
The raw impact of stress and how to deal with it

Martina Gallivan reveals how stress manifests in terms of your physical and mental wellbeing and shows how to tackle this demon before it grasps you.

How are you coping right now? You might think it's a silly question in light of what we are all currently experiencing in this pressure cooker of emotional turmoil. We have all been there before at some time or another. Either through an interview which dropped off a cliff, to a disastrous presentation or redundancy. Financial worries, health scares, parental concerns, missed bill payments, the list goes on.

But a certain amount of stress is actually good for us. It's part of our autonomic nervous system. Our fight or flight response triggered by the stress hormone cortisol. It alerts us to danger, assists in productivity, and gives us that get up and go feeling of invincibility and creativity. So stress is good some of the time.

However, when it impacts on our health that's where the real problems surface. Like a missile firing on all cylinders it attacks us psychologically and physiologically.

You probably wouldn't be surprised if you were told that psychologically the impact of stress can cause sleep disturbances, anxiety, mood swings, depression and generally can lead us down a path that we feel unable to cope hence need the help of an expert.

But it is through our psychological reaction to stress which can subsequently impact on the physiological aspect of our body.

Impact of stress on the body

How does it do this? Well unfortunately the impact manifests itself on many levels. But if you are forewarned as to its effect you should be capable of recognising the mental health impact it is having on your own body and deal with it accordingly from a physiological perspective.

For one, stress effects your digestive tract. If you're eating quickly there's no doubt it's having an impact on digestion. You're eating in what is called sympathetic dominance so your body will no doubt reject this forced cramming causing indigestion and heartburn. Also, vital nutrients won't be able to reach where they need to go so you won't be able to nourish the cells. The answer is to eat slower.

Levels of Secretory IgA or (SIgA) which is our first line of defence and inhibits pathogens in the intestinal lining or epithelial cells decrease with chronic stress. This can result in an imbalanced gut or dysbiosis.

Intestinal Permeability, otherwise known as leaky gut linked to inflammatory bowel disease, MS and Type 1 diabetes, is triggered by stress.

Our thymus gland is an important part of the immune and endocrine system. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can shrink the thymus and cause T-cell damage whose role is to critically fight infection. This causes damage to the gut wall.

Stress can create an inability within the body to fend off free radicals and create oxidative stress and chronic inflammation.

One of the major risk factors for cardiovascular disease and also hypertension is stress. Managing stress can also influence in reducing elevated cholesterol levels.

Continuous stress leads to increased cortisol production which is also linked to weight gain. In particular, visceral fat around the abdomen. And it is this excessive visceral fat percentage which can then lead to illnesses such as type2 diabetes, cholesterol, hypertension and heart disease.

Chronic stress can lead to insulin resistance because it increases levels of cortisol and adrenaline leading to both of these hormones becoming less responsive to insulin.

How to manage stress and win

Now that you are beginning to get a grasp of how stress can affect the human form how can you start to deal with it?

It's no use saying to someone who has just lost their job or is about to lose their home? "*Don't worry it'll all be fine*". This is not going to help.

Exercise, getting rest, eating well, and talking to friends are important for your mental wellbeing. Try cutting down on alcohol and caffeine which both act as stimulants. These are positive suggestions and within our capability.

Having supported patients with high levels of organisational stress in the past I do know we all respond differently. I would add as a parenthesis here. Our reaction to a stress response varies. It is the way in which we react to situations and events determines our own psychological and physiological outcome.

Here is an example. Suppose you have an argument with your boss and he shouts at you but

somehow you manage to shrug it off. In your own head it's no big deal as he's just ranting off again and you don't give it a second thought or let it get to you.

Now suppose my boss shouts and roars and I get upset. My adrenaline increases, cortisol levels accelerate, my mouth is dry. The palms of my hands sweat. I can feel my heart race. In other words, I am really upset and take it to heart. I ruminate about the sequence of events and start to catastrophise, meaning in my own mind I'm going to be fired. I build myself up to a point that the body is now out of control and reacting physiologically and psychologically. And this is where potential danger occurs.

What is necessary is to think about what it is you are thinking about and look at the situation rationally before it gets out of control. My belief is that you may have a much better chance of grasping stress before it grasps you.

Implementing all of the usual suggestions of eating well and regular exercise will help you. But taking a helicopter view by extracting yourself out of the emotional event, analysing it rationally and possibly coming up with planned solutions yourself in a structured organised manner may help to solve your dilemma and empower you to take control of your own destiny.

Reducing stress won't happen overnight but with repetition and self-belief you can overcome the gradual manifestation of this silent and deadly demon.

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