



## **How To Shift Your Life Out Of Overdrive**

If you asked yourself what one word most accurately describes your daily routine, even on those so-called days of rest, chances are you'd answer "stressed."

In one sense, it's ironic that you may think of your life as stress-filled. After all, you probably have more labor-saving devices, money and free time than your ancestors ever dreamed possible.

But, in spite of such prosperity, you may find yourself agreeing with millions of others who complain of living lives filled with too much to do, and too little time in which to do it.

### **Stress And Its Effects Are Real**

Sometimes the effect of certain physical and mental stresses in our lives makes us sick. In fact, stress is linked to illnesses ranging from heart disease and ulcers to allergies and a weakened immune system.

Even so, not all stress is bad. A lot of the stress in our lives is good and contributes positively to our well-being: the joy of becoming a parent; the thrill of seeing your daughter make a tournament-winning free throw; that well-deserved job promotion.

What most of us *really* mean when we say our lives are too stressful is that we're having a hard time balancing the good and the not-so-good stress in our lives.

### **What This Article Can Do For You**

To help you identify the stresses in your life, you'll find two self-scoring quizzes. You'll also find out how to cope with those stresses through relaxation techniques, proper diet -- including some snacks that are as delicious as they are nutritious -- and regular exercise. For help in succeeding with your stress balancing act, read on.

### **How To Spot Stress**

Modern stress problems occur because lifestyles have changed faster than our bodies have been able to adapt. The human body was built to cope with stressful events by gearing up for them, then resolving them and, finally, returning to a normal state.

For example, when our ancestors faced stress in the form of a pack of wolves at the cave door, their bodies prepared for the situation by pumping adrenaline and other hormones into the bloodstream to help deal with the problem.

Once the situation with the wolves was resolved (by fighting them or fleeing from them), our ancestors' bodies returned to a normal state.

Today, our bodies prepare for stressful events the same way, but we are unable to resolve stress as simply as our ancestors did.

Now, instead of fighting or fleeing, we've had to learn how to control our emotions. No matter how much you want to take a club to someone, you don't because it's just unacceptable. We have become civilized. Fortunately, there are plenty of other ways you can resolve stressful situations in your life. Learning to recognize what events cause you stress is a first step.

### **What Is Stress?**

Stress can take many forms. Here's a list of common events. Decide which are *not* stressful:

- Getting a parking ticket
- Receiving a job promotion
- Experiencing the birth of a child
- Exceeding your job-quota goal
- Hosting a dinner party
- Winning a tennis tournament
- Overdrawing your bank account
- Being diagnosed as having a serious disease
- Shedding tears of happiness
- Getting caught in a traffic jam
- Winning the lottery
- Viewing an emotionally charged film
- Coming home to find a broken water pipe
- Having to send a parent to a nursing home

As you've probably guessed, every item on this list is, to one degree or another, stressful. All of which goes to show that stress can be bad and good. Dealing with the stresses in your life and achieving a balance between good and bad stress is what this article is all about.

### **When Stress Gets To Be Too Much**

If stress gets out of control for you, it may be time to visit your family physician or a specialist in mental health. Such a professional may be able to clear up an underlying physical or mental condition contributing to your stress.

The reverse may be the case, though. Stress itself may be contributing to a mental or physical condition. Only a trained physician or counselor can make an accurate diagnosis.

Most stress these days doesn't require treatment beyond what is outlined here. Sometimes, however, more serious conditions exist, and medications may be prescribed.

### **Signs Of Excess Stress**

- Tightness around head or chest
- Extremely rapid or skipping heartbeat
- Stomach in knots
- Trembling limb
- Dry mouth
- Chronic boredom
- Shortness of breath
- Sleeplessness
- Sweaty hands and feet for no apparent reason
- Numbness or weakness
- Diarrhea, nausea, dizziness or faintness

### **Beyond Stress**

There's a significant difference between feeling over stressed, which often can be alleviated by the treatments and remedies recommended in this article, and serious mental and physical illness.

Though mental illness is a complicated subject, some distinguishing characteristics of common mental illnesses (often confused with severe stress) may be helpful.

- *Depression:* People suffering from depression have deep and pervasive feelings of sadness, helplessness, hopelessness and irritability that don't go away. Even happy events can't seem to chase away their blues.
- *Anxiety Disorders:* The word "anxiety" is overused today. As a result, its meaning has become blurred. The kind of anxiety that leads to mental illness is characterized by unpleasant and overriding mental tension from no apparent cause. Phobias, panic disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorders are among the most common anxiety disorders.
- *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:* You may have heard about this in reference to battlefield soldiers who sometimes were called shell-shocked. The most distinguishing characteristic of this disorder is that the victims have repeated episodes of flashback to a high-stress event.
- *Manic-Depressive Disorder:* As the name suggests, extreme mood swings are common with this condition. Recent research indicates that there may be a genetic basis for some, but not all, cases of manic-depressive illness. Exaggerated mood shifts and even suicide attempts are symptoms of this illness.

