

Stress guide

In this guide, I want to offer you some guidance on stress, as I have dealt with a great amount of it during my life. However, there are stressors that we don't control; there are policies in our society that we cannot change.

I offer you a way to be more active towards stress around what you can change in your life. It might inspire you to contribute to promoting change in our society, but this is not mandatory, and I believe in compounding change: one person at a time, one life at a time.

Introduction

Stress has a vital function: protection for survival.

All the stress pathways that are wired in our body are working towards that one goal. Survival, so we can reproduce and perpetuate the species. That's it.

Because of that, the stress mechanisms are very powerful in our bodies. Our strength can be enhanced through adrenaline pumping in our muscles. We can be faster than ever before to flee that predator. We can have an increased thinking boost to find a way to get to a safe place. Our immunity is increased to protect us from pathogens.

This booster is meant to be temporary; we are not built to feel stress constantly.

Normal response to stress: (made simple)

In a normal stress response, we are under attack by a predator or a virus during an infection, or a food and shelter restriction.

This will signal our body to secrete a major hormone called cortisol. This hormone is very powerful and can shut down entire functions in our bodies: digestion, reproduction, and sleep.

While being in a stressful season of your life, keep in mind that recovery takes time. It is not immediate. The longer we find ourselves in a stressful situation, the longer it takes to recover.

Basically, we can't take a day off and are hoping we will recover and be fine.

Ex: during a pregnancy, the body is going through tremendous change, which is stressful for the body. For the body to recover, it can take over 2 years after being pregnant and giving birth; it can take even longer if you couldn't have the sleep you need (for example). I like this example because it shows that when we stretch ourselves for long periods of time, we can't expect to find ourselves back in shape after a one-week vacation. It can take weeks, even years, of slowing down and being mindful of our energy and health.

Actually, stress is governed through different pathways. I made it simple so you can understand the implications of stress and roughly what it signals in our bodies. So you can grasp the importance of cultivating feeling safe by taking care of yourself and your environment. And be able to go back to your safe baseline after stressful events that we cannot avoid.

Mental stress

Looping thoughts, negative self-talk, worrying, or a bad relationship causing bad interactions can create mental stress that triggers a very physical reaction.

Physical stress

Very intense workouts with too short recovery times create physical stress.

Our body doesn't have the time to decrease the level of cortisol, and yet we set it to rise again through intense exercise.

Physical stress can also be triggered through chemicals and harmful substances (sugar, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, pesticides, perfumes).

Chronic stress (mental and physical)

It is when you experience physical or mental stress every day for several hours for long periods of time (weeks, months, years).

My personal story with chronic stress

As a teenager, I was always anxious. I lived in a very anxious environment. We were stressed about money, about family issues, work, and school. There was always a topic to feel stressed about.

So, I continued to run this program in my adult life.

I used to wear my stress like a badge of honour. Being anxious about everything was my way to show that I cared, that it was important to me. I was anxious about what people would think of me, or to have missed something at work. Every little detail of my life, every interaction, needed to be watched, thought of, and replayed for hours. Most of the time, I was consumed by something that happened at work, with a friend, or with my family. I was in deep need of outside validation.

I couldn't get out of my head, stuck in mental loops.

Because of this behavior, I missed most of the present moments for years.

As a result, my body stored this stress. To cope with it, I used alcohol and parties to unwind so I wouldn't explode.



Day after day, it was injuring my body without me paying attention to it. I knew deep down that my behaviors toward food, alcohol, and parties were a way to not be with myself, as I was stuck in an infinite loop of stress. But I didn't know that stress was bad for me.

For years, I thought that it was normal to be stressed when you live an intense life, a fulfilling life. Stress was the price to pay for creating big things. As everyone was doing it, since there are no real tools to help with it, I didn't think it was so bad. But it was.

My body kept warning me for years, from a constant stiff neck, insomnia, to eczema. And my cycle, every month, was warning me that I was reaching my limits, that I was hurting myself.

Since the first time I got my period, I have experienced terrible premenstrual syndrome and pain. It wasn't until 2 years ago that I could experience a healthy cycle. I realized then how big an impact chronic stress is. Because even if I looked healthy on the outside, something was deeply wrong inside.

For me, it was the physical and mental stress I was experiencing.

