

Why Stress Kills



Most people know that stress is bad for the body. We are constantly told to 'lower stress' or 'find ways to manage stress.' Usually this advice has little impact on our daily habits, however, because many of the items that are stressful we assume we have little control to change. I'll often have people say things like 'my job is stressful and there isn't much I can do about it'. Or 'of course, having 3 children is stressful! But what can I do about it?' First let me explain a little bit about why stress is so dangerous to the body from a biological standpoint. Then we can talk about what we can do about it in our daily lives.

Stress and the Body

Stress causes damage in the body in a lot of different ways. One example is the effect on microcirculation. Stress in any form thickens the blood, making it able to clot more quickly in reaction to an emergency. Clotting in turn causes irritation to the lining of microscopic blood vessels (capillaries) that are found all over the body and are crucial for delivering nutrients and oxygen to cells. They are so small that even red blood cells have to compress themselves into an oval shape to pass into them.

To help offset this irritation to the capillaries, the body uses a thin coat of a protein created by the blood, called fibrin, which soothes the irritation in the short term. The body also creates an enzyme to dissolve the fibrin so that it doesn't do permanent damage by impairing microcirculation. Over time, however, if we create more fibrin than is removed, the capillary can remain partially blocked, damaging the cell. Microcirculation is one of the underlying factors caused by stress that can lead to and sustain chronic disease.

Stress also reduces stores of the secretory antibodies, IgAs, we discussed, which work as anti-inflammatories and help protect the integrity of the lining cells of the gut barrier. Two German studies indicated that "mental relaxation procedures, such as meditation, lead to increased secretion of SIgA," helping our immune system better cope with infections and pathogens.

How to Manage

Stress management should be an important part of a health strategy in order to complement nutrition and exercise. One recommendation is to do a relaxation technique, such as walking or sitting meditation, for ten to fifteen minutes each day. If you can't find ten minutes, that is a good indication that stress is a problem in your daily routine. In Buddhist practice, a walking meditation is often used by monks. Most Americans do not have time during the day to

meditate, but taking a few minutes for a walk break has been shown to go a long way toward reducing stress.

One way to implement this practice is to set the timer on your mobile device for ten minutes and use it for a time-out. Try focusing on walking in small steps, thinking about your breathing, and letting your mind clear—especially if you have a particularly stressful conference call or meeting. You can even do a walking meditation in your hotel room. Stress can have just as negative an effect over time as living off of fast food and cigarettes. Small breaks can go a long way toward reducing stress and improving health.

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