

Address your stress for a healthier life

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Picture this: You're taking a relaxing stroll through your neighborhood. Turning a corner, you come face-to-face with a mountain lion. The sight activates a complicated stress response inside your body. Your nervous system sends a surge of adrenaline and cortisol into your bloodstream to activate the fight-or-flight response. Lucky for you, the mountain lion backs off.

Your body's stress response serves an important purpose. Our ancestors — the ones who lived in caves — relied on the fight-or-flight response to avoid becoming snacks for saber-tooth tigers. But the modern predators we face today — traffic jams, unpaid bills, job burnout, parenting demands — rarely back off. As a result, many people live in a state of unrelenting stress, which takes a toll on our health.

Stress is your body's reaction to the pressures of an ever-changing environment, and it's a normal part of life. Not all stress is bad for you. Positive stress can make you more creative, alert and motivated. But unrelieved stress can



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>> Try not to spend time worrying about things you can't control — you'll feel less stress.

cause a host of physical and emotional disorders, including headaches, ulcers, heart attacks, certain types of cancer, stroke, muscle aches, high blood pressure, depression and insomnia. Stress can impair your immune system, worsen skin conditions and interfere with your gastrointestinal system.

If you're feeling stressed out, you're not alone. According to the American Psychological Association, one-third of Americans are living with extreme stress, and nearly 48 percent of Americans say their stress has increased

over the past five years, with money and work woes topping the list.

Signs that you are stressed out include shortness of breath, high blood pressure, back pain, muscle pains, depression, fatigue, relationship problems, insomnia, tension in your shoulders and neck, grinding your teeth, clenching your hands into fists, headaches, stomachaches, weight gain or loss, stiff neck, constipation or diarrhea, and anxiety.

People respond to stressful events differently, so it's important to know your own optimal stress level. If you develop symptoms, you'll know you've exceeded your stress level and you can begin to take steps to manage it.

If you think your symptoms are caused by stress, talk to your health care provider. You'll also want to make sure that your symptoms aren't being caused by other health problems.



Taking care of yourself makes a difference in how your body responds to stress, says David Shern, PhD, president and chief executive officer of Mental Health America.

"Get enough rest and exercise and balance work with play," Shern says.

>> For more tips, visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/stress or www.apa.org/topics/topicstress.html

Get your beauty rest

Stress can make you feel extremely tired, and tired people don't cope well with stressful situations. A few extra hours of shut-eye will help you feel better, more resilient and more adaptable to day-to-day events. Adults need between six and 10 hours of sleep each night, while children need 11 to 12 hours.



Factoid:

Finances are the
No. 1
cause of stress
for Americans

1 SAY YES TO LESS

Is it hard for you to say "no" to others' requests? If so, you might find yourself up to your eyeballs in community projects, babysitting chores, driving demands or other activities that eat up what little time you have for yourself. Weigh the requests, but keep in mind that a well-thought-out and gently stated "no" shows that you respect yourself as well as those who are counting on you to give 100 percent.



3 DO THE WRITE THING

Keeping a diary, journal or blog each day can be an effective way to counter stress, especially if a disability prevents you from engaging in yoga or aerobic exercise. Journaling at the end of the day can help you explore your thoughts and feelings, work through problems and find solutions. Think of your journal as a therapist with an attentive ear.

2 GET A MOVE-ON

Regular exercise is a good way to relieve pent-up energy and tension. Try to exercise at least three times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes each time. Choose non-competitive activities that you enjoy, such as a brisk walk, a bike ride, jogging or swimming. Exercise releases natural substances called endorphins that help you maintain a positive attitude — and they will make you feel good, too. And as an added bonus, the exercise will be good for your health.

4 CALL A TIMEOUT

A few minutes spent unwinding each day can lower your stress level and improve your health and relationships. Listen to your favorite music, lose yourself in a good book or take up a hobby you love. Relaxation techniques such as meditation can reverse the physiologic effects of the stress reaction and cause your pulse to slow, your blood pressure to fall and your muscles to relax. Whatever you choose to do, remember this, Shern says: "It's your time, so spend it doing something you enjoy."