

HOW TO USE STRESS TO STAY IN SHAPE

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Contents

Do You Know How To Use Stress?.....	3
The mechanism of stress	4
Phase 1	4
Phase 2	5
Phase 3	5
Managing Your Stress Properly Makes All The Difference!	6
Exercise 1	6
Exercise 2: Taxes and the dentist!	7
Exercise 3: Vacation time at last!	7
How To React To Negative Emotions	8
Do You Generally Have Good Posture?	9
Summary	10

Do You Know How To Use Stress?

“He who allows himself to be broken by exhaustion will surely never achieve success. But he who bends with adversity and gathers strength to act will surely see the light in time.”¹

Everyone is subject to stress on a daily basis. Just think about what happens during the course of a normal day. The weather is either too hot or too cold. You may be bothered by a craving for something you know you shouldn't eat. You have too many responsibilities, your boss will get angry if you are a few minutes late for work, some unexpected expense arises that throws your budget out of balance, etc. All these little things are likely to cause stress.

In fact, any stimulus that you perceive as a threat to your physical or psychological equilibrium becomes a stress factor. Causes of stress are so numerous and varied that it is all but impossible to avoid them.

Stress, however, does not have to be negative. In fact, some measure of stress is necessary for survival, and for the evolution of the species. Moderate stress incites you to overcome your limitations.

Under the right conditions, even intense stress can stimulate your physical and psychological development. It is often when confronting

¹ The I Ching or Chinese Book of Changes, German Edition by Richard Wilhelm, Medici Library, Paris, 1973.

excessively stressful situations that people reveal the best of themselves.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that stress too often has negative repercussions. A body that is allowed to become stiff with stress finds it more and more difficult to relax.

Chronic tension sets in. Blood circulation is impeded. Muscles, tendons, joints and the spine suffer. The body starts showing signs of wear, in the form of more and more intense aches and pains. Sooner or later the internal organs are affected, and your health deteriorates.

Managing stress properly is one of the keys to staying in shape. To do this, you first have to learn the difference between good and bad stress.

The mechanism of stress

In order to understand the difference between the two types of stress, let's first take a look at what happens in the body when you are subject to stress.

This biochemical process has three main phases.

Phase 1

“When first exposed to stress the body is immediately placed on the alert by a number of biochemical changes which initially trigger a ‘flight or fight’ response, and then eventually aim to re-establish the body’s internal balance. At the same time the body’s resistance diminishes...”²

² Coping With Stress, F. Boucher and A. Binette, Mortagne Publications, Montreal.

This is the alarm phase.

The intensity of the organic reaction is, of course, determined by the degree of danger perceived. Mild stress produces a benign biochemical reaction. In situations of immediate danger, on the other hand, the entire body enters into a state of intense activity.

Phase 2

Resources permitting, the body now enters the second or resistance phase. Here... “reactions characteristic of Phase 1 continue, but in a way that is more adapted to defence. The organism’s resistance increases to above normal levels.”³

Phase 3

Phase 3, which represents the culmination of the preceding 2 phases, can develop in two ways:

1. The organism finally adapts to the situation. This is what is termed positive stress. The challenge has been met, resulting in an enriching transformation. The next time a similar situation arises it will not produce the same state of alert.
2. In an effort to adapt, the organism exhausts all its resources but still fails to cope with the situation. Alarm signals characteristic of Phase 1 reappear, causing organic lesions and sometimes even death.

It is generally recognized that a number of diseases - cancer, arthritis, cardiovascular disorders, hypertension, asthma, headaches, fatigue - can be caused or aggravated by mismanaged stress.

³ Ibid

Managing Your Stress Properly Makes All The Difference!

The key is managing your stress properly. But to do that you first have to learn to recognize a state of stress.

Observe what happens when you are faced with some threat of immediate danger. Your heart immediately starts beating faster, your pupils dilate, your muscles tense up. Your whole body gets ready to confront the real or imagined danger.

