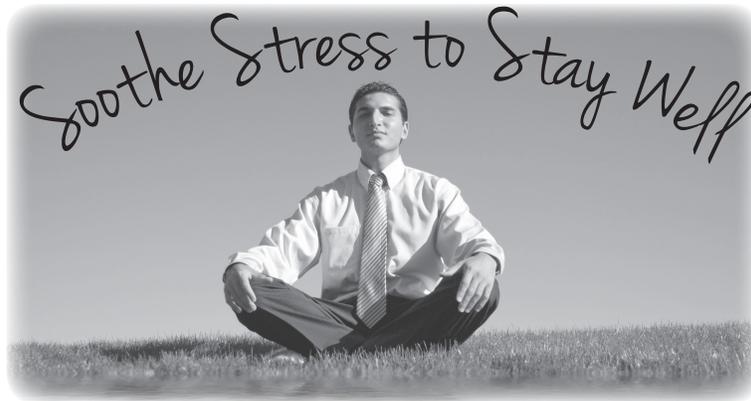
It's perfectly normal to worry about an upcoming presentation, get a stomachache when you're late for an appointment, or sweat and fidget before taking a test. These physical and psychological feelings are natural, temporary reactions to stress, and they're not always bad. Some stress helps you sharpen your focus, make quick decisions, and get a job done. But when you feel stress taking over, it's time to take control.

Scientists have long known that persistent stress leads to unhealthy behaviors including **overeating**, **smoking**, **abusing alcohol**, **sleeping less**, and **skipping exercise**. These behaviors trigger a host of health problems including cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, dementia, and early death. Now researchers are discovering that the *stress itself* can actually cause disease.

The human body reacts to stress by pumping adrenaline and cortisol into the bloodstream to prepare for immediate "fight or flight" action — a response that has ensured human survival throughout history. Too much cortisol can create serious hazards, say neuroscientists. When chronic stress exposes the body to a constant stream of cortisol — as happens when stress is constant — cells become desensitized to the hormone and are unable to respond properly to inflammation, illness, and injury.

Here's what to watch out for, and what you can do about it:

**PROBLEM: Weight gain.** When you're stressed, you're more likely to reach for comfort foods like pastries, chips, and ice cream. That's because stress hormones stimulate a preference for foods full of sugar, starch, and fat. But the link between stress and weight gain goes beyond poor food choices. Research shows that people who experience a stressful event burn fewer calories following a fast-food meal than people who are stress-free. Other research reveals a correlation between excess cortisol and abdominal fat. The fat around the belly — called visceral fat — lies deep enough to surround organs and disrupt their function, promoting inflammation, raising blood pressure, altering cholesterol levels, and interfering with normal blood vessel activity. So



what can you do when a stressful day tempts you to reach into the cookie jar?

**SOLUTION #1: Exercise.** When things go wrong and you're feeling uptight, go for a 10-minute walk or do a set of pushups. Physical activity takes your mind off what's bothering you and promotes a sense of control. Better yet, make daily exercise a habit with a regular walking routine or commitment to group exercise classes. Keeping fit helps your body regulate stress hormones and inhibits unhealthy cravings. If you do overeat, your daily workout lets you burn excess calories to control your weight on an ongoing basis.

**SOLUTION #2: Plan ahead.** That tray of doughnuts or vending machine full of candy and chips may tempt you, so prepare yourself to fight the snack attack:

*Stock healthy options.* Arm yourself with an arsenal of nuts, dried fruit, whole grain crackers, and other low-calorie, nutritious snacks in your drawer or briefcase. If you must choose from the concession station, make it a healthy pick containing high protein, low sugar, and no more than 10% saturated fat.

*Eat mindfully.* Put aside your work for those few minutes you're eating and take time to really enjoy your food. You'll eat less and calm down when you tune into your thoughts and physical sensations while chewing.

*Expose nutritious alternatives.* Keep healthy snacks visible and easy to grab. Take a lesson from Google, which demonstrated how to get people to eat more healthy foods and less sugary treats in an in-house M&M experiment. The team put the colorful candies in opaque containers and emphasized placement of dried fruits and nuts in

clear, glass jars. During a period of 7 weeks, a staff of 2,000 consumed 3.1 million fewer calories.

