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Dealing with Stress

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Many people think of the holidays as the most stressful time of the year, but that stress doesn't always dissipate when the time has come to change the calendar. The New Year, what with resolutions to keep and presents to return, carries its own set of stressors. Stress, unfortunately, is a fact of life for most people regardless of the time of year. In these high-tech, go-go days, life is moving faster than ever.

Whether we like it or not, we live in a culture that equates busyness with importance and mistakes speed for productivity. There seems to be an endless list of "things to do". We juggle work pressures, family demands and worry about financial responsibilities forgetting to take time-out for ourselves. It's not surprising our bodies become overloaded.

Stress is not necessarily bad if it is managed. It can actually be very invigorating and empowering. It can however, reach toxic levels where it taxes your coping skills to the point that it starts to have a negative effect mentally, physically and/or emotionally.

Too much stress can be difficult to address because it can vary from person to person. Another problem with stress is that many people take it for granted; it becomes a way of life. And thirdly, what relieves stress for some people does not work as well for others.

Here are some tips to help achieve that healthy balance in your life where you can manage stress so that most days you can feel rested, calm and in control.

Listen to your body. Most people can tell when they are experiencing too much stress - usually some physical, psychological or behavioral symptom such as a tension headache, neck and shoulder discomfort, back pain, stomach ache, nausea, feelings of depression, impaired memory or increased alcohol intake let them know that they are on overload. Stress has been linked to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, immune system disorder, certain cancers, alcoholism, obesity and more. Listening to your body makes you more aware of its limits and helps you acknowledge the strains and stresses that you may be experiencing.

Nurture yourself. One of the simplest and most immediate approaches to stress reduction is to make time, even small amounts, for yourself. Don't mistake self-care for selfishness and deny your own needs. Whether it's a weekend get-away or a few hours at a health spa - the balance between work, rest and play will make your bad days not quite so bad and the good day more attainable.

Take a break. Make a habit of taking breaks in your day. Go for a walk or workout at lunch time - distance yourself physically and mentally from work and you will come back rejuvenated. Create a special place in your home where you can go to day-dream, plan, relax and just enjoy the moment without being disturbed.

Exercise = stress relief. One of the best ways to combat daily stress is with regular exercise - particularly aerobic exercise. It has a positive effect on a person's state of mind. Many individuals report that exercise produces a feeling of exhilaration (a.k.a. the runner's high). Any form of exercise that diverts attention from one's problems provides a sense of achievement and boosts confidence that can help individuals to effectively deal with stress. Try working out before going into a stressful meeting.

Learn to control your mind with meditation. Decrease the energy you put into worrying and anxiety by observing your thoughts and feelings as they happen. Many of the things we worry about never happen. Positive thinking can do a lot to change this habit.

Take a deep breath. Take a few moments to turn inward by closing the eyes and focusing on your breath. Inhale for four counts and exhale for eight. It will have a calming effect helping you relax and your thoughts will become clearer. It is difficult to feel stressed, insecure or filled with negative emotions when you are breathing deeply. Not only stress, but heart rate and blood pressure will also be lowered.

Take care of yourself. Healthy nutritional habits and adequate sleep are often neglected when we are pressured. It is easy to lose sight of what's important when under stress. Self-care and those habits essential to long term health get put on hold. Book and keep appointments with yourself for regular exercise, recreational pursuit and activities that you enjoy.

Control the rhythm of your life. Rather than a sudden shift in mental gears every time you break away from what you're doing to lunge for a ringing telephone let it ring long enough for you to shift your attention from what you are doing or let the machine get it. Allow your e-mails to pile up at times and turn off the cell phone when you're not expecting a call. As often as possible put yourself in charge of the pace of your day.

Remember to have fun! People having fun rarely burnout - they are too busy enjoying life.

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