

## **3 simple tips to reducing stress and enjoying the holidays again**

All of us experience different challenges and bumps in the road but sometimes find the pressure is too hard to handle. When we feel overwhelmed, under the gun, or unsure how to meet the demands placed on us, we experience stress. In small doses, stress can be a good thing. It can give you the push you need, motivating you to do your best and to stay focused and alert. Stress is what allows you to make snap decisions for your safety. But when life tests exceed your ability to manage, stress becomes a threat to both your physical and emotional well-being.

### **What is stress?**

Stress is a psychological and physiological reaction to events that disturbs our equilibrium in some way. When faced with a threat, whether to our physical safety or emotional balance the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight” response which puts all bodily systems on red alert.

### **The body's stress response**

The “fight-or-flight” stress response involves an enormous amount of biological changes that prepare us for emergency action. The hypothalamus in our brain sends signals to the sympathetic nervous system to release the stress hormones adrenaline, nor-epinephrine, and cortisol. These stress hormones race through the bloodstream, readying us to either flee the scene or battle it out.

Our heart rate increase and blood flow to the large muscles increases so we can run faster and fight harder. Blood vessels under the skin constrict to prevent blood loss in case of injury, pupils dilate so we can see better, and our blood sugar ramps up, giving us an energy boost and speeding up reaction time. At the same time, body processes not essential to immediate survival is suppressed such as the digestive and reproductive systems. The stress response floods your body with chemicals that prepare you for “fight or flight.” But while the stress response is helpful in true emergency situations where you must be alert, it wears your body down when constantly activated.

There are many signs and symptoms of stress and vary from individual to individual. However, there are 4 basic areas in which we see the impact of stress; physical, behavioral, emotional and cognition.

Physically, the ones we think of most frequently is, high blood pressure, muscle aches, back pain, stomach upset, tiredness, sleep problems, weight gain or loss and sexual dysfunction

Stress permeates into thoughts and feelings causing anxiety, restlessness, depression, sadness, anger, mood swings, confusion, burnout, resentment, guilt, and seeing only the negative. The third area stress affects is our behavior: overeating, under eating, angry outbursts, drug abuse, excessive drinking, increased smoking, social withdrawal.

The final area stress impacts is our cognition or memory causing indecisiveness, inability to concentrate, trouble thinking clearly, poor judgment.

Within stress, there are two major types of stress and understanding them will have an impact on how you deal with it.

1. Eustress- good stress such as a marriage, job promotion,
2. Distress- the things we consider to be bad
  - a. Acute: arrives and disappears quickly. Limited time, exam, public speaking
  - b. Hyperstress: pushed beyond ones limits, Wall Street trader
  - c. Hypo-stress; not being challenged, repetitive factory work.
  - d. Chronic: weeks, months or years, providing long term care for a loved one

### **Top ten stressful life events**

1. Spouse's death
2. Divorce
3. Marriage separation
4. Jail term
5. Death of a close relative
6. Injury or illness
7. Marriage
8. Fired from job
9. Marriage reconciliation
10. Retirement

### **Importance of managing stress and its symptoms**

While unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, there are many things you can do to control it and reduce its effects.

Recent research suggests that anywhere from 60 to 90 percent of illness is stress-related. Extended or repeated activation of the stress response takes a heavy toll on the body. Prolonged exposure to stress increases your risk of everything from heart disease, obesity, and infection to anxiety, depression, and memory problems. The physical wear and tear of stress includes damage to the cardiovascular system and immune system suppression. Stress compromises your ability to fight off disease and infection, throws your digestive system off balance, makes it difficult to conceive a baby, and can even stunt growth in children. Because of the widespread damage it can cause, it's essential to learn how to deal with stress in a more positive way and reduce its impact on your daily life. Our body does not have the ability to distinguish between distress and eustress. As a result chronic stress wears you down day after day and year after year, with no visible escape. Under sustained or severe stress, even the well-adjusted person loses the ability to adapt. When stress overwhelms our coping resources, our bodies and minds suffer.

There are many ways to deal with stress but here are 3 top ways to handle stress, especially around the holidays. Remember that each one of these tips are about changing something, making life better. Sometimes in order to do that, we need support to help make those changes. It's when we have support that stuff really starts to happen.

### **Stress reduction secret #1: Avoid unnecessary stress**

Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

- **Learn how to say “no”** – Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when you're close to breaking point. Taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.
- **Think before you say yes.** Remember you may have to say no to a good yes in order to be able to say yes to an even better yes.
- **Avoid people who stress you out** – If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely. They can be toxic.
- **Take control of your environment** – If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic's got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online or get another family member to do it.
- **Avoid hot-button topics** – If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.

### **Stress reduction secret #2: Evaluate tasks and time constraints**

There are situations where there is constant time and work pressure which adds significant stress to one's life. Sometimes these situations are not easily avoidable but evaluating how you deal with them can help to reduce stress.

- **Pare down your to-do list** – Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts.” Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.
- **Small Tasks** - Splitting projects and assignments into small pieces and doing a small amount of work on a regular basis on these projects is perhaps one of the very best ways to prevent becoming overwhelmed with work.
- **Priorities** - Choosing appropriate priorities for tasks is an important way to avoid stress. Is it better to work overtime completing projects to earn extra money or job prestige and not see your family much or to somehow avoid overtime work and spend a lot of time with your family? These are the types of decisions which are important and can have a significant effect on stress levels. The decisions should be made while keeping in mind what is important in life.

### **Stress reduction secret #3 Create a new reality of the holidays.**

- **Ask yourself “what will best serve me?”** – If you are sick and overwhelmed, you cannot help those around you. It’s ok to put yourself first. If you are coming from a place of good health then you are better equipped to do things for other people.
- **Let go of expectations** – from yourself, friends and work. You do not have to be the super mom, be-all friend or all star employee. Sometimes we put too much pressure on ourselves. Does the house have to be perfectly clean in order to have family?
- **Create new holiday traditions-** Find some new activities that require less time and less money. Instead of having the huge meal, think about ordering a prepared meal and using paper plates instead of china. Consider sponsoring a soldier and spend the money on a care package sent in your family’s name. Be sure to involve the family when making changes.
- **Set financial budgets** - Remember what you can’t pay for now will impact you in January, causing more stress. Christmas comes around every year, set aside money each month so that you can pay cash for gifts.

### **Summary**

1. Avoid unnecessary stress
2. Evaluate task and time constraints
3. Create a new reality of the holidays.

Sometimes it takes structure to make changes. If you do not have the option of family or friends or don’t feel comfortable working with them, find somebody who can and will help you.

Peggy Green is President of Whole Body Fitness where she coaches clients to new heights in energy, nutrition, weight loss, life balance and time management. She would love to hear from you, 303-345-501 [www.WholeBodyFitnessColorado.com](http://www.WholeBodyFitnessColorado.com).

Look for future health and wellness tips in upcoming newsletters. Next month: How to stop sabotaging your new year’s resolutions and loose the weight you really want.