

Reducing Unhealthy Stress

Healthy stress does exist. Exercise can be a form of healthy stress. Establishing a reasonable deadline for finishing a project is another. Healthy stress can be experienced through word games and crossword puzzles as well. Through healthy stress we can build emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual strength.

Stress can also become unhealthy. The manner in which we react to situations can help make them even more stress-filled. A cascading effect can be created where unhealthy stress seems to come rushing in to every challenge that emerges. Reducing this unhealthy stress and its impact on us, our family and friends is an important part of self care. Self care should not be confused with being selfish or self-centered. Good self care is about working towards healthier relationships with ourselves and others.

There are some intentional ways through which unhealthy stress can be addressed and gradually reduced. These can also help you recover faster when unhealthy stress comes roaring into your life. Here are eight ways that stress can be reduced. They will work for each of us in varying ways and to varying degrees. You might try each one out for a while and see how they work for you.

Notice at Least One Good Thing a Day

Notice something good you experience each day. To do this you must look for something good each day. Reflect on your experience and how this “good thing” affected you. Share it with someone or write it in a journal. This recording or sharing will help etch it in your mind.

Reinterpret an Experience You View as Negative

Say you get in your car to go to the store and discover that you left your shopping list on the kitchen counter. Interpret going back inside to get your list as an opportunity to make sure you have everything you need. Yes, this can feel like “putting a spin” on what happened because it is. This is not about altering events, but rather your reaction to them.

Build Social Support

Brain scans show that the same circuitry fires up when we feel emotional pain as when we feel physical pain. But this circuitry is slower to react in those with greater social support in their daily lives. Making connections with others, engaging in conversation, taking time to call a friend or jot a note to someone all help build social connections. Personal “face to face time” is critically important for this.

Jot Down Attainable Goals

Choose attainable goals for the week (no more than seven) and commit to achieving one each day. This could be as simple and repeatable as getting out of bed at a specific time. Or, it could be a commitment to make contact with a family member or friend on a specific day. Writing these goals down is a good way to track what is going right: what you have accomplished.

Meditation

Meditation can alter our brains, increasing the gray matter in the regions associated with emotion regulation and dampening activity in the fear-responsive amygdala. Periods of quiet meditation can be as brief as five minutes and interspersed throughout the day. Using quiet music or chant to help is fine. If you decide to try meditation, be sure to set attainable goals as you do this. Start with the 5 minutes and gradually build to longer periods.

Getting Enough Sleep

Rest and sleep is crucial to reducing stress. Sleep deprivation is one of the greatest angst producers. Lack of sleep causes stress hormones to soar and can spark other imbalances as well. Finding ways to reduce brain stimulation as time to go to sleep nears can help. Reducing the intensity of lights at night can help, as can turning off televisions and computers an hour or so before trying to sleep. Meditation might help here as well. If sleep is a challenge, bring this to the attention of your physician.

Give to Someone Else

Doing something nice for others can make us happier and calmer, studies show. This does not have to involve money and could be as simple as offering a smile. It could also involve being part of a group effort volunteering to help at a community organization, charitable group, or church. Doing this would combine building social support with giving to someone else.

Regular Exercise

Regular exercise has been linked to reduce stress and growth of new brain cells. One hundred and fifty (150) minutes a week of moderate intensity exercise can accomplish this. We generally see or hear this as 30 minutes of an activity five times a week. If you leave the ear pieces to your i-pod in the house or car and have to go back to get them, you can count this as part of the 30 minutes. Or, you can reinterpret this negative experience as an opportunity to warm up.