

Stress and 2009

Advice Line

by Dr. Betty Phillips



Pay attention to your thoughts. Are worries piling up, are frustrations and irritations mounting, are you feeling anger at whatever or whoever is to blame for this mess? Take a moment to scan your body. Is your body tense, braced, jaws clenched, gut tight, breathing fast and shallow? If you could see within, you'd find a pot-pourri of stress chemicals coursing through your body and your blood pressure and heart rate elevated. If so, you're wearing your "stress monster" costume and Halloween is over! You can divest yourself of this most unwelcome burden. Stress reduction does take awareness and some effort — but less effort if you take a few minutes every day to reduce your stress.

Ignore this message at your peril. The facts are well documented. Chronic stress disrupts the quality of your life, significantly accelerates aging and contributes to the development of sleep disorders, illnesses (such as colds, allergies, infections) and chronic diseases (such as cancer, heart disease, Alzheimers).

In the first article of this series December 2007 I wrote about life problems such as "money worries and incessant bad news blaring over the TV." From the perspective of December 2008, those days seem like the "good old days." How can we ever reduce our stress? Remember there is a difference between life problems and stress responses. Although each life problem will cause a new stress response, each spike in stress will be temporary unless you are already carrying the stress monster in your mind and body. You can avoid chronic stress overload by following the advice from these columns and/or similar self-help sources.

My website, www.BettyPhillipsPsychology.com, contains all my Chatham County Line articles (Advice Line section) and related articles (Reading Room section). I'll review a few pointers to help you keep the stress monster at bay. All of the stress management techniques will calm the sympathetic nervous system response and promote the parasympathetic responses of relaxation and well-being, so choose methods which work best for you.

I'll mention a few of physical approaches to stress management. Habitual use of the methods mentioned in the first article (A-breathing and muscle relaxation) will help inhibit the stress response. Exercise is a good stress management technique. I

mention it here to remind you that exercise should not be the only stress response method you use. You don't want your stress to increase if you can't exercise because you are laid up with a cold or injury. You may also know that stress can interfere with exercise by decreasing your motivation to get off the couch. Stress then leads to depression and more stress in a vicious cycle. Healthy food choices, appropriate supplementation, yoga, acupuncture — these are some of the many approaches to combat the physical components of the stress response.

Need advice?

Send Dr. Betty Phillips questions about individual, relationship, marriage or family issues to BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net or 466 Eagle Point Road, Pittsboro 27312. Questions can be anonymous. Betty looks forward to hearing from you!

Stress management must encompass mind as well as body. If you want to check this out, relax and then start to list your upsetting life problems. Lo and behold, your previously relaxed body will be tight and tense. One important stress control technique is practicing appreciation and gratitude instead of the more typical rumination about life problems. Spending some time every day contemplating the blessings in your life reduces stress exponentially. Science has demonstrated that a daily gratitude practice produces a significant positive effect on happiness and well-being.

Today I will add a time efficient technique for stress management developed by yoga practitioners. Alternate nostril breathing can be practiced for five minutes daily to promote brain synchronization and relaxation. You can also use this technique to calm yourself down whenever you are feeling upset or when you experience insomnia. The basic concept is to use your thumb to close off the right nostril so that you can breathe out and in through the left nostril, then use your ring finger to close the left nostril so that you can breathe out and in through the right nostril. I will provide additional information about this technique on my website.

Note that the "magic pill bottle" won't do the trick. You will have to make some life changes. But, heck, why not, if the life changes increase your happiness and well-being?

I've received requests to continue writing about stress in 2009. The stress monster comes in many disguises and poses many different challenges. You can also contact me directly with questions and suggestions for articles.

Best wishes for a great holiday season and year 2009!



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