

Stress:

Make You, Break You

By: Steve Gangemi, DC “Sock Doc”

Stress is a general word many use to describe something that poses some threat to their overall health and well-being. You probably won't hear someone comment about their wonderfully stressful day, but rather they'll discuss how burdened their day is due to all the stress they're under. We associate stress with the negative, yet we forget to realize that certain stress is healthy and without it we will not thrive and succeed as an individual.

We've all learned about the fight-or-flight response, which is how our nervous system reacts to a stressful event in order to get us out of trouble and possibly save our life. In a Paleo era, you would perhaps have been eaten by some ferocious animal if your nervous system failed to respond properly. In today's world, if you are unable to react to stress appropriately, you just might get run over crossing the street or in a department store aisle on Black Friday.

Stress will allow you to develop through adaptation. Take the example of training for a marathon. If you're not a runner and you start your training with too high of intensity or mileage, then the stress will break you. You will get injured. Yet, if you slowly ease into the training, increasing the duration and intensity of your runs appropriately as your body adapts to the training, then this stress can make you a more fit individual.

As humans living in a fast-paced world where competition is fierce and the next best diet and workout program is the one that you missed on your Facebook feed, stress is everywhere and it's often too much for most to handle. Some people are on the verge of breaking if they encounter any more added stress to their already maxed-out lives.

Several weeks ago I was driving my pickup truck down a rather busy street when a woman thought she could make her way across the road before she became my hood ornament. She misjudged my speed, and once she got into the middle of the lane that I was driving in, she suddenly froze and stared right at me. Yes, just like a deer in the headlights (although it was daytime). She had completely lost her ability to properly respond for survival. That's a rather extreme and unhealthy reaction of her body and although she evaded my vehicle, suffice it to say that she may not be as lucky the next time. Just add in a driver of another vehicle under the same stress load, unable to adjust and react to stress as a healthy human being should be able to do, and yeah – that's one way “accidents” happen.

You might think that that's a rare case of someone's poor physiological state of well-being, but it's a lot more common than you think. Actually, I'd venture

to say that stress is breaking more people than it is making stronger and adapted to thrive and survive. For the average person who sleeps poorly, wakes up tired, uses drugs (including caffeine) to get them physically and mentally alert, eats poorly or skips meals, works long hours, and crams in some TV time before taking their sleep meds to do it all over again the next day – stress accumulates and eventually wins. This may present itself in the form of an accident that a well-adapted body could have prevented (“she slipped on the stairs”), an injury (“his knee gave out”) or some random health problem (“she needs thyroid medication” or “he suddenly had a heart attack”). Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you?

Improve Your Stress Tolerance

The stress response is very individualized and yes, it can make or break you. Take for example, if you suddenly lose your job. If you really love your job this would initially sound like a major catastrophe – showing up at work only to be told there are cutbacks. If your body is already burdened with a lot of other unhealthy stressors – perhaps a poor diet, relationship issues and maybe some physical health problems – then this sudden loss of your financial security could truly be devastating to your life, rather than merely a setback. Your relationship with your significant other could worsen, as you're unable to emotionally cope. Your physical health problems could get worse as increased stress hormones, primarily cortisol, affect your sleep so that you are unable to repair your tissues at night. Your immune system is further impaired and free radical damage is widespread. You start to crave more sugar, salt and caffeine to physiologically cope with the stress, which of course will add to the health problems. This is not to mention their ultimate effect on neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin; anxiety and depression set in. Your body is more broken.

But let's say, in the same scenario, that you have taken care of your health and well-being far beyond your career. You eat well. You are active often. You're in a healthy relationship. Despite the sudden slap-in-the-face of the job loss, you're now in the position to quickly pick yourself up after some time processing the emotional stress. Your body is more resilient to stress overall; your fight-or-flight response and stress hormones can kick in when they need to, but just as importantly, shut off when they need to. After all, if you can't control it and shut it down, well, that's unfortunately one of the reasons why someone “goes postal.” You have the ability to see this loss as an opportunity to pursue a new path. The stress makes you stronger in the end.

Know the Signs and Symptoms of Too Much Stress

You might be under more stress, or unable to deal with your current level of stress, than you think. It's not uncommon for many to have certain signs and symptoms that are the body's way of telling you to chill out and change what you're doing. If you know

some of these body signals, then you can adjust what you're doing before you get into some deep health crisis or suddenly find yourself staring helplessly at an approaching vehicle.

