

STRESS SUCCESS QUICKIES

by Helaine Z. Harris, MA, MFT

Doesn't Stress Success seem like an oxymoron to you? It sure did to me, at first!

Keeping up with modern life is often complicated by the very technological advances and other conveniences that are meant to streamline our day, often creating even more havoc than we had before. We have the pressure of a tumultuous economy, and with the stock market and housing prices dropping, the stress factor has been increasing for many. It seems like stress has become a way of life. It is true that in small doses stress can motivate you and help you perform under pressure such as preparing for a presentation or studying for exams, however on a long-term basis, it creates a multitude of problems.

Now is the time to bring your mind and body back into balance instead of being overwhelmed and stuck. You can protect yourself from the more severe effects of stress by first recognizing the symptoms and signs and then taking action to implement some healthier choices for yourself.

What is Stress?

With either a real or perceived threat, your body automatically goes into the stress-induced response, the "fight-or-flight" response. When this occurs, your body responds by automatically increasing your metabolism, heart rate and blood pressure, as well as releasing a flood of stress hormones into your body.

The stress response is your body's way of protecting you so in time of emergency, you stay focused, alert and energetic to save your life or protect your family.

Chronic Stress

The problem is **our body is not capable of distinguishing between physical and emotional stress**. Our bodies react to a ton of bills and traffic the same way it does to life threatening situations. The more our stress reaction is "on" the harder it is to turn "off". In time it affects our brain so you may be more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, autoimmune disorders, and all kinds of pain. Over time, this type of stress has serious health implications for almost all of our body systems.

Chronic stress significantly increases the risk of:

- Heart problems
- Stroke
- Digestive problems
- High blood pressure
- Sleep disorders
- Speeding up the aging process

Believe it or not, stress can also affect men by decreasing sexual performance as well as the sperm count. In women stress can affect PMS, infertility, and menopausal hot flashes are often made worse. Eventually it affects your sex life. Do you really want this?

It is important to assess your ability to cope with stress in healthy ways. Your attitude and feeling of control may influence its affect on you. Do you feel in charge of your stress or does your stress control you? This is an important question to ask yourself.

So how do you know when stress has got you? The stress symptoms range from emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical. Here is a partial list of our reactions when stress goes overboard:

- Excessive anger and hostility
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Constant worry
- Moodiness
- Isolating
- Loss of sex drive
- Increased aches and pains
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Increased addictive behaviors: cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, shopping, sex
- Neglecting your responsibilities

Simple Coping Techniques

- Practice relaxation techniques such as yoga, breathwork, meditation
- Reach out to friends, family and relationship partners
- Increase physical activity: walk, hike, dance, ride a bike, exercise
- Take a class that you enjoy
- Join a group that is fun for you
- Go out with friends
- Play
- Sing, write, play an instrument, journal
- Get a massage
- Laugh – Research has shown laughter is the best medicine.

Stress Success Quickies

1. Breathing is one of the easiest and fastest ways to calm the stress response. I call this the Calming Breath. Breathe in to the count of four, Hold for four, Breathe out to the count of four, Hold for the count of four. Take about 10 breaths like this and notice what happens. As you become better at it, you can take and hold longer breaths.
2. After doing the Calming Breath, find a comfortable spot and just imagine a place in nature that feels good for you. Imagine your favorite time of day, notice the landscape, the air, smells and anything else that creates you being in this peaceful environment. Stay there for 5, 10 minutes or longer if possible. It is like a mini vacation. This is a type of imagery or self-hypnosis. When working with a psychotherapist who's trained in hypnosis, you can do regression work to release the core of your stress on deeper levels.

Some of the more profound healing methods that I find are great for everyone are EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques), Hypnosis, Shamanic processes, Reichian work and Energy Medicine exercises. We are also using a biofeedback machine for some clients at our center.

If you find you are getting overwhelmed, agitated or depressed, it may be time to get some help if you are not able to successfully cope with it on your own. Now is your time to release the stress in your life and enjoy a healthier, more joyous lifestyle and live longer. Here's to your Stress Success!

Helaine Z. Harris, MA, MFT, marriage and family therapist, teacher, lecturer and founder of An Awakening Center™, which blends over 40 traditional and alternative psychotherapies. She has 30 years experience and is the author of ***Are You In Love with a Vampire? Healing the Relationship Drain Game***. She specializes in empowerment, relationship and career creativity.

Helaine Z. Harris, MA, MFT www.hzharris.com 800 - 30therapy
800 – 308-4372
818 – 782- 6869

Dr. Elissa Epel, PhD was the researcher and colleague that Shawn referenced in talking about stress management therapy reducing cortisol. I found it fascinating to learn that cortisol reduction alone resulted in weight loss in her research. As Shawn suggested, you might Google PubMed or Medline and find some of her articles.