I had to do tremendous work on feeling safe every day, most of the day. Clean up my environment by letting go of the things and people that weren't good for my nervous system.

Start exercising regularly, fixing my sugar levels by stopping my coping system with sweets and alcohol.

Underestimated stress within our lives can have a tremendous impact on our health, and we don't even know it.

But I figured it out, and you can do it as well.

What I did is not miraculous; I consistently worked on the stressful sources in my life and tackled them one by one.

And let me tell you, it wasn't about listening to meditation or doing a bit of journaling every morning. Though these techniques are great tools that I love to use. They don't work when used as an objective instead of a means.

I went through every area of my life to see what the stress source was and fix it, change it, love it, or let it go, depending on what it was.

From my relationships, my self-esteem, the way I work, what I want for my life, my relationship to my body, what I like doing in my life, what makes me happy, everything...

To me, this is the first big step to start thinking about when we want to solve our period problems.

So let's dive right into the methodology that is helping me (still to this day) regulate my stress level and remove stress in my life.

The effect of stress on our general system, and how our period is telling us something is wrong

Even when stress is made up by our minds, it is real, and we have a very real physical response to it.

Stress is interpreted in our body as a survival signal, the fight-or-flight mode. It increases the level of Cortisol in our blood. Cortisol is our stress hormone. It is so powerful that it can shut down entire bodily functions to help us to flee or fight in case of a death threat.

These functions are digestion, sleep, and procreation.

When stressed out for a long period of time, we observe digestion problems (constipation or diarrhea), as our body is not processing the food correctly.

Your sleep is disturbed, you wake up tired, you feel you can't fall into a deep sleep, or you may suffer from insomnia.

As a master hormone, Cortisol affects all the other hormones, especially our sex hormones, which are at the bottom of the signaling pathways. So, if you have chronic stress, cortisol is always high. You might see it during your luteal phase and your period.

You might not ovulate, you may experience short cycles (<25 days), and spotting during the luteal phase (2 weeks before your actual period). A long cycle can also be a result of stress (>35 days).

Your period may be very light (less than 30ml of blood during the entire period) or have disappeared altogether. At the other end of the pendulum, you may experience very heavy periods (more than 80ml of blood during the entire period, you are bleeding through your protections and clothes).

You may experience cramps, migraines, and Pre-menstrual Syndrome, which is very frequent when we experience intense stress for long periods.

These abnormal cycles may keep you from procreating and exhaust you, to say the least.

Methodology

Chronic stress is holding us back. It is making us sick physically and mentally. It is keeping us from making bolder decisions for ourselves. We can't see clearly when being in this fight-or-flight mode constantly.

My method is to put some order in all of this and systematize the way we deal with stress, prioritize intentionally, so we break the fight or flight mode. We lower the cortisol levels; our system is calming down. As we go through this process, we start to utilize the hormones that support our peace, clear thinking, and pleasure. Named dopamine, serotonin, and endorphin. They will help you move forward with the change that is needed in your life to go back to a calm state.

1) Identify

We can only change what we can see. To treat stress, we need to identify it.

1) First, what I like to do is ask myself: Do I have physical proof of stress?

- Bad sleep
- Bad digestion: diarrhea, bloating, constipation
- Dry skin
- Acne
- Foggy brain
- Trouble focusing
- Heart palpitations
- Stomach aches
- Sweating when it is not hot, or when you didn't exercise
- Migraines
- Deep fatigue
- ...

2) Do I have mental proof of stress, and do I have coping mechanisms?

- Mental loops
- Emotional rollercoaster
- Mood swings
- Overly sensitive
- Cravings for junk food or sugar, or coffee
- Binge drinking or frequent alcohol drinking to unwind in the evenings
- Binge-watching movies, videos, shows... not wanting to think or be with myself.

There are many more, but with this map, you'll be able to identify if you are experiencing chronic stress or a stressful transition in your life.

Once you have identified that you are feeling stressed, and you want to do something about it, you need to know what the stressors in your life are.

Some symptoms may not be due to stress, but it is always good to work on feeling safe and work in parallel with your doctor to look for underlying conditions.

3) For how long have I been experiencing these stress symptoms?

3 months? 6 months? Since forever?

I love journaling as a tool to help me understand what is really going on within me. You can meditate, talk to someone with whom you feel safe (a friend, a therapist).

