

TURN STRESS INTO SUCCESS – Dr Helena Popovic MBBS



Stress is an inevitable part of life.

Intermittent mild or acute stress is not a bad thing. It builds up our resilience and switches on our adrenal glands to release performance-enhancing chemicals. However chronic or severe stress has a detrimental effect on our performance as well as on our physical, mental and emotional health. Unchecked stress is a contributing factor in every major disease we suffer and can lead to erosion of brain function, depression and body fat deposition. An estimated 80 percent of the Australian health budget is spent on stress-related conditions.

A study of 12 000 nurses found that those who described their work pressures as 'too high' were 50 percent more likely to develop heart disease 15 years later than women who felt their workloads were manageable. A study from Heidelberg University in Germany found that a stressful job—defined by long hours, demanding schedules and uncomfortable work conditions—increased the risk of developing asthma in adult life by 40 percent.

Stress interferes with blood glucose regulation and raises triglyceride levels.

Stress weakens the immune system and slows recovery from illness.

Emotional stress is more predictive of death from cardiovascular disease and cancer than is smoking. In other words, if you have heart disease or cancer and you're under intense emotional stress, you are more likely to die than if you smoke!

Stress impairs all our mental abilities, especially memory, creativity, decision-making and problem-solving. With prolonged stress, our capacity for empathy, kindness, patience and joy are significantly diminished.

This is just a snapshot of the wide-ranging effects of ongoing stress.

In surveys done by Australian health insurance companies, 100 percent of respondents report feeling stressed at various times throughout their lives. When asked to rate the severity of their stress, 50 percent of people tick 'extreme'. Similar surveys conducted by the American Psychological Association reveal that a quarter of Americans rate their stress level as eight or more out of 10. Yet when asked to *define* stress, people's answers are surprisingly vague. So what exactly is stress and what can we do about it?

Stress is the *response* of a living organism to a *perceived threat*. This definition provides three things to work with:

1. the threat itself, known as the stressor — the thing 'out there' causing the stress
2. our perceptions of the threat — what we make it mean and the perspective we choose to take
3. our responses to the threat — physical, psychological and emotional — that are largely governed by adrenaline and cortisol

Therefore stress is a specific set of responses that occur in the brain and body whenever you face something you *think* is threatening — whether or not it is *actually* threatening. This is the first clue in effectively managing stress: understanding that whether or not you find something stressful is subjective. Some people find public speaking highly stressful. Other people love giving speeches. Some people thrive on deadlines. Other people break into a panic. In some instances, increasing your skills or improving your time management is a first step in stress management.

What exactly happens in the brain and body when we perceive a threat?

At the first inkling of a possible threat, for instance a sabre-tooth tiger, an angry client or a rapidly approaching deadline, the brain sends a message to the adrenal glands (sitting on top of the kidneys) to pump adrenaline into the bloodstream. The role of adrenaline is to set off the fright, flight, fight response—whether the stressor is a tiger, client or deadline. Adrenaline does this by increasing heart rate, blood pressure, muscle strength, arousal, concentration and speed of information processing. At the same time, the adrenal glands also release cortisol to reduce inflammation and raise blood sugar levels so that fuel is available for immediate action. The combined result of these two hormones is to provide a massive surge of energy to enable us to deal with the threat. Therefore **not all stress is negative**. In the acute stage of stress we are fired up and fully focused. Ability increases and hunger decreases. The technical term for the performance-enhancing stage of acute stress is 'eustress'. A bit of stress can bring out the best in people. This is referred to as 'rising to meet a challenge'. Specific examples are mild stage fright or an athlete's frame of mind before a race—switched on and revved up. Can you think of a time when you experienced eustress—when the right amount of stress lifted your game?

However, if stress becomes too severe or continues for too long, the brain and body get overwhelmed and we hit a tipping point at which performance starts to decline. This tipping point is known as an individual's 'allostatic load'. It's where *eustress* becomes *distress*.

