

## FACT SHEET

# Stress Less, Live Better

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### Why you get stressed

Today, there are more reasons to be stressed than ever before. Modern technology dictates that you should be available 24 hours a day. The pressures to achieve 'success', which society measures in terms of what you do and what you own, results in unrealistic expectations being placed upon you and those you love.

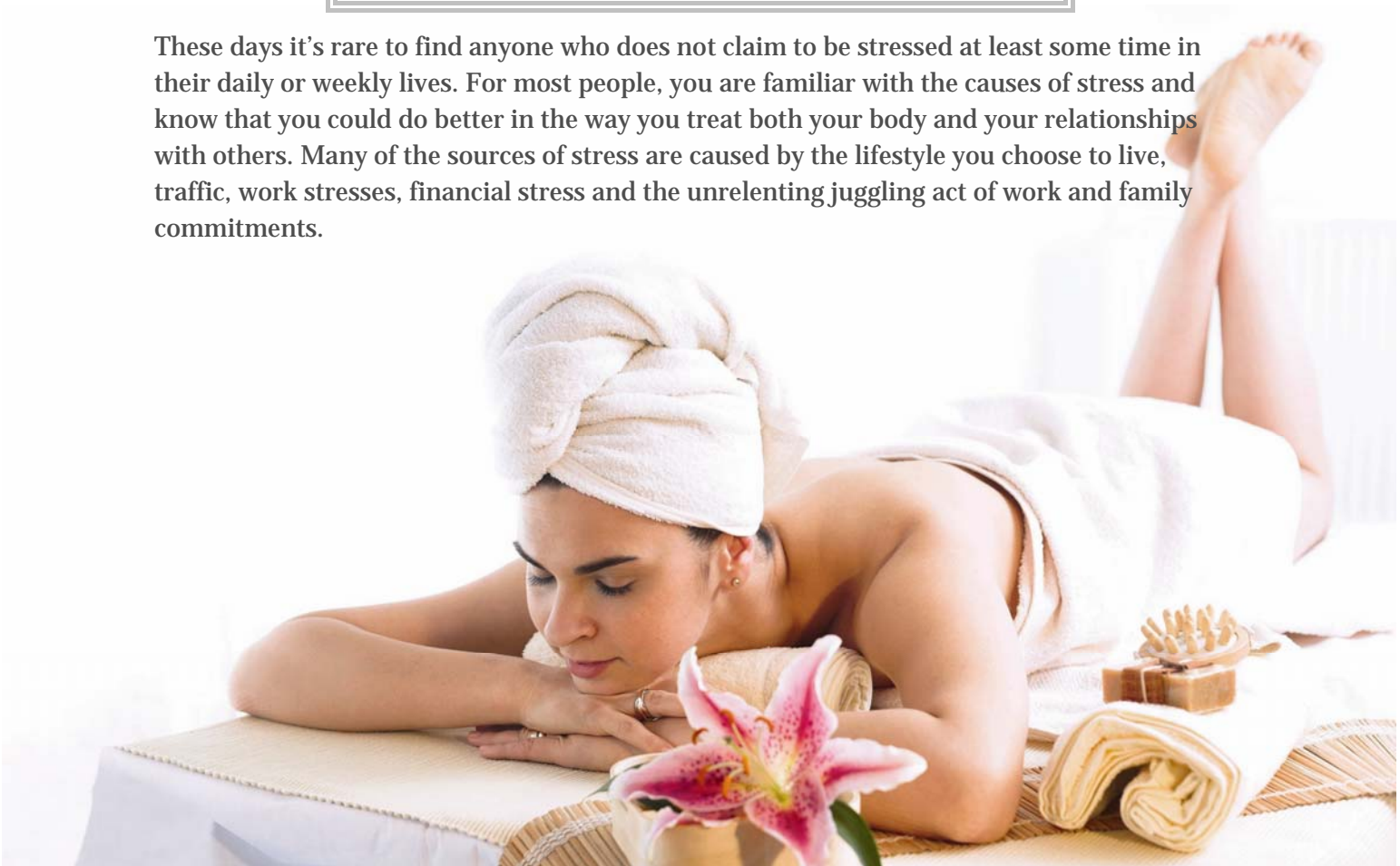
Many of you are constantly chasing the dream of more, and spend all your time chasing bigger houses, faster cars and inevitably in the quest for all this, one day wake up and question your choices.