Here is what you can do:

Take a piece of paper and write out all the things that you are feeling stressed about. Write down everything, if it is a thought, how a person is treating you, how you behave, your job, your kids, the society, etc. Just write it down without judging it.

2) Categorize

Once you have identified the stressors in your life, let's categorize them to understand what is under your control and what isn't.

Often, we ruminate, mentally looping on things we have no control over directly, like the economy, climate change, wars... etc. We feel scared and helpless, and there is nothing we can do to improve the situation at once.

Also, we don't control how other people behave and will probably never know why people act the way they do.

Those things can eat us up and really damage us mentally. That's why it is important to look at our stressors and define if they are in our control or define steps at our level to feel good about the situation.

On the other hand, taking responsibility for our lives for what we can change, without judgment, is very powerful.

You can see your reality changing very fast around you when you take responsibility for your actions, your thoughts, what you need to work on, and what you need to do to build a better life for yourself.

Take your list and categorize each item as under my control/not under my control, and focus on it with you at the center.

Under my control	Not under my control
I have too many tasks on my plate	Not enough research on the menstrual cycle to help me with my PMS
I do everything on my own at home	The planet is burning
This person is not treating me with respect	This person is always mad
I don't have enough time	What would they think of me?
I think I am not good enough	
Any negative self-talk	

3) Set actions and commitments

Once you have defined what is under your control, you will need to put a system in place to remove, reduce, or redirect the stressful situation.

Remove: It can be a place, a person, a habit that you want to stop, a food, a thought that you have about yourself, or a pattern. In this case, you want to completely remove the stressor from your life.

You will need to define a strategy and a timeline to reach your goal.

Reduce: You don't want to stop completely, but reducing will help reduce your stress or stop it. Like reducing the work hours, reducing sugar, and reducing alcohol. Reducing too harsh workouts, reducing the responsibility at home through home tasks sharing, etc.

Redirect: You want to redirect the stress into excitement. For example, you need extra money because of an extra expense, **which** is stressing you out. You can use the stress energy toward a project that could generate the money you need. You are shifting to creative mode, which calms down your system; you can't be stressed and have creative thinking at the same time. You need to take time to think, act, and when you have the result, it is secreting dopamine and serotonin in your system, and you enjoy a new creation in your life.

This example is on money, but it can be about a lot of different things: improving your home, working on the next relationship step with your partner, teaching your children to tidy their rooms so you don't have to do it for them, talking to your best friend about the behavior that is stressing you, finding a new way to do something at work to relieve the stressor...

Then, when you have defined the action, you have to commit to it and actually do it. You can put a deadline on it, a time frame. Set a date for the conversation you need to have.

Make space around yourself to free up your evenings, or specific times for yourself to be alone if you need to.

Schedule your meals ahead of time to replace the food you want to stop eating.

Get help.

Getting into action can be hard when we are putting off deciding for ourselves and waiting for others to act. My advice on this will be to do baby steps, some small and easy things first, and then you can act on a big thing.

The more you do it, the more you get confidence about what you need in your life, how you want to live it. You find yourself more and more resilient AND stress drops!

Sometimes, I get to the point of just reaffirming a decision I made for myself or telling myself that what other people think of me doesn't matter so much after all. This helps break my mental loops.

Find your own reaffirming system to remember your decisions.

4) Embodiment

The practices that help you feel good about yourself and stay healthy also help with your mind.

Our brain is part of our body, if we want to have a healthy mind, we need to take care of our brain through exercise, food, breathing, sleep, being in nature, etc.

If our brain functions better, it produces the right amounts of neurotransmitters needed for the day, and we have better chances of feeling good daily.

I like to think that the only way to fail this is to give up. There are no wrong embodiment practices.

Breaking mental loops through thought observation

Learning to observe our thoughts and know that we don't have to believe everything we think is a powerful tool. Our brain produces thoughts all the time; they come from our education, our environment, and what we hear or read.

THEY ARE NOT THE TRUTH OF WHO WE ARE.

Learning to control them to be able to use our brain as the powerful creation tool that it is, is such a great lesson for life.

If we let them, our thoughts can trap us into mental loops, limiting beliefs, in conversations that could have happened, may happen, in catastrophic scenarios that didn't happen, may never happen, in our deepest fears...etc



Let's just recognize that our monkey brain is freaking out most of the time. We don't have to listen to EVERYTHING it says to us.

