

Stress Less

The Essential Guide to
Reducing Stress With
Meditation and Mindfulness



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CHAPTER 1: WHY YOU MUST STRESS LESS



We all know that stress is bad for us and this is something we get told very often. However, it's all too easy to write this off as being a minor nuisance or frustration rather than anything to really worry about. We all get stressed from time to time, right?

In reality though, this is the wrong way to think about stress. While it is fairly common place, that is not to say that it isn't serious. In fact, stress is *incredibly* serious and can cause severe problems both in the short term and long term.

Stress can shorten your lifespan. Ruin your enjoyment. Cause serious illness. Shrink your brain. Hurt your performance. Ruin your relationships. Cause impotence.

Do those sound like small matters?

To understand this better, it can help to look more closely at what precisely stress is. *How* it causes the problems it does and how and why you need to do everything you can to prevent and reduce it.

So What Exactly is Stress?

Stress is what we feel when we're overworked, when we're dreading something that's about to happen or when we're generally unable to relax and stay calm due to outside or inside factors influencing our thoughts.

But it actually goes beyond this. Stress is a basic physiological reaction that is designed to help us focus and survive. In itself it is not a bad thing and is actually rather adaptive. The problem is that it has been taken out of context, which means the positive effects become outweighed by the negative.

Essentially, stress is what causes the 'fight or flight response'. This is a physiological response to perceived danger, designed to improve our chances of survival. If you were to see a lion for example, this would trigger a cascade of effects collectively resulting in the stress response.

This begins when we observe danger or experience fear. Increased activity in our brain, causes the release of adrenaline, as well as dopamine, norepinephrine and cortisol – our stress hormones. These then trigger a number of physiological changes: increasing our heartrate, making us breathe more quickly and making us more acutely focussed on the potential threat.

A list of the symptoms should include:

- Increased heartrate
- Rapid, shallow breathing
- Muscle contraction
- Tunnel vision
- Heightened sensitivity
- Increased blood viscosity
- Suppression of the pain response
- Suppression of the immune system
- Suppression of the digestive system
- Dilation of the pupils
- Dilation of the blood vessels
- Reduction in prefrontal cortex activity (temporo-hypofrontality)

In the short term, this is good for us. In the short term, these things help us to evade danger and win combative situations. Increased muscle tension makes us stronger. Increased blood viscosity makes our blood more likely to clot in case of an injury. Dilated pupils let more light in to improve our vision. Suppression of secondary functions means that more blood can be sent to the muscles and the brain. Reduced pain means we can carry on fighting or running despite injury.

In short, anything that can help you to survive is prioritized, while secondary functions are suppressed. The idea is that once we get to safety, we can then turn off this fight or flight response and instead enter the ‘rest and digest’ state in order to recover. Once the predator is gone, we can recover.

But the problem is that in our modern environments, predators aren’t the main problem. It’s rare these days for us to be chased, to get into a fight or to need to escape a forest fire.

What’s *not* so rare, is for our boss to shout at us and to tell us that we’re late for our deadline. It’s not rare for us to be in debt. It’s not rare for us to have marital problems.

And unfortunately, the brain interprets all these signals in just the same way: as threats. And this causes the same fight or flight response. But because these types of threats aren’t so easily resolved, this means we’ll often end up on heightened alert for a longer period of time.

This is also why stress causes impotence in men. If you are highly stressed, blood is sent *everywhere* except the genitals!

And this takes a tremendous toll on our bodies.

As you might imagine: it is not good for you when your immune system and digestive system are suppressed for days. It’s also not good for your brain to be flooded with norepinephrine and cortisol. It’s not good for your heartrate to stay elevated, or your blood pressure to stay high.

This is the problem with *chronic* stress as opposed to acute stress. And it's the problem with heightened levels of stress, as opposed to the gentle, motivating force of 'eustress'. We'll look at all of this more in the long term, but suffice to say that the longer stress like this continues, the more you start to feel drained, malnourished, fatigued, ill and possibly eventually depressed.

How Stress Damages the Brain

When we are stressed, it effectively makes us less intelligent. This is due to the reduction in pre-frontal activity, which in turn is designed to make us more focussed and alert. Essentially, the pre-frontal cortex is the part of the brain responsible for forward planning, creative thinking and other 'high-order' brain activity.

When you are being chased by a lion though, it is really not the time to be thinking about the meaning of life!

So shutting down this part of the brain and placing your focus on feedback from your senses makes much more sense.

Of course that's not particularly useful in the workplace though: and this is why the stress response is so seriously *unhelpful* when we have to give a presentation, answer a question on the spot or go on a date. This is when we lose all articulation and start stammering and saying useless things.

