

A Short Primer on Stress

People will tell you that things are stressful or that they are sometimes stressed out or that the stress is getting to them. What is this thing called stress and how can we deal with it?

What is stress?

In her book, *Outwitting Stress*, by Nancy Rosenberg (The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut, 2003), it is stated that, “Stress can be defined as any state that causes people to lose their equilibrium, whether it be mentally, physically or emotionally.”

When we are completely balanced, we are physically well, emotionally stable and mentally strong. No one is completely in that state for any appreciable period of time. We are all under stress of some sort or another both good and bad.

“Stress is like the tension on a violin string. You need enough tension so you can make music, but not so much that it snaps.” - Anonymous

What kinds of stress are there?

There is stress in the excitement and anticipation of something new and different or hoped to be good – a new job, the first day of school, a new relationship, a new baby, a new car, etc. For each of these things and a myriad of ones that we personally see as good stresses, there is stress nonetheless. It is just that we can handle that kind of anxiety or tension without the association of pressure.

Stress can be good-feeling evoking and/or destructive feeling. How we choose to respond to that stressful situation determines how we feel emotionally, physically and mentally.

Some other kinds of stress include :

- Workplace stress – work loads, work difficulty, time management, learning to say “No!”, taking care of yourself physically, taking a break from work, vicarious trauma, an angry boss
- Parenting – Time management, being a protector, educator and role model, dealing with teens and tweens, student stress, kids who won’t listen or talk
- Finances – establishing financial goals, paying your bills and saving money, life insurance, credit challenges, cost cutting, spending over the holidays
- Holiday stress – trying to go to all those parties and have fun, buying the perfect presents within your budget, getting together with relatives you don’t like and only see once a year, trying to decorate the house and cook and bake like Martha Stewart, trying to find the meaning for the season
- Marriage – living a respectful relationship, balancing each other’s needs, communication, handling marital finances, in-laws, sex, having one partner stay at home, housework, repairs

- Illness, Death and Dying – Dealing with your personal illness, frailty or deteriorating health, recognizing the signs of depression, coping with terminal illness, caregiving, hospice care, saying goodbye
- Sex and Dating – what are the rules today, establishing a meaningful relationship, surviving family getting-to-know-yous, protecting your space, compromising, communication
- Travel, Traffic and Delays – traffic jams, running late, traveling with kids, restaurant stress, plane travel
- Living in a sometimes, evil and ugly world – leaders like Saddam Hussein, atrocities, lack of communication with others
- Personal stress – perfectionism, too much coffee a day, smoking, use and misuse and finally addiction to alcohol or drugs, workaholism, catastrophising or negative thinking, public speaking, socializing, isolation, the pace of change in the world, decision making, phobias, weight control, pregnancy, chronic disease, osteoarthritis, headaches
- Environment – pollution, smoke from cigarettes, loud noises, temperature extremes

What are the Signs of Stress?

Physically: These are some of the signs of stress manifested on a physical basis :

- the “fight or flight” syndrome deals with your body’s perception of imminent danger where your heart beats harder and faster, muscles tense, breathing gets faster, mouth goes dry
- chronic stress has longer lasting more incrementally-more harmful symptoms such as:
 - headaches
 - dizziness
 - clenching jaw or grinding teeth
 - chest pains
 - indigestion, nausea, bloating, cramps, constipation , diarrhea, irritable bowel syndrome
 - exacerbation of symptoms of peptic ulcers, inflammatory bowel disease or colitis
 - back pain
 - appetite lost or increased
 - loss of interest in sex, more intense PMS symptoms, fertility affected, shut down of menstruation, higher risk of miscarriage
 - fatigue
 - insomnia
 - high blood pressure
 - heart disease
 - stroke
 - immune system compromise leading to increased risk for colds, flu and other infections

- memory impairment, concentration and the ability to learn

Mentally :

- difficulty concentrating
- trouble making decisions

Emotionally :

- nervousness
- anxiety and tension
- agitation
- feeling flat
- apathy
- depression

Behaviourally :

- fidgeting
- nail biting
- compulsive eating
- smoking
- aggressiveness

How does one deal with stress?

