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Stress and Weight Loss

Stress is an unavoidable part of our daily lives. A certain amount of stress is actually necessary for our survival; however, the amount of stress most people are under these days is causing more harm than good and can have serious health implications.

- *43% of all adults suffer adverse health effects due to stress.*

- *75%-90% of all medical visits are in some way related to stress.*

Stress greatly impacts one's health; it speeds up the aging process and leaves us feeling fatigued and demotivated. Not only is stress correlated with weight gain and the inability to lose weight, but it is also linked to a wide variety of diseases including:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Osteoporosis
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Obesity
- Cancer
- Anxiety & Depression

Stress, no matter where it is coming from, disrupts your body's internal balance, known as homeostasis. There are two different categories of stress: acute (short term) and chronic (long term). Acute stress occurs when, for example, you have to slam on the breaks in the car, someone scares you or you are running late. Chronic stress is long lasting and is linked to serious side effects. Examples of chronic stress are taking care of a sick parent, feeling unhappy in your home life, enduring a long illness or a drawn out divorce.

No matter what type of stress you are under, your body reacts by activating the "General Adaptation Syndrome," which is responsible for returning your body to a state of homeostasis, or internal balance.

General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS):

- You experience an external stress, either physical or emotional;
- An internal alarm goes off signaling a "flight or fight" response in your brain;
- In reaction to the "flight or fight" response, your autonomic nervous system (ANS) involuntarily secretes two hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, that are required to help maintain homeostasis.

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Hormones:

- **Adrenaline:** keeps you alert by increasing your heart rate, blood pressure and quickly mobilizes energy reserves.
- **Cortisol:** works more slowly, helps to replenish energy supplies and readies immune system to handle any threat.

GAS and Weight Gain/Loss:

When you feel stressed, your brain is affected. Your ANS cannot tell the difference between physical and emotional stress, therefore, it reacts the same. The GAS response to stress is immediate if there is a physical threat; however, most of the time the source of stress is not originating from a physical threat and there is no real need for “flight or fight.” Stress is related to weight gain because in order to fight or flee you need energy.

Cortisol is responsible for helping you to receive the energy you need, primarily by increasing your blood sugar. This is accomplished by converting protein to sugar, then releasing stored glucose in your liver. This is also why people crave carbohydrates when they feel stressed. The brain sends a signal indicating that energy is needed in order to fight or to flee.

When blood sugar levels are elevated, insulin (the fat storing hormone) is secreted in order to transport the blood sugar to the brain and working muscles. Here is the catch: the muscles aren't working because there is no physical stress, only emotional. People are usually sitting and not moving for long periods of time when feeling stressed. Can you guess what happens? The excess sugar you just secreted and ate in the form of carbohydrates gets stored as fat. When you are chronically stressed, this cycle continues to repeat itself.

A larger problem arises when the “General Adaptation Syndrome” is not able to shut off. This creates feelings of exhaustion, flu-like symptoms and disease. When one experiences periods of prolonged and intense stress, and one feels unable to relax, these symptoms may result.

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What Can I Do to Decrease Stress in My Life?

1. Diaphragmatic Breathing

- Can be practiced anytime, anywhere.

Instructions

- Sit up straight in a comfortable position;
- Inhale through your nose...exhale through your nose.

4-Part Breath

- Inhale deeply through your nose so the breath moves down past your clavicle and chest before expanding your rib cage and into your stomach;
- Your stomach should expand upon inhalation and chest should not move in or out;
- Starting from your stomach, exhale slowly through your nose, with control, up through your chest, clavicles and out the nose;
- As you exhale, pull your belly button toward your spine to diffuse the stale air from your lungs;
- Inhale for a count of four seconds, hold for two seconds and exhale for another count of four;
- Repeat until you feel relaxed.

2. Progressive Relaxation

- Lie on your back with palms facing up by your side, let toes fall open to either side;
- Individually contract different muscle groups for a few seconds, then release;
- Remind yourself to relax each muscle group and release any tension that is being held.

3. Meditation

- Various techniques to choose from;
- Join a meditation group;
- Purchase an informational book or video.

4. Yoga

- Beneficial for many reasons other than stress reduction;
- Join a class based on your level;
- Purchase a book or video;
- Strengthens the body and the mind and teaches you how to breathe.

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5. Time Management

- Set priorities;
- Organize your day;
- Delegate tasks and responsibilities;
- Don't overschedule;
- Ignore perfectionist tendencies.

6. Exercise

- Uses the sugar secreted in your “flight or fight” response;
- Helps maintain cortisol balance;
- Allows for more “me” time;
- Can be a social activity.

7. Nutrition

- Drink plenty of water, reduce or eliminate caffeinated beverages;
- Avoid eating sugary, high GI carbohydrates and processed foods;
- Eat a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables.