

He wears his responsibilities with self-assurance.

The best-stressed executive

by John Parks Trowbridge, M.D.

Stress is the very *spice* of life.

Being alive means responding to stimulation from the environment; stress is merely the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it. A feeling of lack of control in such situations can produce weakness or frustration. Learning some simple techniques for taking charge of your life can be a key to both health and happiness.

Our environment, our body, and our thoughts are the three sources of daily challenges. The physical environment presents stressful situations such as weather, noise, crowding, and pollution. Societal influences include changing values and roles, time pressures, performance standards, and interpersonal demands. The changing nature of work, changing work force, and changing structure of business have a major impact. Our bodies require us to deal with rapid growth and aging, illness, accidents, poor diet, sleep disturbances. Each day when we awaken to the alarm clock, rather than waking naturally when rested, we begin being stressed. Our thoughts are complex psychological patterns that interpret and label our experiences. Worrying increases body tensions, creating further uneasiness and leading to even more anxiety.

By responding to challenges, we experience joy and the thrill of achievement. Appropriate adaptation creates a positive perception of "pleasant stress." Success without *distress* comes when we view stressful situations as opportunities, to which we respond with growth-enhancing reactions. We gain in strength and develop resistance to future stresses. Failing to cope, on the other hand, leads to stress overload, weakness, and increased vulnerability.

Persons with optimal coping performance have developed a lifestyle of "pleasant stress." They experience exhilaration, strong motivation, mental alertness, high energy. Their actions reflect realistic analysis of

problems, sharp perception, enhanced memory and recall. Calmness under pressure results from increased immunity to changing stresses, drawing upon strength gained in past experiences. Each of us has the potential to live a life filled with "pleasant stress."

Surveys of illness in the U.S.A. have yielded surprising results. Only about six percent of people are without complaints, claiming high energy and robust health. About 40 percent suffer from chronic diseases and levels of disability. Many people have come to accept their symptoms as a normal part of living. They accept the fact that they feel lousy because they believe everyone else does. But one person in 20 does *not* suffer "everyday complaints"—he or she feels great, looks great, and has lots of energy. Studies of their health habits and how they handle stress have provided definite correlations between coping with stress and regularly feeling well.

Everyday complaints of irritability, inability to concentrate, worry, and tension headaches signify psychological fatigue. Free-floating anxiety, out of proportion to the actual problems at hand, is common. Fatigue, difficulties with sleeping, indigestion, constipation, diarrhea, frequent colds, and excessive eating, drinking, and smoking frequently result from poor handling of stress.

Emotional disturbances are often early signs of serious stress problems. The three A's—absenteeism, accidents, and alcoholism—are the most obvious on-the-job signs. Excessive and unresolved stress accounts for more lost working days than all other causes put together. The failure to cope well becomes a vicious cycle. With diminished resistance, overload comes quickly, and the cycle becomes a spiral.

Stress presents a challenge to your health. Any successful solution must consider you as a whole being: mind, body, and spirit. Spiritual health—the melody of

your life—is a critical dimension in a total health-care program. Simple techniques can help reverse the stress alarm response. Some physical alterations are *easy* to accomplish.

Begin with comfortable shoes that fit right and are appropriate for your activities. Many men find that knee-high support stockings increase their feeling of well-being. Women have a great number of choices of support hosiery. Fashion issues aside, properly fitting waistbands (whether belts, slacks, or skirts) and coats allow freedom of movement and breathing. Restriction of these body activities increases stress in an otherwise pleasant setting.

Muscle tensions can be eased by shower massages. For muscle-tension headaches, stretch the neck while allowing the shower to beat gently from the base of the head to the shoulders and halfway down the back.

Getting or giving a massage is a pleasurable experience. Fragrant oil is available from local stores or specialty shops, or you can make your own by adding cologne or perfume to safflower oil.

Lack of control is a key stress factor. Development of a “pleasant stress” lifestyle must involve taking charge of your life. Planning for stress enables you to flow and grow with it, rather than bob helplessly like a cork on a sea of overwhelming forces.

A realistic appreciation of your strengths and talents and of the situations in your life prepares you to meet challenges. Often the “worst possibilities” will not develop—or will not be as bad as you anticipate. But for those times when “the bottom falls out,” you will have built the framework needed for survival and rescue.

This technique helps to identify and account for potentially distressing events. Set down your goals as clearly as possible. Outline all the obstacles you foresee that could interrupt your progress. Develop several solutions to get around *each* obstacle. Choose from these courses of action just how you plan to do the job. You will find that you *can* do it.

Planning for the future involves planning the details of “your dream.” Working toward what you really desire mobilizes powerful emotional forces. Your energy reserves are tapped to meet *your* needs. You can develop a daily image of yourself “having a good day.”

An important preventive measure in keeping stress from building to hard-to-handle levels is to reverse your alarm response when it is fired off inappropriately. Jumping away from an oncoming car requires urgent mobilization of body energies. The same major alarm response in a business meeting or behind the steering wheel serves no productive purpose.

Learn to recognize the body changes that signal the

alarm response: pounding heart, rapid pulse, shortness of breath, inability to sit still, gripping emotions, racing thoughts, and even tensing of the muscles of the arms and legs, clenching of the jaw, gritting of the teeth, and a tightened stomach.

Simple relaxation methods, such as abdominal breathing, can be used inconspicuously to quickly reduce the alarm responses, without interfering with your activity. The sooner you recognize and alter these body changes, the better able you are to prevent the occurrence of stress overload.

Taking charge of your life means developing simple daily controls. “Triple-10 Time” is a valuable technique.

