

Dealing with stress.

Physiological tips.

The UK has some of the longest working hours in the EU. We also spend more time taking part in cultural activities than anywhere else in Europe. In short, the UK is a culture where we work and play hard. You don't need research to tell you that working hours are getting longer and there is more pressure on us all to perform and succeed in all aspects of our professional, personal and social lives.

To stay happy, healthy and productive for more than just the short-term, relaxation and balance plays a vital role in all our lives. Relaxation is more than 'downtime', it is an investment in your well-being that enables you to live life to the full!

What is Stress?

Stress and tension are necessary for success and without some level of stimulation we would decline into apathy. Each person has an optimum stress level and it is important to understand the signs of excessive stress, and its causes.

What does it do?

The stress reaction is a physical one, for the very good reason that when primitive man had feelings of stress, the cause was likely to be a physical danger. His body reactions prepared him to run away fast, or to turn and fight (the fight-flight response). The adrenal glands therefore release adrenaline, which produces a 'high' almost like a drug.

The adrenals also release cortisone. Together, these two hormones gear the whole body for action:

- Digestion shuts down
- Glucose is released into the blood stream to fuel the nerves and muscles
- Breathing, heart rate and blood pressure all increase, ready to deliver oxygen to the cells to burn the fuel and make energy.

Although the majority of modern day stresses – losing car keys, stuck in a traffic jam, striving for status, stressful job, relationship problems, drinking coffee etc – do not call for either fight or flight, we still respond in this same manner.

If this process happens too often, side effects build up, as a result of an imbalance in the long term stress hormones released by the adrenal glands – cortisol and DHEA.

The Role of Endorphins

Endorphins are a group of naturally occurring chemicals that the body produces to enable it to cope in stressful situations. When they are released into the body, we are more relaxed, we are more able to cope with pain and generally feel better about life. A balance of these chemicals is vital to physical and emotional well-being.

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There is even some evidence suggesting that alcoholism, depression and drug dependency are the result of the body's inability to produce sufficient levels of endorphins.

Endorphins are responsible for the natural high we feel in many situations, for example:

- Exercise is a major endorphin-producer, especially prolonged, continuous exercise like running, swimming or skiing. Endorphins are responsible for the 'runner's high' and also the second wind felt towards the end of a race
- Chocolate and chilli peppers both stimulate endorphin production
- Loving physical contact is a powerful factor in stimulating endorphin production
- Alcohol provides temporary relief to endorphin imbalance. This may explain the role of alcohol in recreation in many cultures – it also underlines the addictive nature of alcohol and the potential for its abuse
- Many therapies stimulate endorphin production, including massage, hydrotherapy, electrotherapy, shiatsu and acupuncture
- Laughter is a major endorphin-producer. Music of all types has a powerful psychological and physiological effect on us and can stimulate endorphin production
- Meditation, including Qi Gong, yogic breathing and T'ai Chi as well as visualisation and hypnosis all stimulate endorphin production and can be powerful tools to aid relaxation.

Exercise

In most modern day stress situations we experience, there is limited physical response or tension release (the most we do is drum our fingers or make a rude remark). This is not enough to use up the nutrients released into the blood and the physical mechanisms designed to burn them up. This is why exercise is important for people who are stressed in any way. Obviously it is best to get active at the time of stress – a brisk walk or vigorous workout is good first aid for feelings of stress. Think outside the box and be creative with your exercise. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

Nutrition

Avoiding food and drink that may create unnecessary stress on your system is a good place to start:

- Reduce refined foods (i.e. made with white flour) – high in sugar
- Reduce processed foods – high in additives/preservatives and sugar
- Reduce caffeine intake – includes tea, coffee, chocolate
- Avoid alcohol, stop smoking
- Increase fresh fruit and vegetables, rich in vital vitamins/minerals plus flavonoids (help neutralise free radicals)
- Increase whole foods – products made with wholemeal flour, whole grains (e.g. brown rice, millet), pulses (peas, beans, lentils).



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Sleep

The body needs sleep to function. Given this simple fact, it is amazing how low down on our list of priorities a good night's sleep often comes. The effects of a lack of sleep, or poor quality sleep are cumulative and can have health implications.

