



HEALTHCARE HAPPENINGS



Understanding Stress and How It Really Impacts You

[By Irene Tamaras]

For years I blindly accepted the high level of stress in my life as a burden I was supposed to bear. I didn't understand the severe impact that my stress would have on my health and my life. But most of all, I didn't know that I could actually do something about it.

Only after many years of struggling to regain my health did I learn the truth behind stress and how it can impact one's life. My quest into healing gave me this understanding.

Stress is something that we all have in our lives to one degree or another. It's a natural part of the human experience, and whether it is emotional in origin or physical, eventually emotional stress can induce physical stress and vice versa. Through my own experiences and through my observations as a wellness expert, I have seen firsthand how complex and unique dealing with stress can be—there are some people who deal with enormous amounts of stress every day and yet have a fairly easy time managing it, while there are others among us who live with fewer stressors or less serious stressors and still have a difficult time managing stress.

But why is it that some people manage their stress better than others?

First, let me begin by telling you that it is not a sign of weakness to have difficulty managing stress or to ask for help. Effective stress management comes from knowledge, education, and a sincere willingness to change. Many of us mask our stress because we just don't know what to do about it, even after the ill effects of stress become visible in our lives.

Second, you should know that there are probably hundreds of reasons why some of us do better at managing stress, some of which are beyond conscious control: genetic predispositions, environmental factors,

and conditioned responses such as fear or anxiety are among the examples. But know this: the ability to control your stress reactions is something that can be learned by everyone, no matter the degree of stress in your life.

There are two kinds of stress, both positive stress and negative stress. Positive stress can usually not hurt us and is useful in that it challenges us to do better. It is negative stress that is detrimental, and if not treated over time, it can become all-consuming, leaving us feeling like there is no way out. Even the simpler mental or emotional stressors, such as minor aggravations from a significant other or children, can be detrimental over time.

To begin to deal constructively with your stress, it is important to first understand it by breaking down what is happening to you mentally, emotionally, and physically. It is crucial that you make a serious attempt to examine your life to pinpoint where the stress is originating from and to identify the changes needed to help you not only reduce or eliminate your stress, but also improve the quality of your life. If you don't know where to begin, then ask for help. Turn to friends if need be, or better yet, seek out professionals such as psychologists or psychiatrists, wellness or life coaches, or even your medical doctor.

Of major importance to the body's stress response are the adrenal glands (also known as "the glands of stress"), which help our bodies to cope with stress, whether

emotional, mental, or physical in nature. In Chinese medicine, these vital adrenal glands are known as the "root of life" because they store vital energy and can become severely strained when under chronic stress. The adrenal glands work interactively with the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, and our ability to recover quickly from negative stressors and our energy and endurance depend on the proper functioning of the adrenal glands.

According to the book *Adrenal Fatigue* (Smart Publications, 2002) by James L. Wilson, when "the amount of stress overextends the capacity of the body to compensate and recover from that stress," adrenal fatigue is the result.

Adrenal fatigue is a condition that often goes unnoticed by medical professionals or is erroneously cited as another medical condition, yet its effect on a person's ability to be healthy is severe. The adrenal glands are critically important because they secrete hormones that "influence all of the major physiological processes in your body," according to Wilson. Therefore, the body's healing response is directly affected by the homeostasis of the adrenal glands.

One hormone of major importance in this regard is cortisol, which helps the body cope with stressors. It is important for normal body function and affects nearly every organ. When the adrenal glands cannot produce enough cortisol, adrenal fatigue sets in, resulting in symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty handling stress, increased time to



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heal from an illness or injury, diminished mental capacity, feelings of unhappiness, and more.

Furthermore, cortisol is important in maintaining blood sugar and impacts the body's anti-inflammatory and immune reactions. It also affects the cardiovascular and central nervous systems. When the body experiences any type of stress, the adrenal glands secrete increasingly more cortisol because "cortisol protects the cells from stress." With these extra demands on the adrenal glands, however, the body's capacity to secrete cortisol is limited.

Learning to reduce or eliminate stress is crucial for giving the adrenal glands a chance to recover, although this can be a difficult process for people to manage. One way to aid in this recovery is to educate ourselves about the importance of vitamin C, which is one of the most important vitamins involved in adrenal metabolism. According to Wilson, "the more cortisol made, the more vitamin C used."

In the book *The Healing Factor: Vitamin C Against Disease* (Putnam Pub. Group, 1974) by Irwin Stone, the answer given is to change our thinking about vitamin C and consume enough to replenish this long-lost "healing factor."

Stone's research, along with that of other renowned pioneers in vitamin C research, shows that vitamin C has a "remarkable ability to fight disease." Stone reports that additional vitamin C must be taken during stressful episodes, such as after injuries and burns, and by those living with chronic stress because during "increased adrenal activity, ascorbic acid (vitamin C) is depleted from the gland."

One way to diagnose adrenal fatigue is by taking a 24-hour saliva hormone test, which measures the amounts of various hormones in the saliva. According to Wilson, such testing is more effective than blood testing, which only "measures hormones circulating

outside the cells," or urine testing, which merely measures the "spill over of hormones out of the blood and into the urine." In short, unlike saliva testing, neither blood nor urine testing "correlates with the hormone levels inside the cells." But even without a formal saliva hormone test, one's own emotional and physical assessment can prove very informative in one's evaluation of one's stress and its ramifications on one's health and quality of life.

