

# York University Staff Association Health and Wellness News and Views

Between your busy work schedule, taking care of the kids, running errands, and, oh the hundred other things you have to do in a day, it's easy to forget the amount of stress you're actually under. All that tension could start a chain reaction of health problems. Anxiety, depression, sleep disorders/insomnia, high blood pressure and diabetes. There is good news though reducing stress is in your control. Therefore the focus of the April Health and Wellness newsletter is Stress Management through relaxation, diet and exercise. Something I think we can all benefit from. Especially me...



**The Relaxation Response** You can't avoid all stress, but you can counteract its negative effects by learning how to evoke the relaxation response, the opposite of the stress response. The stress response floods your body with chemicals that prepare you for "fight or flight." While the stress response is helpful in emergency situations, it wears your body down when constantly activated. I personally struggle with stress management. I have found that relaxation and meditation do work. Relaxation brings your system back into balance: deepening your breathing, slowing down your heart rate and blood pressure, and relaxing your muscles. Studies show that relaxation can increase energy and focus, combat illness, relieve aches and pains, and boost motivation and productivity. Best of all-with a little practice, anyone can reap these benefits.

A variety of techniques can help you to achieve relaxation. We did touch upon one technique in the March newsletter. Some others include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, visualization, and yoga. Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques aren't difficult, but it takes practice. Start by setting aside 10 to 20 minutes a day for relaxation practice. Try these steps to help you relax the next time you feel stress or anxiety.

Lie down quietly in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Relax all of your muscles, beginning with your feet

progressing up to your face. Keep your muscles relaxed. Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. Breathe easily and naturally. Continue for 10-20 minutes. When you are feeling completely relaxed, lay quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and then with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes. Don't worry if you are not successful in achieving a deep state of relaxation the first few times you attempt these steps. Each time you make the effort to reach that relaxed state of mind it gets easier.

Besides relying on this technique at least once a day, I regularly use it at night to get to sleep. . It's actually really simple, and it works!

**Mindful Eating** If you reach for food when you're under stress or gulp your meals down in a rush, try eating mindfully. With our crazy schedules I know this is much easier said than done... Make an effort to sit down at the table and focus your full attention on your meal. (No TV, newspapers, or eating on the run). Eat slowly, taking time to fully enjoy and concentrate on each bite. In doing so, try to add some stress reducing foods to your daily meal plan.

**Stress reducing super foods** Most people know that a good diet is an important element in a healthy lifestyle. What you may not realize is that the foods we eat can also play an important role in stress reduction.

**Nuts** such as almonds, pistachios, and walnuts, are a great source of vitamin E, which is an anti oxidant and can boost your immune system. They also contain vitamin B which can help support your body during stressful events. Studies have shown that eating as little as a quarter a cup a day can lower blood pressure significantly.

**Avocados** are another great way to lower blood pressure naturally as well as to ensure you are getting enough potassium. A half of an avocado contains more potassium than a large banana.

**Skimmed milk** can reduce muscle spasms and ease tension. I love to have a small glass of milk right before bed. There is also some evidence to suggest that skim milk can also help with PMS symptoms including mood swings, irritability and anxiety.

**Oats and Oatmeal** are a great form of carbohydrate (opposed to a refined carb like white bread.) Eating oats can make the brain produce more of the stress relieving hormone serotonin.

**Salmon and other fatty fish** have high levels of omega 3 fatty acids. Omega 3 helps to keep the stress hormone cortisol and adrenaline under control. In addition, omega 3 also helps to prevent heart disease.

**Spinach** is packed full of magnesium, another chemical that can help to lower your stress levels. If you don't have sufficient magnesium in your diet it can cause migraine headaches as well as low energy. Just one cup of spinach can provide 50% of the recommended daily amount of magnesium, so it shouldn't be too difficult to incorporate this into a well balanced diet.

While diet alone will not completely eliminate stress. Incorporating these foods can certainly help as a part of an overall stress management program.



**Exercise** It's easy to use stress as an excuse to skip exercise. But as our society becomes more health-conscious, there has been an increased focus on the importance of exercise. Exercise and stress management are closely linked. Exercise can be an extremely effective stress reliever for several reasons. Exercise allows you to breath deeper when you most need it, when you are stressed you breath shallowly depriving yourself of oxygen.

Exercise lightens depression. Movement is good, so when feeling down...get up and get moving. Working out can increase your energy levels and when you have lots of energy, you are better able to deal with situations.

Physical activity itself can take your mind off of your problems and either redirects it on the activity at hand, (group cardio classes are a great outlet). Yoga and Tai chi can help you to achieve that Zen like state. Both are equally effective. Exercise also usually involves a change of scenery as well, either taking you to a gym, a park, a

biking trail, or a neighborhood sidewalk, all of which can be pleasant, low stress places.