Beyond a person's tipping point, the stages of distress follow a predictable path. Initially they experience tunnel vision and a reduction in capacity to see options. This leads to feeling stuck in a rut and becoming agitated and hyperactive. Cognitive abilities can drop by more than 50 percent because blood is diverted from higher centres of intelligence to more primitive reflex parts of the brain. Short-and long-term memory freeze up (as I

frequently experienced in the middle of an exam) and exhaustion sets in. If you are not able to switch off at the end of the day, you can develop insomnia or disrupted sleep patterns and this sets off a self-perpetuating vicious cycle. Unabated stress can also produce irritability, impatience, emotional lability and loss of empathy. The longer the stress continues, the higher the risk of physical illness or depression.

What does this summary of stress reveal? Effectively managing stress is about understanding what happens at your tipping point. What is it that pushes a person from eustress into distress?

Your tipping point is where you start to feel you are losing control of a situation. You may not always recognise that **loss of control is the basis of feeling stressed**, but if you drill down to the core of an issue, lack of control is often a key factor. (When I use the term stress I am referring to negative stress, not eustress.) This is why deadlines are a common cause of stress: you are not able to control the passage of time. If you feel you have plenty of time to complete a task, you are unlikely to feel stressed. The minute you feel you are running out of time, what happens? This is also why managing a team can be stressful: you cannot control other people. As for public speaking—you cannot control how an audience will respond. Experienced public speakers learn techniques to overcome this. A situation can be threatening without being stressful if you know how to deal with the threat or have the option of walking away from it.

This understanding provides the basis for turning stress into success. Stress can be reconfigured to our advantage. **Every time we handle a stressful situation effectively, we boost our immunity to disease.** Threatening situations per se do not erode people's health; feeling out of control and viewing a situation in a negative light are what do the damage. If you change your thinking about an event, you change the way your brain and body respond to it.

In 1986, a pioneer in the field of psychoneuroimmunology, Dr Steven Locke, studied the effects of stressful life events on the immune function of Harvard University graduates. He measured the number and functionality of natural killer (NK) cells in their blood and discovered that students who coped poorly and reported feeling anxious or depressed had fewer and inferior NK cells than students who experienced stressful events but handled them effectively. The students who were good at handling stress had even higher numbers of NK cells than students who had little stress in their lives. That which doesn't kill us really does make us stronger.

A study of centenarians in 1999 by Dr Thomas Perls and Dr Margery Silver found that successfully dealing with stress was one of the greatest predictors of longevity. People who live longer don't experience less stress in their lives than people who die early. What set the centenarians apart was their exceptional ability to respond to difficulties and to recover from setbacks.

So commit to memory the following acronym that outlines the steps to turning stress into success: LESS STRESS

L = Look at things differently

E = Evaluate if something really matters

S = Sleep on it

S = Share it with a mate

S = Spend time in nature

T = Thank people

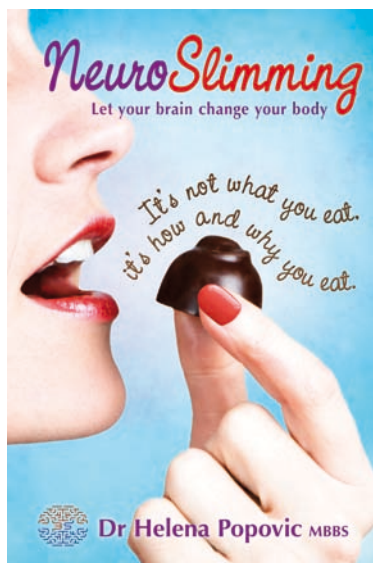
R = Read my books! ;-)

E = Exercise your body

S = Still your mind

S = Stay in the present moment and Stop multitasking

To learn more about how to turn stress into success and live longer, stronger, healthier and happier, subscribe to my free fortnightly Health-e-Bytes at the website below.



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