Even more serious than adrenal fatigue is Addison's disease, aka chronic adrenal insufficiency, aka hypoadrenia, which is a rare endocrine disorder in which the adrenal glands don't produce sufficient amounts of steroid hormones, including cortisol. Symptoms can include fatigue, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, sweating, muscle weakness, changes in mood, and joint or muscle pain, and if left undiagnosed and untreated, the disease can lead to a health emergency. Although there are many causes for Addison's disease, Wilson states that it is "usually caused by an auto-immune process but can be induced by stress, direct infection, destruction, or other causes." Wilson further adds that the medical establishment only recognizes Addison's disease and not adrenal fatigue, leaving millions of people suffering as a result.

With education and awareness, there is much we can do to keep our adrenal glands working properly. It is imperative that we understand that there is a whole physiological process that takes place in our body when we have negative stress, anger, emotional outbursts, anxiety, fear, or other negative reactions. Prolonged negative stress or stress reactions can damage our vital organs and disrupt the homeostasis of our body's energy field, thereby reducing immune function, which can lead to illness and disease. With proper stress management tools and techniques, we can learn how to make the changes in our lives necessary to help us feel better and live healthier, stronger, and happier lives.

10 Tips for Stress Relief

1. **Perception:** Oftentimes, the way we perceive a stress in our life is more critical than the actual stress itself. Try to break repetitive patterns that keep you trapped in a vicious cycle resulting in recurring stress.
2. **Managing Thoughts and Emotions:** Our thoughts affect our emotions. The reactions we have to our thoughts can trigger physiological reactions throughout our entire body. Learning to control negative thoughts and emotional reactions is crucial for preserving harmony between the mind and body.
3. **Sleep:** Sleep is good medicine because it is during sleep that the body repairs itself. This includes the adrenal glands. Improving the quality of your sleep is very important for managing and warding off unnecessary stress. The National Sleep Foundation (sleepfoundation.org) offers great sleep tips as well as a self-evaluation quiz to help you determine the quality of your sleep. Making time for sleep requires lifestyle changes, sacrifice, and discipline (for example, taking the television out of your bedroom, not watching television or using the computer for 1-2 hours before you sleep, and not staying up late), but the benefits are worth it.
4. **Food and Drink:** Making good food and beverage choices, especially during times of stress, is very important. Your body uses nutrients at a faster rate during such periods because your metabolism is sped up. Choosing wisely what to eat is very hard, but crucial to healing and staying strong during times of stress. Avoid sugar as much as



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you can because it is a temporary, quick-energy fix which spikes your blood sugar too quickly and is followed by a “low” that leaves you needing more fuel. Caffeine is also a stimulant that your adrenals don’t need, especially during times of stress when your adrenals are trying to recover. The book *Adrenal Fatigue* by James L. Wilson offers an excellent breakdown of the foods and beverages you should eat to recover from adrenal fatigue.

5. **Vitamin Supplements and Vitamin C:**

The food you eat is of critical importance to adrenal health because it is your body’s platform for nutrients. Secondary to good eating habits is the importance of vitamin supplements and extra vitamin C for adrenal recovery. Check with your medical professional to determine the amount of vitamin supplements and extra vitamin C that are right for you and your overall health. The book *Adrenal Fatigue* also offers a thorough review of the additional nutrients that will help your adrenals recover.

6. **Environment:** Consider the environment you live and work in, and try to create a more harmonious setting for yourself. Change is difficult, and sometimes it is easier to stay in an unhealthy environment than to actually do something about it. Remember that you deserve happiness and that it is up to you to make it happen.

7. **Fresh Air:** The quality of the air you breathe offers vital atmospheric energy, so make time to connect with nature—to breath in fresh air. Our hectic lives can make us forget the importance of getting away from pollutants, but make this a priority in your life.

8. **Physical and Mental Exercises:** Getting physical exercise is crucial for staying healthy, and remember that exercise doesn’t have to be vigorous, but can be gentle, too (yoga, Qi Gong, walking, and swimming, for example, are gentle exercises). Just as important as physical exercise are mental exercises such as meditation and visualization. Meditation is an effective tool that requires effort

and discipline. Stilling the mind is very calming to the nervous system. During stressful times, it may be hard to concentrate because you may be distracted, tense, and anxious. Consider buying instructional CDs that can help you meditate and visualize.

9. **Silence:** Silence can be a great medicine just as quality sleep is. Try to create silent time for yourself (in addition to the time you meditate or visualize). During the day, turn off the “external noise” that is emitted from televisions and computers, and just consider for a moment all the extra energy it takes to talk, talk, talk. Carve out time to just be silent. It conserves energy and allows for wonderful self-reflection.

10. **Ask for Help:** Stress in our lives can cause so much physical and emotional destruction, so if you find that you need help managing stress, please seek it. Your well-being is a gift that only you can give to yourself, but you may need professional help to put you on the path to good health and happiness.

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