

# York University Staff Association Health and Wellness News and Views

Feel like a cannon with the fuse almost gone? Or, maybe you're more of a pressure cooker about ready to explode? Between your busy work schedule, taking care of the kids, running errands, and, oh the hundred other things you must 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, diabetes, the list goes on. Your body and mind can't take tremendous amounts of stress for extended periods of time without negative consequences. You must give both a break every now and again to rejuvenate and relax. While it may not be in your cards to take a much-needed vacation, there are still things you can do to ease the angst.

Just as we have a stress response, we also have a "relaxation response," during which your breathing slows, your blood pressure decreases, and you even use less oxygen. 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." Our bodies can't tell the difference between an approaching grizzly bear and a ticked off spouse, a work deadline, or a traffic jam, so our stress response is triggered when there's no imminent danger. While the stress response is helpful in emergency situations, it wears your body down when constantly activated. I personally struggle with stress management. I've found that the relaxation response does 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, pains, boost motivation and productivity. A variety of techniques can help you to achieve relaxation. Some include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, visualization, and yoga. Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques isn't difficult, but it does take practice. Start by setting aside 10 to 15 minutes a day for relaxation and breathing practice. I know what you're thinking. You breathe all day every day and you're still stressed, right? That isn't the kind of breathing I'm referencing. Begin by lying down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Relax all your muscles, beginning with your feet progressing up to your face and down to your fingertips. Keep your muscles relaxed. Inhale through your nose and exhale out your mouth. 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.

Relaxing is all about getting your mind off the stresses of life. Anything that will accomplish this can be helpful in making you feel calm and at peace. Even if only for a moment. Simply make yourself comfortable at your desk, in an empty conference room, in your car, (not while driving of course) wherever! and then try to picture a peaceful scene, a future vacation, your favorite beach, a warm bath. You can even visualize yourself accomplishing a future goal or, as Women's Health magazine puts it, "picture yourself in an elevator, happily sandwiched between two hot actors of your choice."

If you reach for food when you're under stress or gulp your meals down in a rush, try eating mindfully. With life's 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 cell phone, 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. 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. Nourishing your body with the right food will give you the energy you need to tackle what life brings you, including stress.

**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 eliminate stress. Incorporating these foods can certainly help as a part of an overall stress management program.

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 your 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 stressful situations. Physical activity itself can take your mind off your problems and redirects it to 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 feelings, turning these otherwise potentially unhealthy emotions into motivation. Furthermore, 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, 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. No matter what your fitness level may be, the key is simply to move your body every day. Identifying the type or types of exercise that you most enjoy—and those best suited to your mind-body and soul.

The pleasures in life can absolutely relieve stress in a positive way. **HAVING FUN SHOULD BE MANDATORY.** With a lighthearted attitude, events that would normally be annoying become amusing. Big hassles become humorously absurd, and 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.

Stop focusing on how stressed you are and remember how blessed you are. We are all working off the same 24-hour clock, how you choose to use this time is what defines the results you experience. It's time to manage the good, the bad, and the ugly faces of stress in your life by focusing on what is right for you, 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.

***"If it's important enough to you, you'll make the time. If not - you'll make an excuse."*** ~Marie Forleo

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