

Managing Your Stress

You need stress in your life. Research shows that the healthiest and most productive people are those that learn to manage stress. Stress stimulates your physical and mental performance. So you want to find ways to make it a positive force.

The Stress Response (Fight or flight)

Stress begins when demands are placed on you. In your mind you evaluate whether or not those demands are threatening either physically or psychologically. If your brain decides that there is a possibility of harm, it initiates a stress response. This response is also called a *fight or flight response* because it causes the same bodily changes that allowed our ancient ancestors to fight or flee.

All the physiological changes occur to prepare your body for action: muscles tense, heart rate and blood pressure increase; breath becomes quick and shallow to deliver oxygen; digestive and reproductive systems shut down to conserve energy; hormones are released to keep you alert; fats and sugars are released into your bloodstream for energy.

Unfortunately, fighting or fleeing is rarely useful for dealing with most of today's stresses, like money or relationships. And without a physical outlet the stress builds up.

Over time you will become less able to relax. Tension can turn into headaches, neck, shoulder or back pain. You may not sleep well and your threshold for handling stress may reduce, making it difficult to cope.

Massage to the rescue

Massage triggers a *relaxation response* countering *the stress response* and helping your body restore its balance.

The relaxation response allows for deeper breaths, blood pressure decreases, and muscles relax allowing you to focus on pleasant sensations. Feelings of anxiety decrease and mood improves possibly through the release of endorphins.

Research has demonstrated that as you get more frequent massage, the effects become more pronounced and longer lasting. Repeatedly experiencing the deep relaxation with massage helps you retain the feeling through daily activities. Massage also makes you more aware of sensations in your body allowing you to notice more subtle signs of stress and tension.

Blow your tension away

When you don't have time for massage you can use your breath to release tension. When under stress you breathe from your chest (shallow breathing) causing tension through your neck and shoulders.

You can break this pattern by deep breathing from your abdomen (*diaphragmatic breathing*). Diaphragmatic breathing will help release tension from your back, neck, shoulders and chest. And as your breathing becomes more relaxed so will your mind. This technique can easily be researched in the Public Library or on the web.