But stress can sometimes be very subtle. For example, studies have shown that when people watch an exciting movie, their muscles flex. This tension is all but imperceptible, and does not prevent you from remaining in your seat. However, even this is enough to alter a state of relaxation and induce a state of stress.

And there's more.

As the following exercises will demonstrate, your own thoughts - which are like a constant movie going on in your head - also have an effect on your body. To experience the phenomenon for yourself, try the following exercises.

Exercise 1

1. Tighten the muscles in your face, shut your eyes tight, clench your fists, flex the muscles in your arms, back, buttocks, thighs and legs.
2. Maintain the tension for a few seconds, then relax.

As you will see, your body reflexively relaxes after the effort. Your breathing slows down and becomes deeper, and you feel better.

Exercise 2: Taxes and the dentist!

1. Spend a few seconds thinking about your next visit to the dentist. Do you remember that special odour and the noises that are typical of a dentist's office? Imagine your dentist getting ready to give you a needle.

2. What is happening in your body?

3. If nothing happens, try thinking about your next tax return, all the receipts you'll have to add up and justify, and all the bills you'll have to pay.

Now how do you feel? Still relaxed? Has your breathing changed (becoming more rapid and shallower)? What about your jaw? Your neck? Your back?

Here is another exercise that will help you become more aware of the link between your body and your thoughts.

Exercise 3: Vacation time at last!

1. Now think about something pleasant, for example a wonderful vacation.

2. Picture what is happening around you. Try to recall sounds, odours, images. Take the time to immerse yourself in the relaxing atmosphere.

Once again, concentrate on what is happening in your body. Observe your breathing and muscles. Is your jaw tight? Are you stiff? Probably not, if you really are thinking about something pleasant.

As you can see, this exercise can be a useful way of relaxing. You can do it almost anywhere, at any time. All you have to do is

get comfortable, close your eyes, and imagine any pleasant scene you choose.

Try to do the exercise daily in order to rid your body of accumulated tension.

And if you have the time, why not try some deep relaxation? There are a number of methods which are easy to learn (ask for a Godefroy Publications reading list for more information).

How To React To Negative Emotions

Have you ever watched a dog about to be punished? Tail between its legs, head bowed, in a crouching position?

People who are faced with a threatening situation tend to hunch their shoulders, bend their backs and bow their heads, as if steadying themselves for the expected storm.

These postures are called corporal responses to emotion. Of course such responses vary from person to person, depending on the emotions they are experiencing. But when dealing with similar emotions, people's corporal responses are often the same.

Take a moment to observe the people around you, for example someone who is angry. If the person tries to contain his or her anger, you will see his jaw immediately contract, his body tighten up and his face grow rigid and change color.

Overly intense emotions - and especially negative emotions - become a source of stress, and eventually of disease. Like stress, emotions can throw your body out of balance. Chinese medicine is

very clear in establishing the link between emotions and the body - each organ is associated with a specific emotion.

By treating the organs which correspond to the negative emotions you tend to experience, you can lessen the impact of these emotions and live in greater harmony.

Do You Generally Have Good Posture?

Posture - the way your body is balanced - is another important indication of whether your system is in harmony or not.

We all tend to neglect the way we are in contact with the ground. Even the shoes we wear can be harmful: heels that are too high, shoes that are too pointy and prevent the toes from spreading, or sandals that fit badly, all prevent us from spreading our weight evenly, forcing our body to compensate by adopting unhealthy postures. This, in turn, creates muscular tension, especially in the thighs, lower back, shoulders and nape of the neck.

Here are a few techniques for preventing backaches:

- Try not to stay in the same position for too long. Remember: life is movement!
- Do not remain bent over for too long, so as not to strain the lower back muscles.
- If you have to remain standing for long periods (at work, waiting in line, etc.) try to keep one foot on a small step. This will keep your hips aligned properly and help keep your back straight.

- When you feel your back getting tired, squat with your back up against a wall, making sure to relax your shoulders and arms.

Summary

- Learn to recognize states of stress... and to relax.
- Be aware of your emotions - all intense emotions are accompanied by an imbalance in your organism.
- Watch your posture.



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