

Stress: It's all in your head

How well you cope can impact your health

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Aug. 15 — Flipping through the newspaper one morning, Jack read that his large health care company was planning to lay off thousands of workers. “It’s finally going to happen to me,” he said to himself. “I know it. I won’t be able to find another job, either.” Jack thought about the layoffs constantly, even though there were no warning signs at his office. His stomach problem flared up again, and he started to have trouble sleeping.

JILL, WHO works at the same company, also saw the news piece about the layoffs. She felt worried, but told herself, “Obsessing about this isn’t going to help, and it will drive me crazy. There’s not much I can do at this point, anyway.” She managed to forget about the layoff threat.

Potentially stressful situations like these hypothetical stories bombard most of us on a regular basis, and people like Jack may literally take them to heart: Between 60 to 90 percent of visits to health care professionals are for stress-related problems.

People like Jill, however, know how to keep a lid on stress. Because what causes stress isn’t always what’s going on around us — that strange look from the boss, that traffic jam — it’s how we perceive these events. The word “stress” technically refers only to how our body reacts to different external inputs, known as stressors.

“The way that people cope makes a difference,” says Dr. Allison Conner, a clinical psychologist who practices in New York City. “It’s natural to feel some amount of stress when faced with a stressor. It’s not like we become automatons. But there are ways of handling the situation,” she says.

Here’s how stress works: When we perceive a threat of any kind, the nervous system releases hormones like adrenaline and noradrenaline, which increase your heart and breathing rates, blood pressure and muscle tension. This is known as the fight-or-flight response, and it served our rugged ancestors well as they hunted or battled.

WHEN STRESS GOES TOO FAR

But if you’re only battling for a seat on the subway, those chemicals linger for no reason and can cause problems. Some stress is good for us and does help us get things done. Its effectiveness lies on a bell curve known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law. As stress increases, so does performance and efficiency, but only up to a point. If the stress continues beyond that point, performance and

efficiency drop off. Signs that stress has gone too far include emotional distress, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating or changes in eating patterns. Some people experience panic symptoms like difficulty breathing, heart pounding, numbness or tingling in extremities.

Prolonged stress can contribute to anxiety, depression, anger and hostility, high blood pressure or cardiac irregularities.

However, a person can train him- or herself to lessen the effects of stress and to downplay stressors through simple thought training.

‘THE RELAXATION RESPONSE’

Dr. Herbert Benson, founding president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Chestnut Hill, Mass., and most recently co-author with William Proctor of “The Breakout Principle,” calls creating the opposite reaction to stress “invoking the relaxation response.”

Benson’s approach to stress involves two basic steps: repeating a prayer, word, sound or phrase and disregarding other thoughts.

This quiets some parts of the brain and activates others, which in turn commands puffs of nitric oxide to be secreted, helping the body to be less responsive to stress hormones, Benson says.

“These changes influence a 24-hour period, and you’re calmer and you’re more efficient,” he says.

Benson says that repetitive prayer, yoga, qigong and meditation have the same effect.

“All we have described over these decades is the science for what people have been doing for millennia,” he says. “Regardless of the culture, these techniques have been there, but they all come back to the basic relaxation response.”

Tips for letting go of stress

Try this relaxation exercise taught at the Mind/Body Medical Institute:

Pick a focus word, short phrase or prayer that is firmly rooted in your belief system, such as ‘one,’ ‘peace,’ ‘The Lord is my shepherd,’ ‘Hail Mary full of grace’ or ‘shalom.’
Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
Close your eyes.
Relax your muscles, progressing from your feet to your calves, thighs, abdomen, shoulders, head and neck.
Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, say your focus word, sound, phrase or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.
Assume a passive attitude. Don’t worry about how well you’re doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, ‘Oh well,’ and gently return to your repetition.
Continue for 10 to 20 minutes.
Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.
Practice the technique once or twice daily. Good times to do so are before breakfast and before dinner

Another tactic is to change the negative or distorted patterns of thought that cause us stress, which are often called “catastrophizing.”

“A current example is the news,” Connor says. “It’s very easy to jump on that and think, ‘There’s going to be a terrorist attack now because they raised the alert.’ While that’s not completely off base, the chances of that happening to any one person are not that high.”

With cognitive therapy, people learn to pay attention to mental missteps. Benson suggests the following steps to derail catastrophizing, anger and other negative thoughts as soon as they occur:

Stop. Breathe deeply, invoking a relaxation response.

Reflect. Ask yourself, “How important is this? Is this important enough for me to develop this anger or rage?”

Choose your response. “So I’m a little bit late in a traffic jam. Is it worth being so upset?” That very thought will interrupt the stress,” Benson says. “You’re in control, not what you’re thinking about. You’re no longer like a cork on the sea.”

Suppressing a stress response isn’t always appropriate. If a car accident is imminent or you really are being stalked by a wild animal, those stress chemicals are needed to think and act quickly. And responses to serious stressors like the death of a loved one usually cannot and should not be suppressed. But what about the smaller stressors, things you won’t even remember in a year? Relax. They’re just in your head.