Wow! What a list of stressors! Are you feeling over whelmed? There are simple and easy ways of coping with this stress to be able to live full and productive lives.

Physically:

- get eight hours of sleep a night
- eat three reasonably-sized balanced meals a day
- keep clean - personal hygiene
- snack on protein during the day to keep energy levels up
- cut down or cut out caffeine
- cut down or cut out smoking
- watch your weight
- enjoy regular sex
- laugh a lot for the endorphins
- exercise at least three times per week at a minimum of half an hour each
- take breaks during the day to catch your breath
- laugh
- schedule regular relaxation time and practice this
- alternative medicine - massage therapy, aromatherapy, shiatsu, reikki, therapeutic touch, naturopathy

Mentally:

- exercise your mind with challenging reading as well as light, fun fiction

- do crosswords
- write out the decisions you must make along with the pros and cons of the options
- meditate

Emotionally:

- have a good friend and confidante to share your hopes and dreams with – social support
- get a pet
- recognize through awareness when the stress is getting to be too great and take a break
- feel your emotions and recognize them for what they are
- time manage
- learn to say “No!” – set boundaries and prioritize, be assertive
- leave work at work
- do something you enjoy – reading, gardening, opera, mud wrestling – leisure
- plan your next vacation
- be aware of procrastination
- deal with the clutter of things in your life
- meditate
- relaxation techniques – yoga
- reframe other people’s behaviour
- get professional help
- read self-help books
- think about the fact that you might be an A-type personality, and think about incorporating some Bs into your life
- positive self-talk
- recognize your anger, feel it and release it
- set goals for your life physically and financially and regularly review them
- live your spiritual side whether it be through religion or a higher power
- volunteering

Behaviourally:

- quit smoking
- cut out caffeine
- watch your diet
- play with your kids

Conclusion:

Chapters Bookstore has a whole section on stress and stress management. It is a topic under close scrutiny currently. Some suggested readings are:

1. *Stress Without Distress* by Hans Selye, M.D., The New American Library of Canada Limited, 1974
2. *Stress Management* by Edward A. Charlesworth, PH.D. and Ronald G. Nathan, PH.D., Ballantine Books, New York, 1982

3. *The Little Book of Stress Relief* by David Posen, M.D., Key Porter Books, 2003
4. *Outwitting Stress* by Nancy Rosenberg, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut, 2003

As well, on the website for the Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program – www.OLAP.ca – there are nine articles about stress in the booklet *Experiences of Lawyers Helping Lawyers*, Volume 2, Section III. Particularly read the ones titled *Focusing During Stress* and *Wellness and Balance for the Sole Practitioner*. Leota Embleton has written some excellent articles under the heading *Managing Lawyer Stress*, also on the website.

From a legal perspective, there is an excellent book published by the American Bar Association Law Practice Management Section written by George Kaufman titled *The Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work : Taking the Stress out of Success*.

Stress is inevitable but it is manageable. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone about it. Talking to another lawyer who understands the legal culture and the day-to-day pressures of practice can help you get through the trying times.

The Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program provides 24 hour, confidential, peer support and counseling to lawyers, law students and their immediate families with issues of stress, burnout, addictions and mental wellness challenges. To speak to the Program Manager, Leota Embleton, MSW, leota@olap.ca, or Case Managers, Doron Gold, LLB, doron@olap.ca, Terri Wilkinson, LLB, RN, terri@olap.ca or Jill Fenaughty, BA, MA, LLB, jill@olap.ca, please call 1-877-576-6227. To contact the Volunteer Executive Director, John Starzynski, LLB, please call 1-877-584-6227 or go to john@olap.ca. You may also contact OLAP through the website at www.OLAP.ca.