

## ***Holistic Approaches to (Dis)Stress***

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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No one is immune to stress. It's a universal human experience. You've undoubtedly heard that some stress can be "helpful," especially if it motivates you to make changes that improve your lifestyle and health. This is called "eustress" (the Greek prefix *eu* meaning "good"). Some people even work best when they're under this kind of stress, thriving under a degree of pressure, and seeming to require the demands of deadlines or some other urgency to perform at their highest capability.

More often than not, however, people experience less helpful kinds of stress referred to as "distress" (with the Latin prefix *dis* meaning "bad"). Distress is typically brought about by feelings of intense irritation, anxiety or the sense of being threatened.

A lot of present-day distress is related to situations of conflict, feelings of being pressed for time, or when there are other problems to worry about at home or work. The mental and emotional strain can seem nearly unbearable and are certainly upsetting. What many people fail to recognize, however, is that the physical results of stress – especially prolonged, chronic stress – can be just as harmful, if not more so.

Of course, stress is nothing new; our ancestors experienced plenty of it. Granted, they were not dealing with what we consider stressful today. Theirs may have had more of a life-and-death nature, dealing with the changing seasons and dangerous interactions with flora and fauna. All the same, our ancestors' stressful legacy to us is expressed in the human body, which is now actually wired to respond to stress as a threat to life.

When this response is triggered, the body's "master gland" – the pituitary – causes the adrenal glands to release adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol – hormones that prepare the body for "fight or flight." This causes your muscles to tense, increases your degree of alertness, and triggers your heartbeat, blood pressure and respiration to rocket upward. In true emergencies, this physical response to stress can make the difference between life and death. Unfortunately, a body that consistently perceives itself in danger can lose its strong capacity for defense...and worse, can hasten its own demise. Chronic stress has been linked to illness, heart disease, mental burnout and even cancer.

There are, however, steps you can take from an holistic point of view, to prevent and minimize unhealthy levels of stress in your life.

For starters, consider stretching. Take a few minutes several times a day to stand up and stretch your arms and legs. Doing so provides a physical release that can both invigorate and relax you. It also can serve as a mental/emotional release, especially if you sigh or yawn in the process. Stretching helps tense muscles to rest, which can promote easier breathing. It can also help lower your heart rate and blood pressure, and you may find that you are better able to focus afterward.

Don't underestimate the power of a good cup of tea! Many herbs have relaxant properties that can contribute to a sense of well-being. Use a teaspoon of any of the following dried herbs (or a combination thereof) for each cup of tea you'd like to make: lavender, hawthorn blossoms, St. John's Wort, lemon balm, hop fruit, chamomile, hibiscus, or orange blossoms. Add a cup of boiling water and let it steep for 5-10 minutes. Strain, drink, (stretch!) and relax.

Finally, don't forget stress-fighting foods. Chronic stress eats away at the B vitamins in your body, which are essential for a healthy nervous system, and which play a key role in your body's energy production. So, whenever you feel like you are under a great deal of stress, be sure you are getting your B's. The best sources are found in natural foods such as nuts, lentils, potatoes, bananas, and brewer's yeast.