- Most adults need 7 to 9 hours sleep a night, every night – if your alarm jolts you out of a deep sleep, especially if you are dreaming, you can be pretty certain you are not getting enough
- A lie-in at the weekend can't undo the effects of a lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep during the week
- If you have been stressed or unwell, you may need more sleep than usual – try to listen to your body's demands
- Poor-quality sleep can be just as bad as not enough sleep. Pain, stress, lack of exercise, too many stimulants like caffeine or too much alcohol can all be culprits
- If you aren't sleeping well – is it time for a new bed?
- Chronic lack of sleep can be debilitating and have long-term health implications – speak to your GP.

Relaxation

Learning how to relax is also an important way to reduce the effects of stress and tension. Relaxation techniques can help, the key being to keep the exercise simple and pleasurable.

- Try some simple progressive muscle relaxation, an exercise to free the body of physical tensions that might distract the mind. Tense your muscles as hard as you can and then relax, starting with your feet and ending with your facial muscles
- Many people also find meditation and visualisation techniques helpful
- Group exercise activities like yoga, stretching and tai chi can promote relaxation

Breathe your way to relaxation

Breathing is vital in learning how to relax. The body is physically incapable of panicking if you are breathing correctly. Allowing yourself a few moments where you concentrate on nothing other than the inflow and outflow of the breath from your body is a great way to switch off from external and internal tensions. Good breathing habits are key to our general physiological and emotional wellbeing; if we don't provide our body with enough oxygen, it cannot function properly.

Try out the following breathing exercises:

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Many people think that diaphragmatic breathing is the most natural and healthiest way to breathe.

- Lie flat on the floor. Raise your knees – you can put a cushion under them if you wish
- Put one palm on your upper chest and the other over your navel – your objective is to have the lower hand rise first when you breathe in
- Breathe out fully – and then a little bit more. With practise you will find you can do this by drawing in your abdomen. Pause for 2-4 seconds
- Allow the air to naturally flow in again
- Slowly and calmly repeat this cycle a few times

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The Golden Rules of Breathing

- Prolong your out-breath to calm yourself
- Prolong your in-breath to alert or stimulate yourself.

What counts?

Any activity that you class as recreation counts – it could be gardening, doing a crossword, meditating or yoga. Remember that the manner and intention are all-important. Only include an activity as relaxation if you felt more relaxed when it was completed than when you started! You may well include cooking as a recreational activity, but are the final stressful moments of preparation for a dinner party relaxing?

Similarly, if you are multitasking, it is not always genuine relaxation time: Listening to your favourite classical music is all well and good, but if you are catching up on the minutes from the monthly meeting or checking emails at the same time, again, how much relaxation are you really getting? If you go for a relaxing stroll only to spend most of the time on your mobile trying to sort out a stressful situation, you will get little benefit.

Long term stress - tips

Overall stress reduction demands attention to lifestyle. The important point is to take an active role in it – don't let it just happen.

Tips to control your stress levels

- Limit your working hours to, at most, 10 hours a day, five days a week
- It is much easier to cope with stress when nutrition, exercise and sleep are adequate
- Try the 55/5 rule when you are at the office: take a five minute time-out every hour! It could be as simple as switching off your monitor and collecting your thoughts. It's also a good time to get up and stretch your legs and get a glass of water – your mind and body will thank you for it
- When it is impossible to get away, when you are on a busy train or stuck in a traffic jam, try taking ten deep breaths – close your eyes if this makes you more able to concentrate
- Starting with your toes, gently tighten each muscle in the body and then release it, working your way up through your legs, into your body, shoulders, arms, neck and face. This will help to relieve physical tension and allow you to better relax
- Keep fit – Walking is an excellent way to increase your activity levels but also try to introduce some more vigorous forms of exercise 2-3 times per week, such as swimming or gym exercise
- Book yourself in for a relaxing massage which helps the body produce endorphins to ease tensions
- Schedule in a gym session where you can concentrate purely on relaxation. Take time to stretch and take advantage of the saunas and steam rooms if available.