Do You Know Your Early Warning Stress Signals?
Christine Haran - Jan. 17

There is no hiding out from stress. Even if you're lying on a beach in the middle of a two week vacation, it's possible that you'll be stressed out by the price of your pina colada, or by the snorer sprawled on a nearby blanket.

Despite the unavoidability of stress, there are ways that you can tune into your body and pick up its stress signals, such as problems sleeping, headaches and bossiness. Once you can recognize how your body responds to stress, you can work on catching yourself in the beginning of your "stress cycle." Mind/body researchers say you can prevent the worsening of your symptoms—and sometimes prevent them from occurring at all—by using relaxation techniques, such as just a few minutes of meditation or physical activity.

The goal of relaxation techniques, according to Herbert Benson, MD, president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Boston and an associate professor of medicine at Harvard University, is to elicit a relaxation response from your body that counteracts the consequences of stress by slowing your heart rate, breathing rate and lowers blood pressure. Below, Dr. Benson talks about common stress signals, and ways to relieve stress.

What is Stress?
Stress is any circumstance that requires behavioral adjustment. Any change is, therefore, stressful. And when under stress, we evoke what's called the "fight or flight" response. And that is when adrenaline is put forth in our body and we experience increased metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. Our body is preparing us to run or to fight. Biologically, we need the "fight or flight" response. Our species wouldn't be here today without it because it is necessary for self-protection. Our modern society, however, turns on our stress response when we don't need it. So when we don't run or fight when we're under stress, those same hormones can lead to a number of different disorders, such as anxiety, depression and high blood pressure. Stress can also lead to cardiac irregularities, heart attacks and insomnia. It worsens PMS and hot flashes from menopause, and affects ovulation and infertility.

Do people usually know when they are under stress?
There are a number of stress warning signals. There are physical symptoms, behavioral symptoms, emotional symptoms, cognitive symptoms and spiritual symptoms. Physical symptoms include headaches, indigestion, stomachaches, sweaty palms, sleep difficulties, back pain, tight shoulders, neck, racing heart and tiredness. Behavioral symptoms include excessive smoking; compulsive gum chewing; bossiness; being very critical of others; grinding one's teeth at night; overuse of alcohol and compulsive eating. Emotional symptoms include crying; nervousness; boredom; edginess; feeling powerless to change things; anger; loneliness; unhappiness for no reason and being easily upset. And cognitive symptoms involve trouble thinking clearly, forgetfulness, lack of creativity, memory loss and loss of your sense of humor. Spiritual symptoms might include cynicism, doubt, martyrdom and a loss of direction. And in relationships, stress might play out as an inability to get along with others, getting angry too easily, clamming up or having a low sex drive.

How can people distinguish between stress signals and medical problems?
Different people have different organs that are targeted by stress. Some people become anxious, other people have stomachaches, others headaches. And some people who already suffer from certain conditions, such as migraine headaches, may find that stress will trigger or worsen their headache. A person should ask themselves if the symptom or feeling they are experiencing is caused by or made worse
by stress. And if so, then it's stress related. If you are concerned about a particular symptom, however, you should always go to a doctor first to make sure it's nothing else.

**What can people do to relieve stress?**
There is no good drug or surgical procedure to treat stress. So if you possibly can, try to alter the stressful situation. But just as we all have within us the "fight or flight" or stress response, so we also have within us an opposite response, which is called the relaxation response. And a person should elicit that on a regular basis.

The stress response comes about automatically. The relaxation response requires two steps. One is a repetition. The repetition can be a word, a sound, a prayer, a phrase, or even a repetitive movement. And the second step is when other thoughts come to mind while you're doing the repetition, they should be ignored and you come back to the repetition. The technique should be used once or twice a day for 10 to 20 minutes. So a person could sit quietly and choose an appropriate repetition. It could be a prayer. It could be Om. It could be a secular term like the word "love," "peace" or "calm." Or one can do a repetitive exercise such as yoga, tai chi, ji gong, jogging. Other repetitive activities are knitting or crocheting.

When you break the train of everyday thought by doing this type of repetition, you become calmer and better able to cope with the stressors. And not only that, it's protective because there is a carryover effect that lasts throughout the 24-hour period. But it has to be done regularly. People can find out more about the relaxation response at The Mind/Body Medical Institute Web site at [www.mbmi.org](http://www.mbmi.org).

**How does the relaxation response affect the body?**
What happens is that levels of certain hormones in your body, such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol, literally change, and you're calmer. In addition, the wirings in your brain, your brain chemicals, actually change. All of this has been scientifically proven. As a result, you're less likely to be upset by a stressor, and certainly less likely to have the stress's harmful effect occur.

**Does stress reduction reduce risk of disease?**
Certain heart attacks have recently been proven to be directly related to stress. By counteracting the harmful effects of stress, these types of heart attacks could be prevented, though this has not yet been studied. We know that one can effectively treat insomnia, high blood pressure, PMS, the stress-related symptoms of fertility, the hot flashes of menopause and all sorts of pain that is worsened by stress, by relieving stress.

**What is your advice to people when it comes to stress relief?**
People should view health and well-being as akin to a three-legged stool. One leg is medications, the second leg is surgery and procedures. They are absolutely of essence in modern medicine. But they don't effectively treat stress and its harmful effects. That's why we need a third leg and that is self-care. In that self-care leg, we have the relaxation response, nutrition and exercise, and the belief system of the patient. So people should be aware that there are scores of techniques that they can use to counteract the harmful effects of stress.

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