



Stress and Wellness

By Wendy Marks
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Freida in Yoga Mode

We have an amazing immune system. Billions of cells zip around our bodies, through our organs, muscles and circulatory system, waging minute-by-minute war against bacteria, fungus, viruses and cancer cells. These invading cells are everywhere: subway railings, coughs, sneezes, in the air, in dirt, environmental toxins, etc. . . You get the idea. We are immersed each day in things that can harm or even destroy us. But here come the superheroes— our immune system, and especially its white blood cells.

These white cells function in various ways. They surround and destroy pathogens by getting inside the “bad” cells and eating them, or sometimes they surround and just neutralize. The immune system can also discern toxins and store them in our fat cells. Pretty cool.

Most of the time it all works well. We get occasional flus and colds, and our body fights them off. But when we are chronically stressed, the body's ability to fight off these attackers is greatly reduced, and we are therefore much more susceptible to infections and other types of illness.

Stress is a normal part of life. We work ourselves up in order to take an exam, get through a family wedding, make it through an especially hard work project, and so on— and these are all good things. Stress can be an effective and very useful motivator. There is nothing like waiting till the last minute to study for an exam to get your stressors up. And that's OK. A little stress can also be a good challenge for the immune system, providing practice for overcoming serious attacks on the body.

This is not chronic stress, but acute stress. Acute stress can be good; chronic stress never is. If we are in a situation that continues to stress us out and we feel powerless to act in ways that can effectively change it, that is chronic stress. And that is the killer. Chronic stress can be anything from trying to survive in a difficult marriage, taking care of an elderly relative, dealing with a sick child, feeling lonely and unsupported in our lives, living in difficult political times, dealing with a world that feels out of control, etc. Anything that continues for a long time and that we cannot effectively control creates chronic stress and wears us down.

Paradoxically, the stress hormone corticosteroid, which initially suppresses inflammation and supports immunity, can suppress the effectiveness of this defense system through overuse. Constant stress— physical, emotional, or both — can wear us down and turn our systems for dealing with the stress into an additional cause of stress.

You and I both know that when we are stressed we tend to engage in activities that negatively affect our immune system such as smoking, drinking, staying up late, not exercising and so on. Behaviors that may seem like coping mechanisms in the short term can in fact make the situation worse.

There's been a ton of research about the negative effect of excess stress. There have been links to heart disease, asthma, autoimmune disease, cancer, headaches etc. In fact excess stress makes almost everything that might go wrong with us worse. Clinical immunologist Leonard Calabrese, DO and head of Clinical Immunology at the Cleveland Clinic, offers insights on how stress impacts your immunity and what you can do to minimize the effect: "Eliminating or modifying these factors in one's life is vital to protect and augment the immune response," he says. "It's necessary to buffer the inevitability of the aging process." Among his recommendations are an anti-inflammatory diet and moderate exercise.

In other words, not moderating and dealing with excess stressors in our lives may cause our body to age and deteriorate much more quickly than it normally would. None of us wants that. We want our quality of life to continue in the best possible way for as long as we can.

So what do we do? I think the biggest answer is "Get support." That could mean anything from having a good friend that you can chat with on a regular basis and download your life, to joining a support group that deals with issues of caregivers or whatever your ongoing stressor problem is. There is real value in being able to share what's going on in your life with a group of people in a similar situation. I have used this all of my life and have found it to be a lifesaver.

But there are things that we don't wish to or feel unable to share. Or there are times in which we want to deal with things on a day-to-day basis in a way that doesn't require as much effort or time.

Most of you can guess that I'm going to suggest meditation. It's easy, it's fast, it can be done anywhere and anytime— and has been proven without question to reduce stress. I often tell people who are in work environments where they cannot get a break to simply go into the

bathroom and shut the stall door, set the timer on your phone for five minutes and do a simple meditation. It just works. It slows down your heart rate and gives you the time and space to “let go” for a few minutes, which often allows you to let go for longer periods of time. It gives perspective.

The next highly effective antidote to stress is physical activity. Get out and take a walk, go to the gym, do something that gets your heart rate up and allows you to be focused on your body and not your problems for a little while. I hate going to the gym. I love leaving the gym— I feel relaxed and self-righteous. During the time that I’m exercising, and for a little while after, I may complain about my aches and pains, but I completely forgot about whatever was stressing me.

If you don’t feel you want to do cardiovascular exercise and want something you can do very quickly to reduce stress, yoga is your answer. Anyone can learn five or six yoga poses, and again you can do them in pretty much any environment. Concentrating on holding a pose, focusing on your breath, and putting your body through stretches can be very useful to release and reduce those stress hormones.

My favorite anti-stressor is to do something nice for someone else. Volunteering a few hours a week helping someone who is in a much worse situation than you are can be a great stress breaker. It doesn’t have to take a lot of time. It could be a couple of hours a week. You will feel good and I promise it will reduce your stress.

Take control and determine exactly what your stressors are. Become conscious of these things and seek to reduce them. Practice finding your personal way to cut stress. And as Spock says, “Live long and prosper.”

Namaste, Wendy