To put this into perspective, many primitive African tribes are happier and more contented with their lives than those in western society.

Achieving material success has been equated with personal success and these are vastly different goals.

Material success can only make you happy if you are already happy.

These days it's rare to find anyone who does not claim to be stressed at least some time in their daily or weekly lives. For most people, you are familiar with the causes of stress and know that you could do better in the way you treat both your body and your relationships with others. Many of the sources of stress are caused by the lifestyle you choose to live, traffic, work stresses, financial stress and the unrelenting juggling act of work and family commitments.



## What does stress do to your body?

Stress speeds up your entire system and produces conditions in younger people that are more commonly associated with growing old, particularly age-related conditions as it has been scientifically proven that stress causes aging of the body's cells at a genetic level. Virtually no part of your body can escape the ravages of stress. Studies show that stress can reduce the power of your immune system. A study in the UK exposed 266 people to a common cold virus and then tracked who became sick. 28.6 per cent of those with few signs of stress caught the cold. However, the figure jumped to 42.4 per cent for those who were under high stress.

It is estimated that 90 per cent of all visits to doctors are for stress-related disorders. In women, stress has been linked to fatigue, hair loss, insomnia, disruption of the menstrual cycle, low libido and lack of orgasm. There's even evidence that it can increase your risk of more serious problems such as high blood pressure and heart disease.

Men under high levels of chronic stress at work are more likely to die than their peers. A large US study shows that higher mortality due to cardiovascular events (e.g. heart attack) or other factors was more likely in men whose business had failed, those who had been being fired or demoted or who were having problems with co-workers. The study also confirmed that men who are separated or divorced were more likely to die than men who remained married.

## Why do some people cope better than others?

We do know that certain personality types tolerate stress better than others. Hans Selye, who pioneered the general adaptation theory of stress, suggests that a person's interpretation of stress is not dependent solely on an external event, but also depends upon the perception of the event and the meaning he or she gives it. So, how you look at a situation determines if you will respond to it as threatening or challenging.

You cannot always control what happens to you but you can control how you respond.

It is necessary to have some stress in your life - for example those who have too much time on their hands can be stressed by the lack of motivation in their life. Conversely, 'A' type personalities who live on adrenalin and are highly competitive are at the other end of the spectrum and are contenders for serious health problems.

## What is a type 'A' personality?

A Type 'A' personality is a set of characteristics that includes

- being excessively time conscious
- being insecure about one's status
- being highly competitive
- being hostile and aggressive
- being incapable of relaxation

If you recognise yourself in this description you may well need to examine your lifestyle and make appropriate changes in your life to reduce stress levels.

### **Putting it into perspective**

Think of a recent event that you found stressful. It might be running late for a meeting because you were stuck in traffic, or finding out that your bank account was overdrawn. Rate this on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most stressful event you could imagine.

Then consider the following facts:

- More than one billion people in the world live on less than one dollar a day. In total, 2.7 billion struggle to survive on less than two dollars per day.
- Worldwide 10.6 million children died in 2003 before they reached the age of five.

Then re-evaluate your stressful event. The aim of this exercise is not to dismiss your stress as inconsequential; however hopefully it will help you put it into perspective.

### **Step 1 - Physical ways to manage stress**

#### **NUTRITION**

Balanced nutrition is the key to maintaining overall good health, but it also can affect your capacity to cope with stress. When you are going through a period of stress, you need more of all nutrients, particularly the B-group vitamins, which affect the nervous system, and calcium, which is needed to counteract the lactic acid your tense muscles produce. If you are lacking nutrients, your body will not be equipped to handle stress effectively.

