

Causes of Stress: How Many of These Are in Your Life?

BY DR. TOM HYLAND ROBERTSON

Seems like stress is in the news everywhere these days, from pages like these to morning talk shows. Patients are arriving in my office more stressed than ever, too—the economy, job fears, swine flu, oh my!

If you really want to feel more relaxed—and enjoy the health benefits that accompany a tranquil mindset—you'll have to cope with the three interdependent causes of stress. The true solution might be more complicated than taking a warm bath, but your long-term health is worth the extra effort!

Mental/Emotional

According to Chinese medicine, mental stress (what most people mean when they say they're "stressed out") is just one of the three types. Mental/emotional stress stems from the primitive "fight or flight" response. The adrenaline that results from being in a heightened state of awareness served humans well when it was occasional and we were fleeing woolly mammoths, but it's not particularly helpful when it's constant—or in a traffic jam on I-95. In fact, long-term mental stress leads to increased cardiovascular disease, decreased digestion, and immune system suppression.

In the mental/emotional realm, practicing good sleep hygiene is one of the most important techniques (and influences the other two types of stress). I like TheInsomniaBlog.com for pointers. Mind-body techniques such as meditation are also powerful, and yoga often brings meditative benefits; the physical exertion and intense focus on "being present" lead to mental relaxation. Organizing the routine areas of your life—ruthlessly eliminating clutter—helps immensely. Finally, many of my patients benefit from herbs like chamomile and passionflower.

Biochemical

The second type of stress, biochemical, stems from the things we put into our bodies that we shouldn't, and from the things we should put in but don't. Drugs (including caffeine and nicotine), alcohol, excess salt and sugar, processed foods, and just too much food in general are all Don'ts. On the other hand, many of us don't get enough when it comes to proper vitamins, fruits and vegetables, water, fresh air, and sunlight. Environmental factors we can't always control also play a part in biochemical stress.

These biochemical imbalances can lead to inflammation, which eventually produces tissue damage and,

ultimately, disease. The epidemic of digestive problems in our society, including obesity, is partly caused by tissue damage and inappropriate chemical stimulation from pro-inflammatory foods. (For more details, read "Why (Too Many) Grains Are Bad" at www.WholeChiro.com/resources.html.)

The most important way to counteract biochemical stress is by normalizing your food intake: Aim to eat less overall (only about the size of your fist per meal!), and to get more of the right foods (fresh produce and grass-fed animal products). Here's where being organized comes in—it does take more planning to eat fresh, whole foods! Avoid alcohol, or limit yourself to red wine or dark beer, which contain antioxidants.

When it comes to vitamins, it's best to ask an expert. I recommend a few basic supplements for most of my patients: a high-quality multivitamin, vitamin D, magnesium, omega-3 (EPA/DHA), and coenzyme Q10. For more specific concerns, I offer nutritional consultations.


Physical

The final factor in the stress equation is physical and comes from chronic postural or repetitive injuries, acute injuries (car accidents, slips/falls, sports), and even gravity itself.

Adopt an Eastern mindset and be proactive—don't wait until a problem occurs to find a solution! Believe

it or not, something as simple as cultivating improved balance reduces physical stress on your body. Hiking, walking barefoot, and of course yoga and other specific exercises all help. A well-rounded fitness program should involve the entire body and include stretching, weight-bearing exercises, and cardiovascular work.

Keep all of your joints and muscles in good health: Get periodically checked by a chiropractor who also practices physical therapy. Just as going to the dentist twice a year has been proven to head off serious dental problems, retraining your joints through chiropractic adjustments reduces pain and neurologically increases the brain's awareness of how the joints and muscles are working.

The opposite of "fight or flight" is "rest and digest." Don't be afraid of changing to get to this blissed-out state! If you have questions, find an expert who has the answers or can get them easily. Asking for help is OK! 

Dr. Tom Hyland Robertson earned his Doctor of Chiropractic degree from National College of Chiropractic (now NUHS) near Chicago. During his undergraduate and postgraduate studies, he focused on human biology and nutrition, as well as Eastern disciplines such as acupuncture and reiki. He combines all of these disciplines to treat a wide array of conditions including stress-related illness, headaches, and extremity problems. With his wife Laurie, Dr. Robertson founded Whole Chiropractic Healthcare in 2007 to bring effective alternative healing, including yoga/pilates, to the Anne Arundel and Ft. Meade communities.







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