



## De-Stressing the Stress . . . *Naturally*

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*Holist Nurs Pract* 2008;22(6):365–368

According to the Oxford Scientific Dictionary, *stress* [O.Fr.] is defined as the result produced when a system, or organism, is acted upon by forces that disrupt equilibrium or produce strain; the term denotes the physical (gravity, mechanical force, pathology, injury) and psychologic (fear, anxiety, crisis, joy) forces experienced by individuals. When stress occurs in quantities that a system cannot handle, it produces pathologic changes.

With this definition in mind, how many of us can relate to the uncomfortable feeling in response to stress when our chest seems held tightly in a vice, or when our neck or back muscles feel wound, like a finely tuned violin? A recent survey from the American Psychological Association indicates that almost a third of American adults are experiencing a feeling of “extreme stress” with these symptoms. The results reveal that an outstanding number (32%) report extreme stress; of these, nearly 17% reach their highest levels within 15 days and almost 48% report that their stress levels have risen during the past 5 years. Although 82% of the participants reported that they manage stress well, at the same time they admit that stress causes problems with their physical, mental health, personal relationships, and work. The report showed that 3 of 4 American adults (77%) experienced physical problems within the previous month owing to stress. Common symptoms included fatigue, headache, muscle tension, teeth grinding, digestive disturbances, dizziness, and change in sex

drive. Furthermore, almost half of the study group (48%) reported insomnia during the previous month, losing an average of 21 hours of sleep.<sup>1</sup> Overeating or eating unhealthy comfort foods (refined carbohydrates), such as pasta and heavily laden sugar-containing foods, and beverages were enjoyed by nearly half of the participants, which serve only to exacerbate an already-stressed condition.

Although the survey clearly demonstrated that most participants were actively suffering physically, emotionally, personally, and professionally, they felt that stress is a natural part of modern-day living. Indeed, science indicates that biological systems function better when exposed to a certain level of stress; however, an excess amount of stress, over a protracted period of time, often leads to a system’s breakdown, commonly known as *burnout*.<sup>2</sup> Learning mastery of complementary and integrative therapy strategies for calming both the mind and the body is a key factor for increasing resistance to the stress of modern-day life.

### DE-STRESSING THE STRESS . . . *NATURALLY*

Today, literature and media abound on the topic of “how to” for decreasing one’s stress levels, often accompanied with a myriad of techniques and associated products promoted to supposedly guarantee their success. This can result in a maze of confusion for the very individual seeking guidance in how to effectively improve his or her life by reducing excessive stress levels.

Learning to calm the mind, body, and spirit is a key factor in helping to relieve stress, a process that can be achieved through integration of simple, yet effective,

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dietary and lifestyle guidelines, supportive nutritional and botanical therapies, and tapping into natural stress-reduction methods that are easily accessible.

## HEALTH-PROMOTING DIET

For the individual who suffers from stress, a health-promoting diet, rich in whole “natural,” unprocessed food, becomes even more critical in order to support the biochemistry of the body, enhance strength, and lend increased resistance to stress. The guidelines for a healthy diet are those that provide optimal levels of all major nutrients while maintaining low levels of food components that are known to be detrimental to health such as refined carbohydrates, saturated fats, salt, cholesterol, and food additives.

### Complex carbohydrates: Fruits and vegetables

A dietary plan rich in “rainbow fruits and vegetables” is perhaps the best guideline for using “food as medicine.” Fruits and vegetables contain an array of substances known as phytochemicals, which are protective against cancer and other degenerative diseases. Among the most important groups of phytochemicals are pigments such as chlorophyll, carotenes, and flavonoids. Fruits and vegetables are also a source of dietary fiber. Dietary fiber, which is also found in seeds, legumes, and whole grains, is an important factor in promoting health. Many nutritional scientists and medical experts recommend the consumption of 2 to 3 servings of fruits and 3 to 5 servings of vegetables per day to maintain health and well-being.

### High-quality protein: Fish and lean meats

Protein is the basic building block of life. It is necessary for growth and in every physiologic process of the body. As protein is digested, it is broken down into amino acids, which are then used in cellular repair. Because the human body is capable of synthesizing only 12 of the 22 amino acids that are essential to life, consuming high-quality protein sources is the only way to provide the remaining 9 amino acids. A lack of essential amino acids will adversely affect cellular repair and bodily function. The need for adequate protein is important for maintaining health and to help in managing stress. High-quality protein can be found in the form of fish

(such as salmon) and lean white meats such as organically raised, skinless chicken and turkey.

### Health-promoting fats

Eating the right type of fat is very important in maintaining the proper function of cellular membranes. When a cell loses the integrity of its membrane structure, it also loses its ability to retain water, cellular fluids, electrolytes, and essential nutrients. The optimum dietary fat profile for promoting proper cell membrane functioning includes high levels of monounsaturated and omega-3 fatty acids (found in oil olive and fish, which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids) and consumption of low levels of saturated fat and trans-fatty acids found in dairy products and red meats.

