

A Stress-free Summer (and Life!) BY LAUREN M. FREIMAN, L.Ac.

WE LIVE IN A CRAZY WORLD. The demands of life are like a green light that never turns yellow or red. It doesn't matter if you're tired, sick or on a deadline—the stress just keeps coming.

It is so intertwined with life, one could argue it is impossible to live without it. But chronic stress has been proven to be hazardous to our health. Innumerable emotional and physical disorders have been linked to stress including anxiety, depression, insomnia, heart attacks, stroke, hypertension, immune system disorder, cancer, gastrointestinal disorder, skin disorders and more.

In fact, it's hard to think of any sign, symptom or disease in which stress cannot play an aggravating role. Clearly, it should not be ignored. Rather, it is essential to understand and learn how to manage this integral part of life.

What is stress?

Stress is a series of complex physiological and psychological processes involving the brain, nervous system, endocrine system, immune system and other organs that, when intensely triggered or for too long a time, can result in inflammation and chronic disease.

Inflammation is partly regulated by the hormone cortisol. When cortisol is overused, tissue sensitivity to this hormone is reduced, and it no longer regulates inflammation.

Good stress or bad stress?

It's important to understand that not all stress is bad. Some amounts of short-lived stress have been proven to promote alertness, behavioral and cognitive performance. Stress can help the body survive immediate threats. In earlier times, it was used to help us escape from threats like being killed by a wild animal. The problem is that in civilized modern society, we are no longer faced with immediate threats to our survival. Being stuck in traffic, paying bills, having an argument with a spouse, caretaking for a loved one—although very demanding—are not immediate threats to our survival (although it may feel like it on some days!).

Unfortunately, however, the body interprets all of these as immediate danger. Maybe because we ask our body to perform under poor working conditions such as minimal sleep, irregular eating habits, long work hours with almost no respite or too little or too much exercise, while feeding it foods that are unnaturally grown with pesticides or are bio-engineered.

Emotional stress is often the most intense. Unresolved feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, anger, worry or failure and common life issues such as not

feeling in control, not being able to speak one's mind or feeling stuck in relationships or jobs that are no longer working tend to have the most negative impact.

How does it work?

When the body perceives a threat, a physiological mechanism known as the "fight or flight" response is activated. This response is the body's primitive and automatic response to either fight or run to survive a perceived threat. (Our body will have increased strength and speed in anticipation of the fighting or running.)

Adrenaline works in the short term, causing increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, rapid breathing and diversion of blood flow to the limbs. Cortisol production follows, working to raise glucose (sugar) levels in the blood for extra energy. Other hormones work to shut down any functions that are not immediately necessary for survival such as growth, reproduction, digestion and blood flow to the skin.

The body's stress response is a healthy, normal physiological function that is self-regulating. When a threat, or stressor, is gone, it decreases adrenaline and cortisol levels to normal, and homeostasis is restored.

But in today's fast-paced world, the stress response is activated so frequently that hormone levels begin to respond inappropriately. Cortisol can become either chronically high or chronically low, both of which present a number of dysfunctions in the body.

The good news is that we can be proactive and mitigate the negative effects of stress. By managing stress in our daily lives, we can help keep stress levels in check and improve our health of body, mind and spirit. ■

Tools to Manage Stress

ACUPUNCTURE

Widely used to treat chronic stress, a series of recent studies at Georgetown University Medical Center showed researchers discovered acupuncture helps to regulate the "fight or flight" response.

DEEP BREATHING

Deep breathing, as practiced in meditation or other forms of breath work, has been scientifically proven to reduce stress, benefit the heart, brain, digestion and immune system. Slow, deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which reduces the body's "fight or flight" response.

EXERCISE

Everyone feels the stress-reducing benefits of a good workout. Regular and consistent exercise burns away excess cortisol in the blood. It also increases levels of the endorphins, serotonin and dopamine, known as the 'feel good' hormones.

LAUGHTER

It's true—laughter might just be one of the best medicines. Laughter helps regulate cortisol and adrenaline levels, as well as decrease muscle tension, increase endorphins and stimulate healthy heart and lung function.

MEDITATION

A study in the Journal of Health Psychology showed that focusing on the present, rather than letting the mind wander into the past and future, lowers levels of cortisol. Meditation has also been shown to improve concentration, focus, memory and sense of well-being.