Eat a variety of fresh foods to ensure that you consume all of the forty to sixty nutrients you need to stay healthy. These include vitamins, minerals, amino acids (from proteins), essential fatty acids (from vegetable oil and animal fat), and energy from carbohydrates, protein, and fat. While most foods contain more than one nutrient, no single food provides adequate amounts of all nutrients. Maintain a diet of mostly whole (unprocessed) foods. Stay away from caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate); which causes nervousness and inhibits sleep if too much is consumed. Caffeine causes a fight-or-flight response in your body and uses up your reserves of the B-group vitamins, which are important in coping with stress.

Alcohol also depletes your body's B-group vitamins, and can disrupt sleep and impair your judgment or clarity of thought. Avoid sugar, including white sugar, sugar in pre-packaged food, in soft drinks and even brown sugar. These provide no essential nutrients and can cause an immediate energy "high" followed by a prolonged energy "low."

If you do find yourself guilty of overindulging in coffee, alcohol or any other addictive habit, start slowly by reducing from say 5 cups of coffee a day down to one cup over a period of a month. The same rule applies to alcohol, you only set yourself up to fail if you make the initial goal too hard to achieve. Moderation is the key—follow Teresa Cutter, The Healthy Chef's philosophy of being good 80 per cent of the time and allowing yourself a few indulgences the rest of the time.

It takes 31 days to change a habit.

The body depletes its stores of nutrients when under stress, mainly protein and the B-group vitamins as well as vitamins C and A. A deficiency of magnesium, which helps muscles relax, has been linked to "Type A" or high-stress personalities. If you are under prolonged stress or are at risk for hypertension, consume foods high in potassium, such as orange juice, potatoes, apricots, bananas, avocados, tomatoes, and peaches. You also should increase your intake of calcium, which is found in yogurt, cheese, tofu, and chickpeas. Nuts offer a healthy alternative to regular snack foods, make sure they are unsalted.

#### FOODS FOR RELIEVING ANXIETY

Food itself can have an impact on your mood, purely by its chemical structure. Tryptophan found as a component of dietary protein is particularly plentiful in chocolate, oats, bananas, dried dates, milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, red meat, eggs, fish, poultry, sesame, chickpeas, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, spirulina and peanuts. Tryptophan is converted by the body into serotonin. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that combats pain, decreases appetite, and produces calm or sleep.

As we are all unique, nutritional needs vary to some degree. It will probably take several months to change your diet and establish healthy eating habits. Experimenting and taking the time to reform your eating will have very positive immediate and long-term effects. Eat a relaxed meal free from the distractions of television and make mealtimes an opportunity to catch up with your family and friends. Continue your healthy diet and supplements even after the period of stress has passed so that your body will be best prepared to cope with the next stressful situation you encounter.

The goal is to maintain maximum health with good nutrition, exercise, and active stress management.

For further information on diet see Teresa Cutter's Eat Well page in the Issue 2 of Herbs & Health or her 80/20 diet book.

#### HERBS FOR STRESS

**Zizyphus** is a Traditional Chinese herb that has been found to have sedative and hypnotic properties. It has traditionally been used to help relieve anxiety, insomnia, nervous exhaustion, irritability, palpitations and excessive sweating in the nervous individual and during menopause. It may also help to relieve insomnia due to nervous exhaustion and anxiety.

**Hops** has been found to have sedative and hypnotic properties. Hops has traditionally been used to help relieve sleeplessness, excitability, and anxiety and is often used specifically for restlessness associated with nervous tension headache and/or indigestion.

**Schizandra** has traditionally been used to assist physical performance, endurance and resistance to the effects of stress. It can also be used to help relieve nervous system disorders such as sleeplessness and irritability.

**Vervain** is a tonic and relaxant that has traditionally been used as a calming restorative for debilitated conditions and particularly for nervous exhaustion.

**Oats** is considered to be a restorative to the nervous system as well as being nutritive. It is considered to be specific for nervous debility and exhaustion, and to strengthen the nervous system.

## BE ACTIVE

Exercise is medicine; it is one of the best things you can do for your body. Apart from making you fitter, stronger and more flexible, exercise will make you happier, more confident and smarter! It enhances concentration and can make you more alert.