**PROBLEM: Sleep dysfunction.** Multiple studies reveal a link between insufficient sleep and cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, depression, colds and flu, and accidental injury. During sleep, your body self-repairs from physical ailments and mental strain. But stress makes it harder to fall asleep, increases nighttime wakefulness, and prevents you from falling back to sleep in the middle of the night. This can become a vicious cycle:

Sleep deprivation increases anxiety, making it even harder to sleep and recover from stress.

**SOLUTION #1: Make lists.** If tomorrow's to-dos race around your brain as you try to drift off, get them out of your head by writing them down. Whether you use a pencil and paper or type notes in your smart phone, this strategy ensures that you won't forget about anything the next day, which helps you stop worrying. You can also keep a nightly journal, where you record any anxieties and frustrations, and then close the cover and leave them on the page for the night.

**SOLUTION #2: Use good sleep hygiene.** Practice these healthy sleep habits on a consistent basis:

*Stick to a schedule.* Go to sleep and wake at the same time each day, even on the weekends. This helps regulate your body's clock so you'll fall asleep faster and stay asleep until morning. Adults should aim for about 7-8 hours of sleep a night.

*Create a routine.* A relaxing activity right before bedtime helps separate your sleep time from activities that cause stress and prompts you to shift into sleep mode. Take a bath, read a book, or listen to soothing music to relax your body and mind.

*Steer clear of stimulants.* Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine, and heavy meals before bedtime because these disrupt sleep. Close down electronics because the particular type of light emanating from the screens of these devices activates the brain.

*Evaluate your room.* Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you

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need for restful sleep. Your bedroom should be cool, dark, and free from any noise that can disturb your sleep. This includes a bed partner's disruptions such as snoring. Consider using blackout curtains, eyeshades, earplugs, "white noise" machines, or a fan.

**PROBLEM: Slower healing.** Stress related excess cortisol reduces the body's ability to recover from injury and surgical procedures, and lowers the effectiveness of medications to treat illness and wounds. In one study, surgical patients who were untroubled and optimistic were less likely to be re-hospitalized for infection-related complications than patients who reported negative feelings. Additional research shows that those caring for relatives with dementia and experiencing caregiver stress can take about 10 days longer to heal from wounds than non-caregivers.

**SOLUTION #1: Accentuate the positive.** Positive thinking boosts your immune system and improves your coping skills so you can handle stress better. Look for ways to balance the negative with positive. Find humor, play music, get creative or read books that inspire you. Remind yourself that you've overcome difficult situations before, and things frequently go well. When you're stuck in a downward spiral, talk to cheerful people who uplift and encourage you.

**SOLUTION #2. Make time for self-care.** When you're stressed, tired, and pulled in too many directions, it's hard to give your best to all you must accomplish. Focusing on your personal well-being helps you stay energized and productive. Aim to make self-care a priority:

*Nurture yourself.* Tend to your own physical and emotional needs. Eat well, exercise, sleep, and do something you enjoy, such as a movie, massage, or hike.

*Set boundaries.* Remind yourself that you don't have to be everywhere and do it all. Decline activities that you don't really want to do or will add to your stress. Delegate chores, and ask for help when you need it.

*Create a daily ritual.* Carve out time for your morning meditation, afternoon nap, or evening bath. Just spending a few minutes alone reading

the news or sipping a cup of tea can rejuvenate your body, mind, and spirit.

**PROBLEM: Abdominal distress.** For many years, doctors attributed stomach ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome to stress. In the 1980s, researchers discovered that a stomach bacterium, *H. pylori*, causes ulcers. But not everyone infected with the bacteria gets ulcers. Scientists theorize that exposure to stress changes the balance of bacteria in the gut, giving harmful ones the upper hand, causing stomachaches, diarrhea, constipation, indigestion, heartburn, colitis, and Crohn's disease.