When life's annoyances or frustrating situations build up, you can feel stressed. Higher energy forms of exercise like kick boxing or weight training can provide an effective release of these negative emotions, turning these otherwise potentially unhealthy emotions into motivation.

**Social Support** is another great stress reliever. Because exercise and physical activity can often involve others, you can enjoy a double dose of stress relief with the combined benefits of exercise and fun with friends and co-workers. Whether you are participating in your company's lunchtime fitness program... or taking a walk or a hike with a buddy, or even playing baseball in a league, having others workout with you can make you feel good as well as help motivate you to push harder to get a better workout.

I have to include this possibly superficial, but significant, benefit of exercise. Being active helps you lose weight, tone your body, and maintain a healthy glow and smile. You may feel a subtle but significant boost as your clothes look more flattering on, and you project an aura of increased confidence and strength. Call me shallow, but this does impact many people. The way you feel about yourself, your self esteem, impacts your happiness, and also can make life more or less stressful.

**The Pleasures in Life** can absolutely relieve stress in a positive way. **HAVING FUN SHOULD BE A PRIORITY.** With a lighthearted attitude, events that would normally be annoying become amusing; big hassles become humorously absurd; major stressors become really great stories waiting to be told. Having a sense of humor is a big part of having fun — it's a way to actively seek out fun and happiness instead of waiting for it to come to you. Research shows that laughter also has some amazing health benefits. Laughter can relieve tension, increase pain tolerance and support the immune system. A good belly laugh exercises the diaphragm, contracts the abs and even works out the shoulders, leaving muscles more relaxed afterward. It even provides a good workout for the heart.

Finally, by focusing on what is right for your life, by taking control of your situation and attitude, and taking care of yourself, you will improve your mental and physical health, your relationships at work and home, and your ability to navigate through life's challenges with grace and ease.

## Questions and Comments

One of our members emailed me with this question. I am sure there are others who can relate.

Hi Kerrienne,

I am a breast cancer survivor and I am currently taking medication "Femara" (Aromatase Inhibitor) which acts in preventing the body from producing estrogen which in my case is helping me from getting a reoccurrence of cancer. The medication has many side effects which include weight gain. (I have gained 50 pounds), joint pain, light headed, hot flashes, breast pain.

My question to you is how can I lose the weight that I have gained? I have participated in your classes but I end up in more joint pain afterwards (especially the knees). I know that if I can lose some of the excess weight it will lessen the joint pain.

Please help! I don't know what to do.

My response was...

This is a tough one... I can empathize with your frustration. Unfortunately as long as you are on the medication you will be dealing with the weight gain ☹ it is not your activity levels or what you eat.

My suggestion is to keep eating according to Canada's Food Guide. By following the food guide and keeping up your activity you will be keeping a healthy metabolism, healthy heart, vessels and lungs so that if/when you go off the medication you will be able to lose the weight. If you have to stay on the meds for a while, over time your body/metabolism will adjust and

some of the weight may start to come off. Bottom line, you need to keep a healthy diet without restricting to much because your metabolism will backfire, slowing down and your body will hold onto more weight.

Exercise is something we all need to do. Cardio is important. Although you need to avoid jumping because it can do more harm than good. The point of exercise should be to provide joint pain relief and improve range of motion, not cause debilitating pain.

Try to keep your exercise as low impact as possible, while still getting your heart rate up. Walking is a great exercise (now that the weather is warmer add a long evening walk to your exercise program). Swimming is also very easy on joints. Try an aqua-aerobics class. Even bicycling (stationary or road) is a great way get the heart rate up without causing joint pain. Yoga and Tai chi can also help with range of motion. Strength training is extremely important. It helps build muscle which helps to increase the amount of protection your muscles provide to your joints.

However all of that being said, it is also important to listen to your body. If your joints are really painful or if any swelling is noted, you should take a day off and rest.

Try not to get discouraged. The meds are the culprit, so be patient.

I hope this makes sense... Thank you for your question.

Kerrienne Brown

Please email any comments or questions to me at [kerribr@youku.ca](mailto:kerribr@youku.ca)

## **President's Corner**

For this second edition of our Health and Wellness newsletter, I wanted to simply convey my congratulations to all of the participants of the lunch hour fitness initiative.

I am so happy that this is such a huge success and I am convinced that your participation in this endeavour can only breed positivity into our community.

Great job to you, the participants and to Kerriane Brown – our very talented instructor.

In solidarity

Joanie Cameron Pritchett

President

York University Staff Association