Establishing a regular exercise routine is the best way to stay motivated with a healthy eating program; you will not want to spoil your diet and undo all the hard work. Be more active in everyday life also; park further away from the entry of a shopping centre (this is a great way of avoiding scratches on your car!); take the stairs instead of a lift.

You do not need to spend hundreds of dollars joining a gym or buying expensive equipment - even walking for 15 minutes with the dog three times a week can make a difference. Exercise also generates endorphins the 'feel good' chemical released by your brain.

## Step 2 - Emotional Stress management

### IDENTIFY YOUR STRESSORS—EVERYONE IS DIFFERENT

The first step is to identify your particular 'stressors' as these will differ for everyone. For some it will be financial pressure, others difficult work colleagues and others the pressure of juggling work and family life. You can't improve a situation until you acknowledge what is actually the source your stress, and in some cases there will be multiple causes.

For each stressor you identify there will be potential solutions and for others there are realistic solutions and some that are less likely. For example winning lotto would certainly solve financial stress; however it is highly unlikely, whereas being able to save \$50 per week might be more feasible.

### WORK OUT YOUR PRIORITIES

If you find your financial commitments are crippling you, perhaps reviewing your expenses would be worthwhile. Then ask yourself 'do I really need to keep up with the Jones's?' Is it worth working 70 hours a week to provide this? Would your children prefer parents who are happier, who spend more time with them, than a fancy house?

At the end of your life, do you want to be remembered by your material possessions or for how you made people feel?

### SET YOUR SELF REALISTIC AND ACHIEVABLE PERSONAL GOALS

Goals need to be specific, have a positive focus, achievable and with a time frame in mind. For example: "I want to weigh 60 kilos by my next birthday". Or your goal might be to get more sleep - make your goal "I will have 7-8 hours sleep every night by January 30, 2008". Reward yourself for milestones that you achieve along the way and don't forget to acknowledge and celebrate those achievements.

### AIM FOR PERFECTION BUT ACCEPT THAT 90 PER CENT IS OK

Your colleagues, friends and families will still respect you, even if you are not always perfect. Make a point of saying 'no' to demands on your time which are unreasonable. If you value yourself you will not need the approval of others, and will not feel so compelled to say 'yes' or set unreasonable expectations for yourself. Lower your expectations and be kinder to yourself - you cannot expect to get 100 per cent in an exam if you work, have children and have limited study time. Imagine you did get 90 per cent in an exam ... how did it make you feel? What was your focus? For the perfectionist it is the 10 per cent missed - what do I need to do to get that extra 10 per cent right next time? If you are not a perfectionist your focus should be on the 90 per cent achieved. Focusing on your achievements is essential for good mental health.

### THINK POSITIVELY—YOU GET WHAT YOU EXPECT

We all know people who seem to have everything in life go their way, and it's all too easy to resent them and think 'why doesn't that happen to me?' Chances are those people simply adopt a more positive approach to life. Psychology says that our mind controls our body. So, taking charge of your mind becomes a vital factor in keeping your body healthy. You can do this through affirmations that establish the power of your mind.

It is said that we are never given a wish without the power to fulfil it. Each person is capable of programming their own mind to achieve what they desire.

### IDENTIFY NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Have you ever thought about the fact that there is never a moment when you are not thinking, even when you are asleep, and that whatever happens in this world begins with a thought? The following suggestions will help you manage your thoughts, minimise stress and achieve success and happiness in life.

- (1) Keep a personal notebook or diary. Jot down your thoughts. Write down happenings of the day. Were they positive, appropriate and adequate or were they confused, superfluous and negative? This helps clear the mind at the end of the day.
- (2) Leave your troubles at the door at the end of the day. The following story of the Trouble Tree illustrates this idea well.

A carpenter I hired to help me restore an old farm house has just finished a rough day on the job. A flat tyre made him lose an hour of work, his electric saw quit

and now his ancient truck refused to start. While I drove him home, he sat in stony silence. On arriving, he invited me in to meet his family.

