

SquareONE Rehabilitation Educational Tips

Creating your “Stress List” for a better quality of life

Stress is such a powerful influence on health and fitness that even if you are doing everything right in terms of diet, nutrition and exercise, it can prevent you from getting all the benefits. Understanding stress is the first step in properly addressing it. And, excess stress is not without a remedy.

Prolonged periods of too much stress can contribute significantly and directly to many conditions, ranging from reduced quality of life to deadly diseases such as cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer’s and many others. It contributes to fatigue, bacterial and viral infections, inflammatory illness, blood-sugar problems, weight gain, intestinal distress, headaches and most other disorders. Stress-related problems account for more than 75 percent of all visits to primary-care physicians and are responsible each day for millions of people needing to take time off work and school. So, stress comes with an economic price tag as well as wear and tear.

What’s also important about excess stress is that it interferes with sleep, our most important method for rest and recovery from stress. And, higher levels of stress require more rest and sleep, while inadequate sleep can allow stress to accumulate. All adults require 7-9 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night (more for children).

Stress is a normal part of health and fitness. The body has a great coping mechanism for stress called the HPA axis. Starting in the brain, which senses all stress, the *hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis* releases hormones and affects the nervous system to allow the body to better adapt to stress. However, too many stressors, and their accumulation, are clearly harmful. Fortunately, many can be eliminated once we recognize them.

Let’s first define the three types of stress.

Physical Stress

Physical wear and tear are common stressors on the body and brain, from which we must recover each day. Overworking our muscles is one example. While a mild physical stress can make exercise beneficial, too much physical stress and/or inadequate recovery from it can potentially result in excess stress and harm us. Likewise, dental stress can affect more than your mouth, often causing intestinal dysfunction, headaches, or shoulder, neck or spinal pain. Other physical stress includes poor posture, eye strain, and any situations that adversely impacts the mechanical body, such as too much sitting. While physical stress can cause mechanical problems, it can also lead to biochemical or mental-emotional problems.

Biochemical Stress

Environmental pollution commonly causes biochemical stress in the body, both from indoor and outdoor air and through food and water. Dietary and nutritional imbalances such as too much or too little nutrients, excess caffeine or alcohol can be a stress too, affecting our hormones, enzymes, neurotransmitters and other biochemistry. Symptoms of this type of stress can include fatigue, insomnia, gut dysfunction, or even physical and mental-emotional problems.

Mental-Emotional Stress

This is what most people are familiar with when the word stress is mentioned. Symptoms of excess include tension, anxiety and depression. This can easily contribute to pain, or a loss of enthusiasm or motivation. Mental-emotional stress can also affect cognition, including sensation, perception, learning, concept formation and decision-making. And, of course, mental-emotional stress can lead to physical and biochemical problems as well.

Sources of Stress

Physical, biochemical and mental-emotional stress can come from anywhere: your job, family, other people, your memory and emotions, infections, allergic reactions, trauma and overexertion, even the weather. While we have an effective adaptation mechanism that tames stress, managing it well is also a key aspect of avoiding adverse health or fitness outcomes.

Managing Stress

Usually people have multiple sources of stress, and frequently all three types. Stress is also cumulative. Some people accumulate so much stress they lose track of it, which becomes more stressful. The response to a physical stress from a hard weekend workout may be amplified by Monday's biochemical stress of too much coffee or eating bad food, further compounded with a family-related mental-emotional stress on Tuesday and another with the boss on Wednesday. All of this will affect your performance at an important meeting on Friday.

The weather is also a potential stressor, with certain people more vulnerable. Weather stress may affect us physically, biochemically or mental-emotionally. Extremes in temperature or humidity, very low barometric pressure, and excess sun are examples. In addition, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), due to reduced sunlight typically in the fall and winter can cause mood disorders, depression and fatigue.

Being aware of your stress is a key feature in addressing and avoiding excess.

Make Your Stress List

First, be aware of your stresses by writing them down. It may seem simple, but this may help you notice that certain stressors can easily be reduced or eliminated. It's surprising how much stress can be deleted from your life this way. Finally, with

fewer stressors, your body will better adapt or compensate to the remaining stress you may not be able to change right now.

This process is more effective when you write your stresses down on paper or even digitally. Once you can *see* your stress listed, it will be easier to manage. Here are the steps:

1. On a page, make three columns, one for each stress category: physical, biochemical, and mental emotional.
2. In each category, write down your related stressors. This may take several days to complete since you probably won't think of all your different stresses right away.
3. Next, prioritize them by placing the biggest stress of each category on top.
4. Now circle, underline or bold the stressors that you can control. This may include unhealthy eating habits like eating junk food, drinking too much coffee, not exercising properly, or wearing bad shoes.
5. Then, work on reducing or eliminating one of these stressors at a time, beginning with the easiest; or, ideally, begin with those on the top of the list; or, if you can handle it, work on one stress at a time *from each category*. Keep the process comfortable and manageable.
6. For now, draw a line through those stressors that you can't control. If there's nothing you can do about them, don't worry about them for now. Many people expend lots of energy on stresses they can't or won't do anything about. Examples include job stress or the weather, though in reality, almost any stress can be modified or eliminated — it's just a question of how far you're willing to go to reduce stress.
7. With success as the weeks and months pass, you might reconsider some of the items you've crossed off. You may realize that changing jobs is a must, or moving to a more compatible climate is necessary.

When you've succeeded in eliminating or modifying various stressors one by one, cross them off your list, then move on to others.

More Strategies

In addition to your stress list, you may be familiar with other strategies for dealing with stress. Regardless of how silly they may seem, they can be very effective and help you think of other helpful strategies particular to your situation. Here are some:

- Unless it's a must, learn to say *no* when asked to do something you really don't want to do. Ask yourself if you really want to do this.
- Likewise, as much as possible, avoid things you're not good at or don't enjoy, while focusing on things you are good at, especially those you're passionate about.
- Live in the moment, the present: Be here now!
- Decide to not waste time dwelling about the past or the future, especially the *what ifs*.
- Regular relaxation techniques are potent.

- Listening to the music you love, taking an easy walk by yourself, and other activities can also be great ways to relax.
- When you're concerned about something, talk it over with someone you trust.
- Simplify life. Start by eliminating trivia by asking: "Is this text, email, call or conversation really important or enjoyable?"
- Each morning ask: "What fun things are planned for today?"
- Know your passion, and pursue it.

Understanding and addressing stress is a key component of improving and optimizing health and fitness.