### Signs Of Possible Mental Illness

According to the American Psychiatric Association, a person who displays one or more of these signs should seek professional help as soon as possible.

- Marked personality change
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Strange or grandiose ideas
- Excessive anxieties
- Prolonged depression and apathy
- Marked changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Extreme highs and lows
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Excessive anger or hostility or violent behavior

### Test your Stress Savvy

One of the reasons nobody has been able to develop an accurate diagnostic test for stress is because what's stressful for one person can be relaxing for another.

Though stress is highly subjective, Donald B. Ardell, Ph.D., author of *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs and Disease*, has developed two self-scoring stress tests. Take these tests to help you determine how well you manage stress, and to rate the overall wellness level of your life.

### Profiling Your Stress

For this test, rate each of the situations listed by assigning a number from 0 (causes you no stress, or you never feel that way or exhibit that behavior) to 10 (causes you great stress, or you frequently feel that way or often exhibit that behavior).

Potential Stressor	Your Rate
Impending deadlines	
Unclear job requirements	
Unfilled needs	
Not enough free time	
Confused about role in life	
Work/responsibility overload	
Too few pats on the back	
You (or others) expect too much of you	
In over your head	
Priorities out of whack	

Difficulty concentrating	
Popularity problems	
Negative opinions from others	
Life situations out of control	
Health problems	
All-or-nothing attitude	
Use addictive substances	
Misinterpret reality	
Frequent constipation	
Always the scapegoat	
Feel isolated or lonely	
Explosive temper	
Financial worries	
Lack of self-esteem	
Life goals not met	
<b>TOTAL</b>	

Compare your total against the ranges below and see how your stress profile rates.

- 0 to 25: A stress-free life. Maybe you should take a few risks just to make your life more interesting.
- 26 to 75: Normal reactions to stress.
- 76 to 125: You're at the high end of the normal range. Your scores aren't abnormal, but you might want to ask yourself if you're really comfortable with your reactions to stressful events in your life.
- 126 to 200: Time to calm down. You may be overreacting to the stresses in your life. Some people actually thrive on stress, but even they should slow down once in a while and take stock of their life pace.
- 201 to 250: You are overreacting to all kinds of stress and probably are too hard on yourself. Even if you don't think so, you're probably full of anger and hostility. Don't panic, but you may need some help to get your life back to a healthier, more normal level of stress.

### Rate Your Wellness Level

This helpful exercise encourages you to consider a whole range of lifestyle issues. As with the stress profile, you take it and score it yourself. You get immediate feedback and a good gauge of your personal level of stress. To take the test, use the "Variable Scale" to rate your usual reactions to the events, hassles, pleasures, and lifestyle changes listed. Then, add up your score and check it against the ranges provided to see what your total means.

### Variable Scale

- +3 Great
- +2 Very Good
- +1 Good

- 0 So-so
- -1 Unfortunate
- -2 Very Unfortunate
- -3 Disastrous

Your Variable	Events
	Choice of career
	Present job/business
	Marital status
	Personal relationships
	Sense of humor
	Level of fun experienced in last month
	Financial situation
	Current income level
	Spirituality level
	Feelings of self-esteem
	Positive influence on others
	Sex life
	Personal looks and fitness
	Home life
	Life skills and knowledge of issues and facts unrelated to your job
	Your knowledge about how to manage stress
	Nutritional knowledge, attitudes and choices
	Ability to recover from disappointment, hurts, and tragedies
	Confidence that you now are at, or are reasonably close to, your highest potential
	Overall quality of your life
	Your life is on an upward curve, getting better all the time
	Level of participation in issues and concerns beyond immediate interests
	Choice whether to be a parent or not; understanding the consequences of that choice
	Your role among friends, relatives or others you care deeply about and who care deeply about you
	Emotional acceptance of the reality of aging
	<b>TOTAL</b>

### What The Total Tells You

- +51 to +75: Nothing much disturbs you, even the kind of events and circumstances that would upset many people. You like your life and the way you live, and not much is going to get you off that path.
- +25 to +50: You're capable of dealing creatively and efficiently with the events and circumstances around you.
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- +1 to +24: You have the potential to prosper personally. Your ability to cope with stressful events and circumstances will be helped along even more by adopting good mental and physical changes.
- 0 to -24: Though in good shape, you're at the point where a sudden increase in the number of negative events and circumstances could set you back. Check those areas of the test where you should improve.
- -25 to -50: You might want to see your doctor. Either you were too pessimistic and underrated your true levels of satisfaction, or you are in need of some counseling. But you can change your life and the things that affect it. When you do, life will seem better than ever before.
- -51 to -75: Your well-being could be threatened, but there's hope. It's never too late to make significant, positive changes. You should seek professional help.

