

# LOW-STRESS

## *healthy living*

*Stress may be normal part of life, but it need not become a daily drag on our energy levels, writes Carolyn Moody.*



**T**he term ‘stress’ was coined in the 1930s by Hans Selye, a Canadian endocrinologist. He identified the adrenal glands as the masters of stress reaction. When faced with a stressful situation their job is to secrete adrenaline and cortisol to prepare us for fight or flight. According to Selye, stress is the body’s response to any demand (stressor), whether it is pleasant or harmful; real or imaginary; physical, mental or emotional. We have a limited supply of adaptive energy to deal with stress

and that the amount declines with continuous exposure. As the adrenals become exhausted, unrelieved stress leads to a break down in health.

Stress, however, is not new. It has been around since man appeared and pitted his wits to survive a harsh natural environment. Stress is part of being human. One person’s stress is another person’s challenge. Problems arise when people start experiencing their everyday challenges as overwhelming, and this results in fatigue, disillusionment and a loss of vital energy.

Industrialised humans have accumulated different forms of stress: environmental toxicity, sedentary lifestyles, nutritional denaturing and sleep deprivation. The pace and pressure of life means we all do too much. With modern technology we are available 24/7. We also have high expectations and push ourselves to depletion. Humans are designed for hectic activity followed by long periods of doing nothing but we never switch off. We have become ‘human doings’.

### **NATURAL STRESS RESISTANCE**

Can we make ourselves more stress resistant? Around 460 BC, Hippocrates, the father of medicine said: “Health is the product of environmental factors, diet and living habits.” If you can’t change your circumstances, then revising nutrition and lifestyles may protect you from the worst effects of stress.

The body's reaction to stress is the same as it was for our hunter-gatherer ancestors, but instead of fleeing or fighting we 'stew' over stressful events – whether they be lateness for an appointment or an argument with our spouse. Physical exercise releases tension and brings down levels of stress hormones, especially cortisol which damages health. Find an activity that is easy to fit into a busy schedule, for example, walk to work or take an evening stress-releasing stroll.

### GET MORE SLEEP

Most of us are chronically sleep deprived. Research shows that we need on average eight hours sleep per night with an hour's siesta in the afternoon. Chronic sleep deprivation suppresses the immune system, making us more prone to infections and disease, and depletes our adrenals making us depressed, emotionally unstable, irritable and angry. A lot of people eat more when they are tired. What activities can you drop to get eight hours sleep?

### AVOID BLOOD SUGAR DISRUPTORS

Blood sugar disruptors are stimulating substances used regularly to 'keep us going', or wake us up in the morning. They cause blood sugar disruption and fluctuating blood sugar levels heighten the perception of stress. Blood sugar disruptors disrupt brain chemistry, leading to irritability, anxiety, nervousness and impatience. Having normal blood sugar levels helps alleviate feelings of stress. *(See the box for the list of blood sugar disruptors.)*

Blood sugar disruptors deplete the body of vitamins C, the B vitamins, zinc and essential fatty acids, all of which are needed for healthy adrenal function. The B vitamins and vitamin C cannot be stored by the body. We need to consume them daily in quantities many times higher than the RDA (recommended daily allowance) just to keep pace with the levels being lost through stress and blood sugar

disruptors. Food sources of B vitamins and vitamin C are fresh fruit, raw vegetables, wheat germ, seeds, nuts and whole grains. Meat, fish, eggs and dairy produce also contain some B vitamins.

### BALANCE BLOOD SUGAR

To balance blood sugar it is important to eat three meals a day, even if they are very small. Don't be tempted to skip a meal. The secret is not to wait until you are keeling over with hunger, cravings and low energy. Eat good quality protein at each meal in the form of meat, fish, eggs, tofu, pulses (beans and lentils), seeds and nuts. Protein helps to build health and balance blood sugar. It should make up 40 to 50% of your meal.

Schedule a small snack between meals and before bedtime – for example, fresh and sun-dried fruit with seeds and nuts; rice cakes spread with seed and nut spreads; hard-boiled egg; piece of cooked cold chicken; half an avocado; half a can of tuna; small portion of hummus with crudités; falafel or a small pot of cottage cheese.

Decrease blood sugar disruptors gradually over two weeks. Withdrawal symptoms from stopping them can be headaches, achy muscles, fatigue and dizziness. All this is normal and usually passes within a couple of weeks.

### BLOOD SUGAR DISRUPTORS:

- **Caffeine** found in coffee, tea, chocolate and cocoa products, and cola drinks
- **Alcohol**
- **Sugar** (and sugary foods/drinks)
- **Refined starchy** carbohydrates, i.e. white flour, white rice
- **Tobacco and smoking**
- **Salt** (and highly salted foods and snacks)
- **Some prescribed medications**
- **Recreational drugs**

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