

Six Steps to Stress Management

By Rob McKelvey

The Macquarie Dictionary defines stress, among other things, as “a disturbing physiological or psychological influence which produces a state of severe tension in an individual”. This equates to the feeling that an individual gets when demands exceed the resources that can be applied... a feeling of being out of control or not in synch with things.

Is it any wonder that in this fast paced, multitasking and changing world in which we live today; where more and more demands are being placed on us related to work, finances, relationships, personal and family life, that we feel stressed at times. Stress shows up in a myriad of ways: irritability, disturbed sleep, headaches, poor concentration, and anxiety to name just a few. If stress is not dealt with then it can have other implications for your health such as depression, addictions, ulcers, skin disorders, high blood pressure and heart disease.

We know how too much stress can negatively impact performance as well. While some stress or pressure can increase performance, the overloading of the brain can cause performance to suffer. Then it becomes a never ending cycle since the more performance suffers the more distractions, anxieties, anger, and negative thoughts enter our minds.

So far I have focussed on the negative aspects of stress. However, some stress has a positive influence. It can propel us into action...the fight or flight concept; it can create excitement and the opportunity for new learning from a situation. The question is how can we find the optimal level of stress which will motivate rather than debilitate. Being individuals there is no one answer for everybody. The degree of stress that we feel is dependent on how we choose to interpret and react to the event which raises the stress level within us.

Now on to the **6** steps that can help you manage stress.

- 1. Become aware of what stresses you and how you react.** Notice when you become stressed. Don't ignore the feeling. Is it positive stress or negative stress? Where do you feel it...is it physically or emotionally? Can you choose to change how you feel about it or react differently to the stimulus? Are you overreacting to the situation? Can the stress situation be avoided?
- 2. Breathe.** Sounds simple and it is. Unfortunately we forget to do it effectively as a tool for relaxation. Generally when stressed we breath faster and more shallow. When you find yourself stressed or overwhelmed take 5 deep breaths. Breathe slowly and deeply into your stomach and fill your diaphragm and lungs from there. When your lungs are full hold it for a count of 3 and then exhale. As you exhale, silently say the word “relax”. Repeat 4 more times and you will find yourself more relaxed and less stressed. If you want to continue the process past 5 breathes by all means do so. You may find yourself progressing into a meditative state which is another step for reducing stress.
- 3. Visualise.** Visualisation is one of the most common forms of relaxation. Imagine a place that is safe, calm, pleasant, and restful. It can be an actual place or imaginary...the brain doesn't actually know the difference. Make it a

place that has meaning to you. Use all your five senses in this visualisation. What can you see, taste, hear, smell and feel going on around you. Can you feel the warmth of the sun, taste the salt on your tongue, hear the waves lapping on the beach, see the sailboats going by, and smell the suntan lotion. The intention is to help you relax so imagine yourself in a place where you are relaxed.

- 4. Keep physically active.** Regular exercise and a healthy diet add to the ability to cope with stress and the feeling of being out of synch. Exercising at a moderate level...walking, swimming, jogging, cycling, kayaking...for 30 to 45 minutes three or four times a week. Moderate exercise on a regular basis is enough to release the natural "feel good" chemical endorphins into the brain. Reinforcing the exercise is a balanced nutritious diet.
- 5. Take up a relaxation discipline.** By relaxation discipline I mean something along the lines of yoga, tai chai, or meditation. These are prolonged forms of relaxation that can provide benefit by tapping into the energy flow of the body. Ethereal as it may sound the body is in fact an energy source. The above types of relaxation disciplines can align the energy of the body with breathing and the heart rate. You actually get the combined effectiveness of breathing and exercise.
- 6. Get emotional support.** It has been repeatedly proven that having a trusted individual; whether it be a friend, family member, or professional coach or counsellor, with whom you can talk, can help relieve stress and its associated symptoms. If you have a non-judgemental person to whom you can talk I suggest you make use of them. An quite often the best friend that you can have to help you in stressful situations is yourself. Be kind to yourself and don't put yourself down. Learn to accept yourself.

You may find that one step is enough, or a combination of steps is needed to relieve the feeling of negative stress and being out of control. I encourage you to try one, or all of these techniques, as well as anything else that will reduce stress. Let me know how it works for you.

Here is to a stress free day.