

How Stress Can Work For, Not Against You

You've heard it all- stress is bad for you, stress is good for you, too much is distressing, but a little is a blessing- what does it all mean? The right amount of stress is good for you- but what's the right amount?



Understanding Stress

First, it helps to know that stress is our bodies' reaction to a new situation. Our bodies react in the same way whether the situation is welcome or unwelcome. Our hearts beat faster. Our bodies produce a natural stimulant called adrenaline. We breathe more rapidly. We are more alert, and we may perspire more. All of these responses can be good for you when followed by periods of relaxation. Stress can give you the "competitive edge" in sports, keep you alert and concentrated for a test, or can literally save your life in an emergency. But, when your body is constantly tensed and does not relax, these same responses can lead to increased blood pressure, anxiety attacks, and a wide range of physical disorders.

How Much is Too Much?

There's no set formula for figuring out how much stress is too much. One person's stress may be another's "motivation." However, if you experience stress-related symptoms such as insomnia, appetite changes, excessive fatigue, depression, headaches, stomach ailments, or muscle tension, you may be feeling the effects of an overly stressed lifestyle- all stress and no relaxation. The key is to find a manageable level of stress is to avoid or eliminate unnecessary stressful situations. And, when you can't avoid them, to be sure to



balance stressful experiences with periods of relaxation.

Eliminating Excess Stress

Some stressful situations can be eliminated through creative problem solving. For instance, if you find yourself stressed because you're regularly late, intentionally leave 10 minutes earlier to allow for a leisurely trip. You might even consider turning "wasted" time standing in line (or sitting in traffic) into extra leisure time. Bring along a book, a magazine, a crossword puzzle, or even your homework. Listen to the radio or bring along a CD player and a favorite CD. Or, take along a pad of paper and a pencil and try your hand at sketching. You may not be able to avoid all stressful situations, but you can turn many into positive experiences.



Working With Stress

There will always be minor hassles (and major ones, too) that can't be avoided, eliminated, or changed. But, they can be balanced by periods of relaxation. You can break the cycle of continuous stress by planning time for relaxation. Five minutes of stretching, deep breathing, a warm bath, or uninterrupted silence, may be all you need to break the pattern of tension and fatigue. When you set aside time to relax, you'll feel refreshed, revived, and better able to handle the situations and challenges you face each day.



Adapted from 1987 Parlay International "Stress- More or Less"