Slightly longer-term is adrenal fatigue. This is what happens when your brain has exhausted its supply of adrenaline and other stress

hormones. That might sound like a good thing but you actually need a little norepinephrine, dopamine and cortisol to stay motivated – and even to wake up in the morning! Adrenal fatigue leaves you listless, demotivated and potentially depressed. It can also cause what is known as ‘learned helplessness’ – a condition where you essentially completely give up because your brain has been conditioned to learn that any attempts to change its situation will be met with failure. Not good!

Worse, when you are highly stressed, it can lead to *long term* problems for your brain health. As we briefly mentioned: it can *literally* shrink your brain! Studies show that in the long term, it leads to structural changes that shrink the hippocampus and shrink grey matter – the all-important neural connections throughout the brain. Even a single, severe traumatic event can result in significant reductions in the medial PFC, anterior cingulate and subgenual regions of the brain. The effects of ‘cumulative adversity’ meanwhile, cause smaller volumes in the medial prefrontal cortex (the PFC), insular cortex and anterior cingulate regions.

These regions of the brain correspond with emotional control, decision-making, reasoning and self control.

In other words, the eventual result of stress is to leave you more reactionary, more depressive, more impulsive and less disciplined.

From here, *every* aspect of your life will start to see negative effects.

But there are things you can do about it...

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF YOUR STRESS SYSTEMS



But what if you're not stressed?

What if your work isn't particularly high pressured, your relationships are good and you have plenty of money? Does that mean you're fine?

Probably not. Unfortunately, many other aspects of our modern lifestyles cause symptoms similar to those of stress.

One example is our use of technology and artificial lighting. The brain is designed to use external cues ('zeitgebers' to use correct terminology) to set its own biological rhythms including the sleep-wake cycle (circadian rhythm).

This actually triggers the release of stress hormones at certain times of day. That's because stress hormones are one of the tools that the body uses to wake itself up when you are sleeping. The release of stress hormones like cortisol and norepinephrine triggers activity in the brain that stirs you out of sleep and makes you fully alert.

But if the light is on at night, or you're looking at your phone in the evening, this will cause the release of similar stress hormones right when you're meant to be relaxing. That means you'll continue to feel alert and won't give your brain time to recover.

And what doesn't help is the way that everything on the web and on TV is designed to grab our attention and pull us this way and that – this has been shown to cause effects similar to ADHD in the long term and make it harder for us to concentrate on any one thing for very long.

How Physiological Changes Trigger Stress

The above is an example of how stress is entirely a result of what's going on in your life or even of what you're thinking. Instead, stress can be a result of outside factors that physically influence you.

A way to think of it is like this:

Physical Sensations > Feelings > Emotions > Thoughts > Behaviors

That is to say that your emotions are very often the result of *physical* things affecting your physiology.

For example, if you're in a colder environment, this actually increases the amount of cortisol and the amount of norepinephrine. Physiologically, this is the same as low-level stress and that's why a cold shower is a great way to wake yourself up!

This is also why being cold for too long can make you ill – as the stress response is suppressing your immune system.

Likewise, if you are hungry, then this triggers a physiological type of stress. Essentially, hunger causes your brain to release cortisol due to a decrease in blood sugar. When blood sugar is low, cortisol is released and the body responds to this as it would any other type of stress.

Why? Because as far as the body is concerned, this *is* a form of danger. If you are hungry, then you need to become active and get out there in order to seek out a source of food. Ghrelin, the hunger hormone, is released alongside cortisol and myostatin which breaks down tissue to provide energy.

When you eat on the other hand, this causes a sudden spike in your blood sugar. That in turn will cause you to release insulin, which absorbs the sugar for use around the body (either in the muscles and brain, or to be stored as fat).

This also has the effect of leaving behind another substance called 'tryptophan', which is found in most foods but doesn't get absorbed. Tryptophan makes its way through the circulatory system all the way to the brain, where it crosses the blood brain barrier and converts to serotonin (as it is a 'precursor' to serotonin). Serotonin is the 'feel

good hormone' and it's also a precursor itself: this time to melatonin – the sleep hormone.

This is why when you eat a large meal, you tend to feel full, then happy, then sleepy. Christmas dinner ring any bells?

This is the opposite of the stress response. This is the aforementioned 'rest and digest' response.

And this is another cycle that your body goes through constantly: it moves from fight or flight, to rest and digest. You just don't notice this because in a perfect world, that shift will be subtle and you won't feel it too much. You just move slightly up and down the spectrum, becoming slightly *more* alert and focussed and then slightly *less* so.

Nevertheless though, this constant fluctuation *does* have an impact on things like your productivity and your mood. And it is also closely tied to the sleep-wake cycle. When you wake up for instance, you are in a fasted state having slept all night: thus you have high cortisol.

