

# healthy LIVING

## STRESS LESS FOR GOOD HEALTH

**When you're feeling stressed the last thing you want to be told is to "relax" or "don't worry so much". While that is indeed sage advice and no doubt said by someone who cares about you, it is very difficult to merely switch off our stress**

That being said, there are a number of things that you can do to help manage your stress. First of all though, let's look at some of the triggers that generate stress. Everyone is exposed to some degree of stress in their lifetime, in fact one form, called *Eustress* is actually beneficial stress as it helps to motivate us and get us through a given situation.

Long term chronic stress or negative situations however, can cause us a lot of distress. The Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory developed back in 1967 and still used today lists the following stressful events as some of the most likely to lead to poor health:

- Death of a spouse or close family member
- Divorce or marital separation
- Physical stress - pregnancy, labour, injury or illness, puberty and menopause
- Changes or demands at work
- Job loss
- Personal financial state <sup>1</sup>

Other more common forms of day-to-day stress that we all encounter at some point are things like long hours at work, increased levels of responsibility, concern over relationships or our career, poor diet, or simply burning the candle at both ends - that is working too hard and playing too hard.<sup>2</sup>

What's interesting to notice is that two or more people faced with the same situation will react to it differently. This is because it is not the stressor or situation that determines the response but our reaction to the situation<sup>3</sup>.

So what can you do to be one of the people that seem to take it all in their stride? There are 5 key areas of your lifestyle to review that with the right adjustments will go a long way to helping you manage your stress.

### **1. Manage your day**

Get good at managing your time, start each day by writing a to-do list and set priorities so you don't feel pressured or rushed.



It's important not to procrastinate so make sure you get the hard jobs done early while your energy levels are higher.<sup>2, 3</sup>

## 2. Exercise regularly

Results of the 2006/2007 Portrait of Health study done by the New Zealand Ministry of Health showed that only 50% of NZ adults exercise regularly.<sup>4</sup> Exercise is often tough to schedule into our daily life, even more so when we are busy and stressed; yet when we do exercise we nearly always feel better for it.

This is because exercise helps to decrease stress hormones, increases 'feel good' chemicals, reduces fatigue, improves general physical health, decreases the risk of chronic diseases and it also provides the opportunity for positive social interaction. Regular exercise may also improve your future reactions to stressful situations.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Get quality sleep

When we sleep we are giving our body vital time to recover from the day's activities, cement all the memories and lessons from the day as well as work on many repair and maintenance functions.<sup>3</sup> Lack of sleep, either in quality or quantity can lead to fatigue, poor concentration at work, irritability and weakened immunity.<sup>6</sup> Aim to get around 8 hours of undisturbed sleep every night.

## 4. Get good nutrition

Putting all the best nutrients in the world into your body won't be enough if you don't firstly remove the unhealthy stuff from your diet.

Some of the worst offenders for overworking our adrenal glands and contributing to feeling stressed are stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol, sugar and refined carbohydrates. Caffeine is known to cause anxiety, irritability, heart palpitations, headaches and insomnia. Alcohol may seem like a good way to unwind at the end of a busy day, but the reality is that it triggers anxiety and insomnia, stimulates cortisol and adrenaline secretion, and depletes the body of essential nutrients. Sugar and refined carbohydrates are simply empty calories that cause rebound hypoglycaemia and leave us feeling flat and exhausted.<sup>3</sup>

A diet based on whole, unprocessed foods with plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and water will go a long way to helping us not only feel better, but also to respond to stressful situations better.

## 5. Relax

For most of us we won't simply be able to relax just because someone tells us to. Well known methods of helping us to relax include getting a massage, taking a regular yoga class, meditating or doing any other activity you enjoy that allows you some quiet 'me time'.

**How do you rate in each of the above 5 key areas? By making a few simple changes and incorporating these tips into your everyday life you will soon start to feel more energised, resilient and in a position to maintain the state of health and wellness that you deserve.**



### Sources:

- 1 The American Institute of Stress, 'Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory, accessed 2 Dec 2013, available: <http://www.stress.org/holmes-rahe-stress-inventory/>
- 2 Haas E (1992) Staying Healthy with Nutrition: The Complete Guide to diet & Nutritional Medicine, Celestial Arts, Berkeley
- 3 Murray M, Pizzorno J (1998), Encyclopaedia of Natural Medicine, 2nd Ed, Little Brown, Great Britain
- 4 NZ Ministry of Health documents: 'A Portrait of Health: Key Results from the 2006/2007 New Zealand Health Survey' and 'Tracking the Obesity Epidemic: New Zealand 1977-2003'
- 5 Scott, E 'Exercise and Stress Relief: Using Exercise as a Stress Management Tool Stress and Exercise: Look Better, Feel Better', October 20 2008, About.com Guide, Available: <http://stress.about.com/od/programsandpractices/a/exercise.htm>
- 6 Dr Mercola 'Lost Sleep Can Never Be Made Up', 2 Feb 2010, Available: <http://healthypets.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2010/02/02/lost-sleep-can-never-be-made-up.aspx>