

## **Is Negative Stress Taking Its Toll? *How To Know and What to Do about It***

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### **What exactly is stress? Is it always bad?**

Stress is our response to our environment. In and of itself, stress isn't bad. Amazingly enough stress must be present in our lives for us to function at all. According to Tampa Florida-based therapists, James J. Messina, Ph.D. & Constance Messina, Ph.D., each of us has our own normal level of arousal (normal stress) at which we function best. However, if many of these extraordinary situations are present in our lives, stress can – and often does – become negative.

Here is what happens: When an unusual (or stressful) event occurs, our energy output drops for a short period as the event is registered in our mind. Next, our output of energy increases above the normal level. Our arousal is heightened as we try to deal with the situation. Our choices can include such responses as physically running away, fighting, becoming immobilized, suppressing emotion, or learning. Then, finally our available energy is expended and our capacity to function effectively is reduced. Dr. Tracy Gaudet, Director of Health Affairs for the Duke Center of Integrative Medicine, says that 90% of women live our lives suppressing emotions – *disconnected* – from our bodies. According to Dr. Gaudet, if we are constantly tired, stressed and overwhelmed, we could be damaging our health or even putting our lives at risk.

### **What a High Amount of Negative Stress Does to Us?**

When we are experiencing negative stress, our heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, perspiration, pupil dilation, and muscle tension all increase. In the state of chronic stress, heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration are chronically elevated. Common stress-related illnesses include coronary artery disease, peptic ulcers, and even mental illness and burnout. To determine if our lifestyle might be endangering our health, we need to listen to our bodies, and take the necessary steps to reverse the ill affects of negative stress in our lives.

According to Cheryl Richardson in her best selling book *Take Time for Your Life*, in our current fast-paced world, too many of us are fueled by adrenaline. Overuse of our adrenal system keeps our bodies programmed to be “on alert.” It pushes our body to work faster and harder with the energy reserves we have. The end result often is a crash of blood sugar, energy, and a depletion of our nutritional reserves. High adrenaline levels over time can lead to heart disease, diabetes, and chronic fatigue as well as chronic insomnia, suppressed immunity, and to anxiety and depression.



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## What are the Early Warning Signs?

Dr. Gaudet tells us to listen to the messages our bodies are trying to give us before it's too late. To determine if our lifestyles might be endangering our health, we need to check to see if we have any of these "early warning signs:"

- Cold hands and feet
- New allergies
- Skin problems
- Headaches or migraines
- Lack of "restful" sleep
- Irritability
- Muscle aches and pains
- Constant flu and colds
- Low energy

## Negative Stress on the Job

According to Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC, Executive Director of the Breathing Space Institute, many of us are experiencing enormous amounts of negative stress in our jobs because we are working long hours under unrealistic pressures. Many of us work in "pressure cooker" environments. Normally, if we estimate that a project will take one hour to complete, it realistically takes much more. Our work environment is cluttered – a situation that drains us of much needed energy and makes us feel out of control. We'd get more organized – if we only had the time. We wonder what happened to our creativity. The Technology Age is contributing to the feeling of overwhelm – the problem now has become too much information – too many e-mails, voice mail messages, meeting, and memos!!

## Solutions for Managing Negative Stress and Preventing Burnout

The following are only a few of the things we can do to keep stress from turning into burnout:

- Recognize the symptoms of stress. Stop living unconscious and disconnected from our bodies.
- Take good care of ourselves, paying attention to proper diet, regular exercise, and ample sleep.
- If less important, trivial duties take too much time away from the satisfying aspects of our lives, make changes to align what we do with what is important to us. Communicate our priorities with others.
- Be aware of our limitations – we can't do it all.
- Distinguish between the stressful aspects of our life that we can change, and those we can't change.
- Take "time outs" during the day.
- Identify those little things that gnaw at us and eliminate them if at all possible.
- Maintain discipline in daily responsibilities and duties, keeping on a healthy routine whenever we can.
- Concentrate on vital tasks and priorities. Make a list of the tasks we hate to do most. Dispense with or delegate them, if possible.
- Get exercise – it is a great way to let go of tension.
- Blend major tasks that won't show results for a while with tasks that demonstrate immediate and gratifying rewards.
- Take short vacations at least twice a year.



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- Learn to relax.
- Learn to delegate tasks at work that can be done by an assistant. This frees us up to focus on what's most important to our success.
- Give up the need to be a perfectionist.
- Laugh – it is one of the greatest ways to release stress!
- Be realistic about the time it takes to complete tasks – then multiply that estimate by at least 1.5 to allow for unexpected interruptions.
- Learn to say NO. It's a small but mighty word.
- Be willing to admit if stress is a real problem; don't try to cover it up. ASK FOR HELP!!!

### **Finding the Best Resource for YOU**

The great news is that you don't have to face problems of stress and burnout alone. A variety of resources are available to help you break free of the negative stress bind. Many people turn to therapists and/or personal coaches for help. An important question is "What's the difference between the two?" Although this is a broad generalization, a therapist often helps patients uncover and overcome *past* issues that are the underlying foundation for current patterns leading to stress or burnout.

A Personal Life Coach often focuses on your *present* situation and becomes your partner and advocate as you design and take action toward a more desirable, less stressful future. The decision about which is best for you is definitely a personal one. **The important thing to remember is this: If you are feeling stressed or burned out, take action. Seek help. You deserve to have a wonderful life. Don't let that opportunity pass you by!**



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