### Water: The source of life

Water provides proper hydration for healthy cells and tissues and improves the function of the immune system. Without water fats cannot be metabolized, nor can the body flush wastes from its cells. Water transports chemicals and nutrients to cells, helps improve the immune system, and is necessary for normal metabolic processes. Water is the true elixir of life. The recommended amount of pure water on a daily basis is at least 8 to 10 glasses.

### Reducing refined carbohydrates

Refined sugar, simple sugars (corn syrup, honey, white flour), and related sweeteners (high-fructose corn syrup) place great stress on blood glucose control and other body control mechanisms. An association exists between hypoglycemia and mental function. Studies of individuals diagnosed with depression have shown a high incidence of hypoglycemia. Because optimal mental functioning is necessary to withstand and properly cope with stress, eliminating sources of refined carbohydrates may, theoretically, improve mood behavior.

## HEALTHY LIFESTYLE PRACTICES

### Spiritual connection

The term *spirituality* may hold different meaning to different people. It may involve a daily meditation practice, a walk in nature, or a gathering with a

religious community to pray and worship. Creating regular spiritual involvement honors our spiritual well-being by allowing us to connect more deeply with ourselves, with others, as well as the Divine power that connects us to all. It provides comfort and a shelter during difficult, stressful times.

### Restful sleep

Restful sleep provides the foundation for both mental and physical well-being, yet more than 40 million Americans experience insomnia or some form of sleep disturbance.<sup>1</sup>

An individual requires a minimum of 6 to 10 hours of sleep each night to feel energetic, alert, and vibrant. It is important to establish ritual practices each evening to ensure the type of sleep that is most rejuvenating.

An example of an effective ritual practice, which can easily be incorporated into one's daily life, includes the following: eating a light meal in a peaceful environment, followed by a relaxing walk. Upon returning, prepare a warm, relaxing aromatic bath, accompanied by candlelight and soothing music. Then, settle in bed with an inspirational book and a freshly brewed cup of chamomile tea. Make certain that the lights are turned off by 10:30 PM, and then gently guide your breath into a gentle, relaxing slumber.

### Mind-body stress-reduction techniques

The art of producing deep relaxation with any technique requires learning how to breathe. The words for *spirit* and *breath* are virtually the same in many languages. By focusing attention on the breath, it can alter the state of consciousness and induce relaxation. An easy-to-learn breathing technique involves inhaling while slowly counting to 4, pausing and holding the breath for a count of 7, then slowly and completely exhaling at the count of 8. As the air flows out of the mouth, imagine all the tension and stress leaving the body. Then, repeat this process until a deep sense of relaxation is achieved.

### Physical activity

A comprehensive program to enhance flexibility, strength, and endurance includes both aerobic and weight-bearing activity. Movement exercises such as yoga, tai chi, and qi gong all expand flexibility while enhancing mind-body integration. Weight-bearing activity includes cross-country skiing, swimming, gardening, and weightlifting. Research evidence

clearly indicates that regular physical activity is an important factor to guard against the negative effects of stress. It has been shown to increase endorphins, the mood-enhancing brain chemical, and provides a greater sense of confidence and competence. It is good for the body, mind, and spirit.

### Laughter: A spoonful of medicine

Studies show that laughter reduces the level of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, while it increases the levels of health and mood-enhancing hormones, endorphins, and neurotransmitters.<sup>3</sup> Laughter has also been found to increase the immune system, which is often compromised during times of stress.<sup>4</sup> These findings lend further support to the fact that laughter is like a spoonful of medicine, *so laugh hard and more often*.

### Nature's gift

Nature in all her majestic beauty gives to each and everyone of us a gift of opportunity to delight in her mystery, her wisdom, and her miracles. A moment connecting with nature is uplifting and inspirational to the mind, body, and soul.

## NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENT CONSIDERATION

A strong nutritional foundation is an important element in supporting emotional, physical, and mental health. When a person is under stress, it is also important to include nutritional supplementation that supports adrenal function.

A basic nutritional supplement program includes a high-potency multiple vitamin and mineral formula; an antioxidant network supply of nutrients that includes vitamins C and E, coenzyme Q10,  $\alpha$ -lipoic acid, omega-3 essential fatty acids (fish oil, flaxseed oil), and adrenal function supporting nutrients, which include a vitamin B complex, zinc, and magnesium.

## BOTANICAL MEDICINE CONSIDERATION

### Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*)

Chamomile tea (infusion) has been used effectively for thousands of years to help ease tension, anxiety,

and stress. The preparation of chamomile tea is an art, which involves adding the dried floral heads (or a tea bag) into 150 mL of boiling water and covering to prevent the escape of the volatile actives, while gently steeping for 15 minutes.

## AROMATIC PLANT ESSENCE

### Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*)

Lavender, a fragrant aromatic herb, has been used since antiquity for evoking relaxation, dispelling anxiety, increasing well-being, and soothing the mind, body, and spirit into a deep restful sleep. Add 5 to 7 drops of lavender essential oil while gently agitating into a warm bath and soak up for 15 minutes.

## SUMMARY

De-Stressing the Stress . . . *Naturally* offers an easy-to-follow guide, utilizing complementary and integrative therapies to assist in maintaining health and well-being.

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