Dizzy when standing up -> Known as orthostatic hypotension, this occurs when your blood pressure drops when you stand up. No, the way to alleviate this problem is not to stand up more slowly, but to deal with your stress so your blood pressure can be regulated immediately no matter what your positional movement is.

Bothered by bright lights and loud noises -> If you're sensitive to bright lights, let's say you can't go from a dark space to a bright space without being temporarily blinded, then your pupils are slow to constrict and stay constricted as a result of too much stress to your nervous system. This is also relevant if you often need to wear sunglasses especially on overcast days. Ideally a healthy person should not need to wear sunglasses even on a sunny day unless the sun is directly in your eyes. Also, if you're overly startled by loud noises, most likely your body is just too stressed.

Craving salt and/or sugar -> If you crave salt then your adrenal glands are likely fatigued and you're losing too much sodium in your sweat and urine. If you crave potato chips and pretzels then it's probably because of the salt. If you're craving sugar it's due to your body running off sugar rather than fat for fuel which occurs with high stress and especially a highly refined diet.

A "twitchy" eyelid and/or "jerky" limbs -> Some people who are under too much stress will have their lower eyelid on either eye actually twitch or flutter at a rapid rate for just a few seconds at various times throughout the day. It's somewhat amusing when these patients walk into my office and have seen an ophthalmologist and a neurologist already and had a bunch of expensive diagnostic testing done. Hey – it's just your stressed out nervous system! Similarly, some people will have a limb, often their arm, or sometimes their whole body, jerk abruptly as they're dozing off to sleep. If you levitate as you are drifting off to sleep you're definitely under a lot of stress.

Improve Your Stress Threshold and Improve Your Health

I often tell my patients to "fix what you can fix." What this means is that there are often plenty of things in your life that you can do to increase your stress threshold (that is, the level where you break). By that I mean it could be the point at which you start to lose sleep, have an anxiety attack, suffer a migraine, break out in hives, or go ape on those around you. Whatever it may be, the tolerance can always be raised by adjusting stressors either big or small as best you can.

Diet is often the most practical way to lower stress in your body. Although it may not be easy at first, the rewards are huge and there are rarely exceptions for being unable to change your diet. Need I suggest a type of diet to get you started? I hope not.

Daily commitments and time management are another way to help lower your overall stress. It's hard to find someone today who is working just 40 hours a week. Today, the normal seems to be 50-60 hours and that often doesn't include commute times. Find ways to be more efficient at what you do and learn to say "no" when you're already overextended. Adjust your schedule if possible so you're in traffic less or work out at lunch rather than wait until you get home when it's late and you're more likely to blow it off. Make it a plan to get to bed around 10pm – your hormones will thank you as your circadian rhythm is reset and you'll wake up feeling more refreshed.

Some people, no matter what personal changes they make on their own, are unable to fully restore their health without some help. It's not uncommon in my practice to see a patient who is suffering from a host of physical problems which in turn is hindering their immune, hormonal and nervous system, which is then feeding back negatively into the physical problems. So they can never get well. Treatment is necessary in cases like this more often than many realize. What started as some joint stiffness soon becomes a series of muscle imbalances leading to other joint and mobility problems since all muscles in the body essentially connect to one another in some way or another. Now, with the lack of proper movement and function, the nervous system gets "stuck" in a pattern of dysfunction that must be systematically corrected so proper patterns are restored. So yes, you might not be sleeping well because of your skiing accident five years ago.

Remember, you will never eliminate all your stress. That's not only impractical but it's also not healthy for your body or for the development of our species. But if you're going to participate in some high intensity interval training, after a ten-hour work day, fueled by highly refined food and a lot of caffeine, then don't be surprised when (not if) disaster strikes. Exercise is a great way to help adapt to stress but for many it does the exact opposite. I'll address this more in the next issue.

Dr. Gangemi's website, sock-doc.com, focuses on a natural approach to injury treatment and prevention for athletes. With over 15 years of clinical practice, Gangemi is an experienced practitioner of complementary sports medicine and holistic therapies. He's a six-time finisher of the Hawaii Ironman and many other endurance events.

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