

STRESS Defense

Combat Tips for Today's 'Stress Generation'

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In the early 70's if you looked under 'stress' in the yellow pages, all you would find were engineering companies. In the 80's the increase in technology promised we'd work less and enjoy more leisure time...maybe we would maintain our stress free existence? Not so. Our society took all of that extra time and worked *more*. Today a quick internet search of 'stress' will result in over 55 million hits. We're *stressed out!*

Stress is making us sick, and yet for many it's hard to define 'the bug'. Many say stress is something that happens to us – an event like the death of a loved one, or even a promotion at work. Some talk about stress as the "wear and tear" our bodies experience in response to a stressful event. That same 'wear and tear' can affect our mind and actions too – creating emotional and behavioural 'symptoms'. Stress really is about events and our *response* to them. Whether the event is good or bad our bodies can develop a stress response toward the event that is guided by our belief in our abilities to 'deal with' the event.

An event occurs – an upcoming holiday for example – and we evaluate the situation mentally. "How do I feel about this event? What do I have to do to prepare for or combat this event? Am I up for the task?" If we decide that the demands of the situation outweigh the skills we have, then we label the situation as "stressful" and react with the classic "stress response". If we decide that our coping skills outweigh the demands of the situation, then we don't see it as "stressful". A holiday may be a source of joy for one person, and extremely stressful for another:

"I have to get someone to take care of the cat, water the plants, get my work projects in order, arrange for hotel and car rentals, buy a new bathing suit, get to the tanning salon, lose 10 lbs... I should just stay home!!!"

Hans Selye, a pioneer of stress research, quips that "it's not the stress that is killing us, it's our reaction to it." Selye has identified three stages of "stress response".

The first is the **alarm** stage where your body has met with a stressful event. Whether you are fleeing a charging grizzly, or preparing to battle heavy traffic, your body prepares for **action**. It releases adrenalin and another *fight or flight* hormone called cortisol. Blood pressure and heart rate increase, pupils dilate, blood is re-directed to the working muscles, blood sugar increases, gastric secretions increase, blood coagulates more rapidly – all to prepare you for battle. When danger is real (i.e. running from a bear) these mechanisms may save your life. When you're simply battling traffic they could increase your risk of heart attack, ulcers, diabetes, even death, depending on how often you're facing the stress.

The second stage is the **recuperative** stage where damage sustained during alarm is **repaired**. Your body starts to head back to normal levels of heart rate and blood pressure.

Systems begin to normalize. In a matter of several minutes or sometimes hours you enter the final stage where the body returns to its normal state, or what Selye calls **relaxed alertness**. Acute stress should be 'normal' stress, where adequate recuperation occurs between every stressful event. Unfortunately the increased pressure in our lives is making it more difficult to avoid stress, and many of us are finding that we are living in a perpetual state of stress. Without recovery, the physiological stress that enters our bodies during the alarm stage of stress response doesn't leave us – high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high gastric secretions, high stress hormones all conspire to make us sick.

How do you measure up?

The Canadian Mental Health Association has an on-line stress index that can help you or your clients determine how well you cope with daily stress. The 25 item inventory asks you to answer yes or no to questions like do you frequently: 'neglect your diet?' or 'fail to build relaxation time into your day'. Visit http://www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre/stresstest.htm to increase *your* daily stress awareness. Another index developed by Miller and Rahe (1990) is the 'Recent Life Changes Questionnaire' that examines stress and the 'big picture'. It asks you to determine which of a list of potentially stressful events has occurred in your life in the last 6 or 12 months. Both of these questionnaires are great at identifying whether a stressful event has occurred in your life, but neither measures the *quality* of your response to the event. Use them as a means for creating *awareness*, and assessing whether you should get more stress management help. *Both of these indices can be downloaded in pdf format at www.liveoutloud.ca under 'Free Q's'.*

Once you've identified potential stressors in your life, it can be helpful to get a bit more specific by working through the following questions to determine how you respond to the events:

- 1. Determine which events really cause you to feel stress.** Determine how your body responds to the stress. What are you telling yourself about meaning of these events? Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways? *Write them down.*
- 2. Evaluate your options around these events.** Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely? Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)? Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)? Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?
- 3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.** The stress response is triggered by your perception of harm or difficulty whether physical or emotional. Are you making mountains out of molehills when potential stressors are in the midst? Do you overreact and view things as absolutely critical and urgent? If so, attempt to adopt more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.

Physical activity and stress

Remember that stress has the capacity to elevate certain physiological functions like heart rate and blood pressure. Many people are 'hot reactors' to stressful events, and will react to a boiling point (danger zone) when stress hits. Regular exercise has been known to reduce the severity of that stress response, shorten the recovery time from stress, and; reduce the stress related vulnerability to disease. It's important to note, however, that exercise itself is a stressor, so when stress is really high, exercise should lean toward moderate or mild levels of activity. When the going gets *really* tough try slow, deep breathing to bring heart rate and respiration back to normal. Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Meditation, yoga, and other moderate forms of exercise can also help.

Beyond exercise, it's essential to eat well-balanced, **nutritious meals** as vitamins and minerals can help moderate stress levels. High fat and carb loaded 'comfort food' may seem like a good idea at the time, but the energy drop you'll experience afterwards won't help you combat the stress. Ensure you are getting enough **sleep**. Most people need 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night. If you're not getting that your body doesn't have a chance to rest and recover. Fatigue is a form of stress.

When you complain that you are too busy or stressed to exercise, remind yourself that even one bout of activity can work to provide distraction from the day's challenges. A visit to the gym can help you feel good and regain some of the control the work day may have robbed from you.

Michelle Cederberg provides valuable workshops for fitness leaders that can help them work with clients beyond the physical. Visit www.liveoutloud.ca or e-mail Michelle at info@liveoutloud.ca to learn more.

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As president of Live Out Loud Fitness and Wellness Consulting Michelle helps individuals and organizations Pump up Productivity in work, fitness, and life. She has built her career in the fitness industry since 1990, as a personal trainer and educator, and expands that practical experience into motivational speaking and consulting. Her lively sessions have entertained hundreds of audiences across Canada and the U.S.