Practice:

Sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes.

Slowly inhale and exhale 3 times, then focus on your normal breath for a few moments.

Now, listen, what is your mind saying? What do you see? Are you back in a situation of the day, are you telling something to yourself, are you reliving a conversation?

Try not to judge any of the things you are hearing or seeing.

Just observe, when you feel you are reliving something, just try to put yourself outside of it emotionally and observe. You can write down what thoughts you've had.

It is possible that you need to feel something you've been pushing away all day. Allow yourself to feel it. Repressed emotions always backfire. Feeling them is processing them, so you can move forward with your day or night.

You can stay there until you start to feel steadier and calmer.

All of a sudden, you may find yourself needing to eat, to move, take a shower, whatever it is for you at that moment.

Stay there until you are pushed to do something in the present, while leaving the day's situations or conversations in the past where they belong.

Do this once a day and notice how you feel after. How do you feel after a week of practice? In a month?

Celebrate the little things of the day, all the wins

On a journal or piece of paper, write down everything you feel good about at the end of the day. From the cup of coffee in the morning, the hot shower you took, the good meal you've had, the great time you've had with your friends, the good job done, that moment with your kids when you felt deeply in the present.

Write everything, because they are all important and they are the building blocks of your happiness.

When celebrating the little achievements, you are telling your system that you want more of those; they don't go unnoticed. This is very powerful to create more and more happy moments and safety.

Recognizing what we have in our lives, being grateful, and celebrating gives a sense of fulfillment throughout the day. When done consistently, days turn into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, years into decades, and here goes your life, fulfilled and happy because of the details.

While doing this, it minimizes the impact of the stress that occurred during the day. No matter what that person said about you, at home, you are deeply loved. As you celebrate that latter, it holds a bigger space in your mind.

Be in nature

It is proven scientifically that we respond very positively to being outside.

This is affecting our circadian cycle; if we don't pay attention to our biology, we are not exposing ourselves enough to nature and daylight. Hence, disturbing our sleep.

We are animals, built to spend most of our time in nature; the fact that we separate ourselves from that is hurting our bodies and minds. Hence create stress as we don't have ways to enhance our perspectives and have this biological exchange with nature that occurs when we are outside.

Have you felt the change in your body and headspace when you go outside for a walk or sit outside?

Sometimes it is very cold or hot, or rainy, so it is not very nice at first. After a few minutes, your body starts to relax, and you feel how good it is for your body to be outside.

It is also good for your mind. Do you feel that your thoughts are clearer after 5-10 minutes outside?

This occurs because the cortisol levels are going down, your muscles are relaxing, your heart rate is slowing down, and your blood pressure is decreasing, allowing you to relax.

When our body and mind are relaxing, our thoughts get sharper.

When we feel stuck with a problem, going outside and letting go for a moment can help us find a solution quickly.

Walking

I love to walk daily; it is a non-negotiable for me. Walking has tremendous benefits for our health: body and mind.

I said above that we need to take care of our brains to favor a healthy mind and way of thinking.

Walking is a great way to do this.

Studies show that walking improves our heart rate, our blood pressure, and oxygenizes our brain.

It is helping decrease our cortisol levels, and it liberates endorphins.

Also, it improves body posture and strengthens the muscles.



To me, I found that when I am intentional about letting go of things in my mind when I am walking, I have an increased feeling of well-being. When I clear my mind that way, I come back from my walk with new ideas, new perspectives, and a higher mood.

Be aware, be conscious

Once you've gotten rid of the first round of stressors in your life, it's great! Congratulations! You feel free, liberated, and lighter.

Be aware that life happens, and other things are going to stress you out. This deadline, this new person, your new routine with your kids...etc.

Use these tools to constantly identify, categorize, act, and embody. Sometimes you will need to make the list again and follow the process; sometimes you'll just need to think about it during your walk.

The more you do it, the more natural it will become in stressful situations.

And you know, sometimes some stress is good. You can push past old limits to grow; you put yourself in an uncomfortable situation, and the gifts are worth it. Being conscious of your threshold and when you are going into the red with stress, to bring yourself back to your center.

References:

[Molecular mechanisms linking stress and insulin resistance - PMC](#)

[Effect of acute psychotic stress in nondiabetic subjects on beta-cell function and insulin sensitivity - PubMed](#)

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