

Stress, Health, and Coping with Life's Problems

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The American Academy of Family Physicians estimates that 60% of the health problems brought to doctors are somehow related to stress. Sometimes illness is the direct result of the body's sustained stress response, while other times stress exacerbates an existing illness.

The list of stress-related ailments is very long and includes psychological disorders, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, tics, tension headaches, diabetic instability, impaired immunity, hypertension and other cardiovascular distress, gastrointestinal problems, elevated cholesterol, and impaired wound healing. The physiology of the stress-health nexus is complex, but several processes have been identified. Here is just one example: When you are stressed-out, your catecholamine hormone levels spike rapidly and your glucocorticoid levels elevate as part of the process of gluconeogenesis - the creation of new glucose necessary for extended *fight-or-flight* response. Then, if the stress in your life continues, the persistently high glucocorticoid levels actually impair the operations of your thymus, lymph nodes, and spleen, and this delivers a hit to your ability to fight off illnesses. This is why you get sick right when it seems things couldn't get much worse.

Why Coping Skills Are So Important

Technically speaking, the events in our lives aren't the most powerful "stressors;" our thoughts are! There is tremendous variability to how people react to life's problems, and this is in large part determined by each person's unique problem-solving style. Studies have shown that *stress-hardy* people view life's problems as challenges to be mastered, are optimistic problem-solvers, and maintain good perspective on the relative importance of each problem. Several studies have also shown that people who meditate daily, exercise regularly, and maintain healthy lifestyles demonstrate far better coping abilities. It is no surprise that these individuals also demonstrate fewer health complications. In contrast, *stress-impaired* individuals often view life's problems as catastrophic threats, over-react to problems, and mentally turn molehills into mountains. They tend not to exercise, meditate, or eat right. They usually have higher catecholamine and glucocorticoid levels in their bloodstream and more health problems.

Stress Reduction Tips

Learn and practice the mental habits used by stress-hardy individuals. Practice optimistic problem solving. View problems as challenges and maintain good perspective on the relative importance of each problem.

Improve your lifestyle habits: Schedule your time realistically. Exercise regularly, eat right, and develop good social supports. Get adequate rest, recreation, and sleep. Minimize or eliminate alcohol, illicit drugs, and tobacco.

Learn a relaxation or meditation technique, and practice it every day. The large body of research on meditation and health is impressive, with *hundreds* of studies demonstrating an array of benefits such as fewer infections, faster surgical wound healing, lowered cholesterol, reduced arterial occlusion, and far less anxious reactivity.

Read a stress-reduction self-help book like Joan Borysenko's *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind* or Herbert Benson's *The Relaxation Response*.

Seek mental health treatment such as individual psychotherapy or participation in a stress reduction group. A qualified mental health professional can help you to manage your stress effectively and boost your satisfaction with life.