

Effects of long-term stress

By Andrea Bassett

We all know what it's like to be stressed out. Just one glance at your to-do list is a daily reminder of what that feels like. But you may be surprised to know the effects of stress can show up in the most unexpected places. If left untreated, stress can manifest itself in other physical symptoms like back ache, migraines and digestive difficulties. And, in some cases, stress can even lead to depression. The good news is increasing your stress management skills can pay off in more ways than you might think.

"For fast-acting relief, try slowing down."
– Lily Tomlin

First, a quick review of the famous fight-or-flight stress response. In a primitive age, stress was a survival technique – a release of hormones when faced with danger that fueled action, readying us for fight or flight. This physical response helped mitigate the concentration of stress hormones in our bodies, reducing their harmful effects. In modern times, however, we no longer need to run away from danger and so, these stress hormones have nowhere to go and stay in our systems longer than needed.

Dr. Peter Levine, a stress consultant for NASA and an expert in the field of PTSD, studied wild animals under stress and makes an interesting observation: The flight response floods the gazelle's body with hormones and stress energy to enable him to run for his life. If the threat is removed, that energy is no longer needed, and the body discharges it – the gazelle would do this by shaking and twitching his body.

Exposure to chronic stress means that these harmful fight-or-flight hormones are trapped and can create chaos in the body.

The physical symptoms of chronic stress:

- Heart disease & high blood pressure
- Susceptibility to infections
- Aches and pain
- Digestive trouble
- Sleep disturbances & weight gain

The psychological symptoms of chronic stress:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Impairment of memory and/or concentration

If any of this sounds familiar to you, reduce your risk of developing secondary symptoms with one or more of these simple approaches:

- Move your body – find an activity you enjoy and do it. The simplest way to get the benefit of movement is brisk walking!
- Take something off your to-do list – it might seem impossible to do, so start small.
- Meditate or learn relaxation techniques – in little to no time at all, you can train your body to relax and keep the stress at bay.
- Get enough of these stress-busting essentials: sleep, foods rich in antioxidants, friendships and laughs.
- Take a lesson from the gazelle and literally shake it off!

With chronic stress implicated in so many physical and mental health concerns, any effort you make to reduce stress and increase resiliency will produce a great return on investment over the course of your life.

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