### **Tips To Tame Those Tensions**

There are about as many ways to deal with stress as there are causes of it and people who experience it. In plain terms, when attempting to cope effectively with stress, do whatever works.

Among the most common sources of stress relief are exercising, practicing relaxation techniques, changing your diet, talking over your stress with a confidant and engaging in an absorbing hobby.

Very few people will be able to (or need to) use all of these techniques every day. But here's a review of some of the more popular ways people have battled stress and won.

### **Definitely NOT Stress Relievers**

- Smoking cigarettes
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Using illegal drugs
- Eating too much of the wrong foods
- Physical aggression against others
- Withdrawal or isolation from society
- Bottling up your emotions

### **Relaxation Techniques**

People who really need to learn to relax seem to approach relaxation the same way they approach the rest of their lives: *hard charging*.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), most of us don't know much about the art of relaxation. Relaxation is more than getting away from the work-a-day grind, and it is more than the absence of stress. Instead, relaxation is a positive and satisfying feeling during which you experience peace of mind. True relaxation, according to NIMH, requires becoming sensitive to your basic needs for peace, self-awareness, and thoughtful reflection. It also requires the willingness to meet those needs instead of ignoring or dismissing them.

Other relaxation techniques -- known as *progressive* (deep) muscle relaxation, *autogenic* relaxation, and *visual imagery* -- may require some assistance to learn properly. Basically, these relaxation techniques require you to consciously will yourself to relax, muscle by muscle, from the top of your scalp to the tip of your toes.

*Biofeedback* is another technique you might consider. Biofeedback uses equipment (such as an oscilloscope) to make us aware of involuntary or unconscious responses (such as our brain waves) so we can consciously change them.

Biofeedback is used to treat a variety of illnesses. In stress management, it may help you learn to recognize the signs of imminent stress and to avoid so-called involuntary responses to stress.

### **Diet**

Remember, there is no such thing as an anti-stress diet. And vitamin and nutritional advertising notwithstanding, you're not going to eliminate stress by taking pills or following this diet or that one.

However, a healthy body is much better able to deal with the effects of too much stress. That's why eating wholesome foods, such as the snacks recommended here, makes good sense.

If you haven't already done so, you may want to reduce the caffeine in your diet. Try decaffeinated beverages as a way to avoid excessive amounts of stimulants.

### **Quick Snacks Under 100 Calories**

<b>Food</b>	<b>Calories</b>
One-quarter of a small cantaloupe	24
One 6-oz. can low-sodium vegetable juice cocktail with a dash bottled hot pepper sauce & a dash Worcestershire sauce	38
1 cup cauliflower drizzled with 2 tsp. creamy reduced-calorie buttermilk salad dressing	48
1 cup cocoa made with sugarless cocoa mix & hot water	50
1/2 cup apple juice or cider	58
3 Tbsp. raisins	79
3/4 cup seedless grapes	81
Half of a toasted English muffin spread with 1-1/2 tsp. reduced-calorie jelly	94
Eight animal crackers	96
1/2 cup fresh strawberries	28
1 cup plain air-popped popcorn	30
One plain rice cake	35
One thin slice lean turkey breast wrapped around a dill pickle spear	40
1/2 cup vanilla ice milk	92

## **Exercise**

The body prepares for stress by increasing levels of adrenaline and other hormones in the blood. Because modern society dictates that we control our behavior while dealing with stress, we don't burn off those stress-fighting additives as our ancestors did when they battled enemies, hunted their dinner and spent days searching for shelter.

Exercise is one of the few ways we have today of being physically aggressive and getting rid of chemicals pent up in the body as a result of stress.

## **Talk It Over**

As simple as it sounds, one of the best ways to beat stress is to talk over your problems with your spouse or a trusted friend. Sometimes, however, it may be easier to talk through your troubles with a professional, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist. These therapists may be able to help you focus on the cause of your stress and recommend corrective actions to take.

## **Stress Reduction Pays Off**

Reducing stress in your life may provide unexpected rewards. Although there's no guarantee that each of these bonuses will come your way, when you reduce the stress in your life, you also often:

- Lower your blood pressure
- Lower your risk of heart disease
- Eliminate tense muscle aches and pains
- Lose weight (or gain, depending on your reaction to stress)
- Calm your stomach
- Increase your self-esteem
- Reduce headaches
- Improve your overall wellness

## **Take Control**

You *can* manage stress. Arm yourself with the facts and develop a positive attitude.

Remember:

- Look for obvious signs of stress.
- Quiz yourself to get an objective view of your lifestyle and the ways you approach difficult situations.
- Discover the positive benefits of rest and relaxation.
- Eat smart and exercise regularly -- two important keys to maintaining your healthy best.

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