



Tips on Stress Management

Everyone can recognise stress in their daily life. Some people seem to have more stress than others, or is it simply their reaction to events that creates stress? What is stress?

What is Stress?

The stress response is a very important response in our bodies. It is designed to help us cope and get ready for any incoming perceived threat. It has been passed onto us through our genetics.

You can imagine back in caveman times that a stressful event might be you strolling out of your cave in the morning getting ready to make the morning coffee, when suddenly you spot a sabre tooth tiger ready to kill you. Your body perceives the threat to your life; it presses a 'stress button' that triggers a chain of reactions in your body including increased sympathetic nervous system activation and hormones. All of these reactions in your body get you ready to run, and can include increased heart rate, increased breath rate, increased blood pressure, blood flow to the muscles ready to tighten them and run. In that split second you have pressed your stress button, and if you manage it quickly enough to run you might survive. This is the 'fight or flight' response.

Fast forward to today and we still have this inbuilt 'stress button' ready to help us at any moment of perceived threat. Now this reaction is very useful. If I am walking down a dark alley alone late at night and hear ominous footsteps behind me, I might decide to press my 'stress button' ready to fight off or run from any potential attacker. Very useful and this response will possibly benefit me. Or if I am walking down the street and see a child run onto the road, I might press my 'stress button' to help me run quickly to the child or alert any oncoming traffic. Another useful occasion where my stress response has been beneficial, not directly to me but to someone else.

But do you press your stress button too readily? If you have too many emails, phone calls, your family or relationships are demanding or your car has just broken down, will the 'stress button' (muscles tight and getting ready to run) help you in this situation?



Tips on Dealing with 'Stressful' Events

One of the useful ways to deal with stress is firstly to recognise it is a normal (and very useful) response that can be useful in situations of danger or threat. However we sometimes (without thought) habitually use this 'stress button' too often.

Once you have recognised your own stress response within yourself (you might feel your heart rate or breath rate increase, or your muscles tighten as you react to a situation) and good question to stop and ask yourself is "Is my own stress response benefitting me right now? Or is it benefitting anyone else?" If you are about to run away from a potential attacker then yes! A great response to have! If it is a response to save a child from oncoming traffic then yes again, a great response to have! If however it is that you have too many emails, too many phone calls, relationship difficulties, demanding children or family, an inconsiderate boss, will the stress response benefit you? Possibly not!!

Pausing for a moment to simply ask the question, "Will my own stress response benefit me right now?" can help prevent you from pressing that 'stress button' trigger too readily or too often.

Relaxation Tips

There are plenty of relaxation tips available to help you cope and change your own stress reactions. Each person will respond to exercises differently, so I suggest you try a few different things for yourself to find what works for you. Some good tips can include:

Breath work: Lie on your side comfortably and allow your upper belly to completely relax and hang out, you can feel this with your hands. Then slowly inhale allowing your upper belly to expand without breathing into your neck and shoulders. Focus on filling and expanding the belly. With your exhale simply let your air fall out, without any force. See if you can repeat this relaxed breath cycle for a few minutes. This can also be done in sitting.

Switch off and Unplug: Have set times throughout the day or week when you do not constantly check emails and computer updates. They will still be there when you get back and enjoy the pause from electronic screens and external demands.

Meditation: There are many different meditation techniques to try, not all of them will suit you. Try and borrow some guided meditation audio to listen to and don't be too hard on yourself if you think you "can't meditate". Meditation is not about having a blank empty mind, but more about being aware of what comes forward in your thoughts and learning with focus to put them aside or watch them pass. Guided relaxation such as yoga nidra can also benefit.

Exercise and Nature: Take some time in nature or with friends regularly and get some outdoor exercise. Breaking up your usual routine to allow a change in thought processes can help.