CHAPTER 3: HOW TO MANAGE NORMAL STRESS



Just understanding these factors, you can hopefully see that stress isn't a 'bad thing' necessarily: rather it is a useful and required part of a normal, healthy, functioning body. In fact, as we've discussed, a little stress is necessary in order to help you feel more alert, more focussed and more productive. If we never had even a small amount of stress hormones in our system, then we would spend all our time highly rested and too laid back to get any actual work done!

The key is to make sure that those stress levels stay at this optimal level, as well as to try and get your natural cycles to line up with the times when you need to be most productive during the day.

And we can start by hijacking some of the physiological aspects we've already discussed...

Managing Blood Sugar

One very simple way to keep your stress at bay, is to avoid letting your blood sugar drop too low. We've already seen that low blood sugar triggers the release of cortisol and other stress hormones and so it follows that by avoiding low blood sugar, we can avoid this fate.

The best way to manage your blood sugar levels, is to avoid consuming simple carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are the best source of blood sugar for the human body but the problem is that in their 'simple' form, they release energy into the blood much too quickly. This results in a sudden spike in sugar, which then gets taken up and leaves you drained again. What's more, is that this causes the release of melatonin – the sleep hormone – as we've seen earlier. Not ideal for working.

If you have a breakfast that is made up of pancakes and syrup then, it will wake you up and make you feel good in the morning but an hour later you'll start to run low on energy and that will cue the release of cortisol.

So instead, try consuming a source of calories that will release the sugar more gradually into your bloodstream. A great choice is some form of complex carbohydrate, such as oats. This takes longer to reach the blood stream, providing a steady stream of blood sugar and preventing you from going into alert 'starvation' mode.

Conversely, fat will also have the same effect. When you consume a saturated fat, this will once again sit in the stomach while it gets broken down, providing you with a steady release of energy that will help you go about your business throughout the day.

Stay Comfortable

Comfort is fantastic for reducing stress and this has been shown in studies to help boost creativity. It only takes your keys to be digging into your pocket for example, for your body to consider you as uncomfortable and potentially being damaged. Thus, you will find that if you can sit in a more supportive and comfortable chair and also ensure the temperature is right and you are surrounded by things that put you at ease (plants have been shown to do this well for most people), then you will start to feel a lot calmer – even when you're at work and other stresses are being thrown at you.

Spend Time Away From Screens

Computers, smartphones and television are all great. They're entertaining and they're great for productivity. Unfortunately though, they're also very bad for us when it comes to stress hormones. We've already discussed how light from screens can trigger the release of cortisol and we've seen that the constant messages and alerts essentially trigger a series of small stress responses while we're surfing the web.

This is manageable but it becomes problematic when you spend too much time on the computer. Simply going for occasional walks and

taking breaks from the screen throughout the day then will be a great way to help your body recover.

Another tip is to take time off just before bed. If you aim to have a restorative and restful night's sleep, then you need to give yourself time to 'wind down' just before you hit the sack. Taking time away from computers is one of the best ways to do this, so why not have a bath before bed with some candles instead? Or read by a more natural type of light? Give yourself half an hour of 'screen off' time and you'll find you get to sleep much quicker and feel more restored in the morning.

No can do? If you absolutely can't separate yourself from your gadgets at the end of the day, then try using software that will reduce the amount of 'blue light' coming from the screen. Redshift technology will help you block the most damaging wavelengths from your devices and thereby create a more restful light. An alternative is to wear 'blue blocking shades' which can block all blue light in your environment before bed!

Get Rid of Your Alarm

You know what really isn't helping your stress levels?

Your morning alarm!

The reason alarms tend to choose from a generic range of sounds, is that bleeps and ringing sounds are unnatural. These sounds don't occur in nature and thus we are attuned to them and they make us naturally sit up and take notice. In other words: they trigger a stress response.

And now bear in mind that when this happens, you are often in the very deepest stage of sleep. What a way to start your day! Rudely woken from the depths of sleep by a blaring noise, only to find yourself in a pitch dark room.

There are two much healthier alternatives to consider...

Fitness Tracker

One option is to use a fitness tracker/smart watch that has a smart alarm function. These work by monitoring your heartrate and your movement during the night, in order to estimate how awake or asleep you are at any given stage. Using this information, they can then wake you up at the point when you're in light REM sleep, rather than deep SWS sleep. The result is that you're woken at a point when you're already coming around anyway – and this is combined with a gentle nudge from a vibration, rather than a loud ringing.

Daylight Lamp

Better yet, is to use a daylight lamp. These are lamps that are designed to create a wavelength similar to that of the sun – with plenty of blue light! In that way, these are the opposite of redshift technology or blue blocking shades.

These lights will then be built into alarm, that are able to gradually get brighter as it nears the point that you set to wake up at. This helps to gradually stir you into wakefulness, by mimicking the effects of a sunrise. You start to feel more and more awake and your brain

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