As we walked toward the front door, he paused briefly at a small tree, touching the tips of the branches with both hands.

When opening the door, he underwent an amazing transformation. His tanned face was wreathed in smiles and he hugged his two small children and gave his wife a kiss. Afterward he walked me to the car. We passed the tree and my curiosity got the better of me so I asked him about what I had seen him do earlier.

'Oh, that's my trouble tree,' he replied. 'I know I can't help having troubles on the job, but one thing for sure, troubles don't belong at home with my wife and the children. So I just hang them up on the tree every night when I come home. Then in the morning I pick them up again.'

**'Funny thing is,' he smiled, 'when I come out in the morning to pick them up, there aren't nearly as many as I remember hanging up the night before.'**

Author Unknown

#### THE QUALITY OF YOUR THOUGHTS DECIDES THE QUALITY OF THE OUTCOMES YOU ACHIEVE

A vital step in this process is the immediate replacement of all negative thoughts by the positive ones. Thoughts have the power to materialise themselves because they are instrumental in channelling energy towards the physical or mental condition they are about. Your success and happiness depend on identifying your goals precisely and chasing them effectively, both of which, in turn, depend on how well you manage your thoughts.

It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen.

Claude M Bristol 1891-1951

External situations and the remarks of others can harm us through our thoughts, but only to the extent our thoughts allow them to. So think positive. Talk positive. Read positive quotable quotes of great people. Surround yourself with posters and cards bearing positive messages. Place them in suitable places where you are bound to look at them every day. Affirmations need to be positive, present tense and personal- for instance "I have 7-8 hours of relaxing sleep every night." Repeat this 5-10 times out loud before you go to sleep.

Start every day with an affirmation.

## LAUGHTER STIMULATES THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

Humour is a wonderful stress-reducer and antidote to upsets. It is clinically proven to be effective in combating stress, although the exact mechanism is not known. Experts say a good laugh relaxes tense muscles, speeds more oxygen into your system and lowers your blood pressure. So tune into your favourite comedy on television. Read a funny book. Call a friend and chuckle for a few minutes. It even helps to force a laugh once in a while. You'll find your stress melting away almost instantly. University controlled studies show that the experience of laughter lowers serum cortisol levels, increases the amount of activated T lymphocytes, increases the number and activity of natural killer cells, and increases the number of T cells that have helper/ suppresser receptors.

We know that, during stress, the adrenal gland releases corticosteroids (quickly converted to cortisol in the blood stream) and that elevated levels of these have an immunosuppressive effect. This research demonstrates that laughter can lower cortisol levels and thereby protect your immune system.

The emotions and moods you experience directly affect your immune system. A sense of humour allows you to perceive and appreciate the incongruities of life and provide moments of joy and delight. These positive emotions can create neurochemical changes that will buffer the immunosuppressive effects of stress.

Humour gives you a different perspective on your problems. If you can make light out of the situation, it is no longer threatening to you. With such an attitude of detachment, you feel a sense of self-protection and control in your environment. There is a saying, "If you can laugh at it, you can survive it." It's sometimes difficult to force a laugh in tense situations. But that's precisely when you need it most. One trick for finding humour in the worst of situations is to blow things absolutely, ridiculously out of proportion. When your scenario reaches the point of absurdity, you begin to smile. The situation is put in perspective. Now you can calm down.

## Herbs & Health Checklist for managing stress

- Identify your stressors and potential solutions
- Set your goals and regularly evaluate
- Stick to a healthy diet based on the 80/20 philosophy
- Exercise at least 3 times per week for thirty minutes
- Use positive self talk
- Include laughter every day in your life

## Herbs & Health recommends the following resources:

- [www.beyondblue.com.au](http://www.beyondblue.com.au)
- [www.blackdoginstitute.com.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.com.au)
- Beyond Dreaming by Brain Leaning-Mizen  
1999 Wright Books
- Five things we cannot change by David Richo  
2005 Shambhala Publications
- 10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace Wayne Dyer  
2002 Hay House publications