**SOLUTION #1: Eat well.** Consuming a diet rich in vegetables, fruit, lean protein, and fiber boosts your immune system and promotes digestive health. Replace rich, fatty foods with lower-calorie versions that incorporate fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. Add a healthy zing to meals with herbs and spices including turmeric, cinnamon, and ginger, which are known to reduce inflammation.

**SOLUTION #2: Meditate.** Spending a few minutes in meditation can restore your inner peace and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts aggravating your physical symptoms. These benefits don't end when your meditation ends — they carry you more calmly through your day. You don't have to spend a lot of time doing it to reap the benefits.

Try these quick and simple techniques to regain calm and control:

*Open monitoring.* Let your thoughts wander for several minutes without focusing attention on any particular concept or object. You can do this while sitting quietly or during an activity you enjoy such as cooking, walking, or doing arts and crafts. Researchers in the Netherlands found that this meditation technique enhances creative thinking and problem solving.

*Progressive muscle relaxation.* Tense each muscle group in your body, one at a time, holding the tension for 5 seconds before you release. Inhale as you tense a muscle, and exhale as you suddenly and completely relax it. When you are finished with all of the muscle groups, count backwards from 5 to 1 to gently bring your focus back to the present.

*Visualization.* Immerse yourself in an imagined relaxed setting by thinking about how it would look, feel, taste, and sound. Focus on your breathing and repeat calming words to induce peacefulness. Use this technique just before doing something stressful. For example, if you feel anxious about giving a speech, picture yourself speaking confidently and your audience listening intently, and then take several deep breaths before walking up to the podium.

**PROBLEM: Back, neck, and shoulder pain.** Millions of people spend their days hunched over computer screens, tablets, and mobile phones, so it's no surprise that pain in these body parts are common health complaints. Musculoskeletal strain seems particularly sensitive to workplace stress. Once the pain kicks in, stress can intensify both its severity and duration.

**SOLUTION #1: Check your ergonomics.** You can prevent muscle tension, weariness, and fatigue by paying attention to your posture. Take periodic breaks to shift your position and align your spine. Arrange your workstation so that you can sit or stand with your head directly above your shoulders, about an arm's length from your computer screen. Rest your elbows on a surface as you type and keep your wrists relaxed and straight. When seated, your back should be upright or inclined forward slightly from the hips, with your feet flat on the floor or on a foot rest. If you can't adjust your chair back, use a lumbar roll or small pillow.

**SOLUTION #2: Stretch and soothe.** Muscles in your body's core — abdomen, back, hips, and buttocks — act as stabilizers for your spine and surrounding tissues, protecting them from injury. Explore ways that you might care for your stressed body, including stretching or yoga classes, use of foam rollers, massage therapy, and at home 'hydro therapy' using your shower or bathtub.

Stress is a natural part of our daily lives, and it's usually temporary. When stress lingers long-term, though, your health can suffer. Defend yourself by staying fit and healthy. Equipped with a nutritious eating plan, regular exercise, good sleep habits, and ongoing self-care, you can withstand stress, heal faster, and fight off stress-induced illness.



## 6 Second Summary:

- \* Chronic stress triggers health problems, but you can prevent illness with:
- \* Regular exercise
- \* Nutritious meals and snacks
- \* List-writing or journaling
- \* Good sleep hygiene
- \* Positive thinking
- \* Self-care, including meditation, stretching, and setting boundaries

## RESOURCES

General information on how stress affects sleep, health, and addiction, with insights into anxiety and coping mechanisms: Sapolsky, Robert M., *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. Holt Paperpbback, 2004s.

**Herbs and supplements:** [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/herb\\_All.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/herb_All.html)

**Meditation:** [www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858](http://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858)

**Sleep health:** [www.sleep.org](http://www.sleep.org)

**Smart snacking:** [www.cookinglight.com/eating-smart/smart-choices/healthy-office-snacks/view-all](http://www.cookinglight.com/eating-smart/smart-choices/healthy-office-snacks/view-all)

**Yoga:** [www.acefitness.org/acefit/fitness-fact-article/2622/is-yoga-right-for-you/](http://www.acefitness.org/acefit/fitness-fact-article/2622/is-yoga-right-for-you/)

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