Take 10 minutes alone in the early morning to write down three tasks on a “Do Now” list. These are your most important jobs for the day. Put other tasks that you would like to do today on a “Do Soon” list. Finally, jot down reminders of other activities planned or hoped for the day. *Focus* your day’s efforts on your “Do Now” list, crossing off each item as you finish it.

Take 10 minutes at lunchtime for two tasks—to review your lists and organize your afternoon; then devote just seven or eight minutes to a personal activity. Call a friend, call home, write a note, or arrange some personal item. Imagine how many friends you could touch base with in just a month.

Take 10 minutes on arriving home in the evening to sit with your family. Re-enter your home life and put work behind you. The whole family will benefit from this attention and separation of work and home.

These precious few minutes will help keep your priorities clear and make the other 1,000 minutes of your waking day more productive and less stressful.

“Take a break” is useful advice to help interrupt the cumulative effects of events and thoughts. When tensions mount, push your chair back and just “do nothing.”

Quit your intense involvement in affairs of the world and just rest quietly, alone to yourself. A few minutes’ pause reorganizes your body’s energy resources. Brief periods of non-concentration have a central role in managing stress effectively.

Our lives are so involved with *doing* that we all too easily neglect being with others. Consider switching home entertainment from the non-stop television to music from the radio or tape player. The non-directional nature of background music allows opportunities to communicate freely—either ideas within yourself or with others. Music can provide relaxation and emotional harmony in office, home, or car and produce the atmosphere for stress control. Proper background light can also provide a setting for soothing stress.

Loneliness and isolation are different but equally devastating situations. Our greatest protection from such distress is to reach out, to build bridges of friendship. Kindness costs you nothing and gives you everything—including an environment of pleasant stress instead of distress.

Recovery from either “pleasant stress” or distress requires adequate rest to replenish body reserves. Without rest, people begin the day already weakened and more vulnerable to challenges.

Choose a firm mattress or heated waterbed, large enough for you to move comfortably into different sleeping positions. Keep the bedroom temperature at about 21C. (70° F), adding covers needed for warmth. Use a down-fill or other soft pillow, just thick enough to hold the head in a straight line with the spine. Persons with lower back problems can benefit from placing pillows under the knees while sleeping on the back—or sleeping on the side with the knees drawn up toward the chest.

Avoid sleeping pills, since they interfere with natural rest. If you *need* assistance sleeping, consider trying one gram of the amino acid L-tryptophane, available from health foods stores, about 20 to 30 minutes before retiring. This nutrient is involved in the production of a brain hormone which encourages tranquility. (Warm milk, long given by grandmothers to help children sleep, contains tryptophane.)

Proper physical activity greatly increases the body's ability to cope with physical challenges. Not only do strength and stamina increase, but breathing and circulation also become more efficient and muscle relaxation is encouraged.

Walking remains the cheapest, easiest, most accessible, and possibly the best general exercise. Walkers need no special equipment except comfortable shoes. A brisk walk brings nearly every muscle into play.

Hobbies are as simple to start as walking. All you need is an interest you want to pursue . . . then let your enthusiasm draw you on. Set out to indulge your own interests, with your own goals, at your own pace, and in your own special place and time. Remember this is self-time, and self-renewal is your only purpose.

Food is used so often as a “reward” that we fail to look to its real purpose—to provide body-building blocks necessary for energy, healing, and health. Stress requires the body to make responses, so certain nutrients are utilized quickly. Certain vitamins are not stored in the body. When we are under excessive stress, our diet must meet that excess demand as well.

Consult an appropriate nutritional counselor for personal dietary and supplement advice; individual needs

can vary greatly. Until you develop an ideal program, consider starting with a general multiple vitamin-mineral supplement twice daily; 250 to 500 milligrams vitamin C (with bioflavonoids) once or twice daily; and B-complex from brewer's yeast, one tablespoon twice daily.

Travel offers novel experiences and adventures at every turn. Removed from the familiar and confronted with unfamiliar geography and schedules, you have the stressful challenge of adapting in each new environment.

Planning ahead can provide easy controls and allow you to deal effectively with changing events. If you travel frequently, make a short list of items you need for any trip and keep it with your main suitcase. You can also keep travel containers filled with basic toiletries and personal items in your suitcase, ready for the next trip. Always pack ahead to avoid a last-minute scramble. Take along special personal items like your favorite pillow or a heating pad. If your back is easily strained, pack more bags with less weight in each or use a porter rather than struggle and suffer later.

Take a long shower in the morning of your departure—let the hot water give your muscles a refreshing massage. Avoid a heavy or filling meal within six hours of your travel time, and arrive at the terminal early enough to relax for a few minutes before check-in. Plan an extra five or 10 minutes to use the restroom and freshen up before boarding. Visit the restroom halfway through the trip, if only to splash water on your face—just the short walk will be refreshing.

Appropriate management of stress means finding what is right for your life. No “magic cures” or medications can prevent stressful situations or enable you to handle them automatically. Your individual response will depend on your outlook, patterns you have developed, and your physical resources. You *can* maximize your strengths by working toward an optimal level of physical and emotional health.

Developing energy reserves gives you “power to spare,” keeping you ready to convert challenges into opportunities. “Pleasant stress” results from increasing positive personal control over your own environment, your own body, and your own thoughts. Select just *one* or *two* of the techniques described in this article and put them to work for a month. Then review the other suggestions, adapting another one or two to your life.

Go slow while you chart your own course to a less distressing and more rewarding life. Then—take charge—better health and happiness are within your grasp. ☛

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