

Managing Stress for a Healthier Heart

by Debra Gordon

Janice Rodenberg, 46, knows just what to do when she begins to feel overwhelmed. She imagines a filing system—plain manila folders for routine issues, bright orange ones for major issues—then she mentally files away her problems, commitments and worries.

That's just one technique Rodenberg uses to deal with stress. She also swims several times a week, works out on an elliptical trainer, and has learned to say no to commitments she doesn't have time for, whether in her work as a midwife helping to deliver babies, or in her personal life, which includes being a mom to two children, ages 3 and 6.

Rodenberg, of Tucson, Ariz., says that since she began practicing stress management techniques, she no longer experiences severe stomach pain and other unpleasant symptoms of stress. "It has helped tremendously," she says. "For me, getting headaches and stomach pain and treating them aren't what I want to do; I need to prevent the headache in the first place."

What Rodenberg may not realize is that by finding ways to reduce and manage the stress in her life, she also is helping to prevent heart disease. And since heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, her actions provide a major health benefit.

"Studies find that people who are chronically exposed to stressful situations have a high risk of developing heart disease or experiencing a heart attack," says Dr. Diwakar Jain, a cardiologist and professor of medicine at the Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia.

It doesn't matter if the stress is positive or negative, because all stress has the same effect on the body, explains psychologist Steven Gurgevich, director of the Mind-Body Clinic at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson. "If there is a change—whether that change is moving from a warm environment to a cold one, winning the lottery, having a new baby, buying a new house—it requires your heart to adapt."

Fight-or-flight

When you're stressed, your body reacts the only way it knows how—with a

“fight-or-flight” response—releasing chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol that cause your heart to beat faster, your lungs to take in more oxygen, and your liver to pump out more glucose for energy. Immune system cells mobilize, and your blood becomes thicker so it can clot faster, in case of injury. So, whether you’re facing an annoying boss, a wailing baby or an overdrawn bank account, the stress reaction occurs and your blood pressure rises, straining your heart’s pumping ability and increasing the risk that a tiny piece of plaque in your arteries might break off. Since your blood has thickened, it’s more likely to form a clot where that plaque broke off, blocking an artery, and leading to chest pain or a heart attack.

Many of the chemicals released in reaction to stress make some components of blood stickier and more likely to cling to artery walls and restrict blood flow. This is even more dangerous if you’ve already had a heart attack or have been diagnosed with heart disease, Jain says.

Ways to cope

Stress takes a toll on your health, so it’s important to know the warning signs and find ways to cope. Symptoms of stress are wide-ranging and can include fatigue; headache; upset stomach; teeth grinding; pounding heart; shoulder, neck or back pain; irritability; insomnia; anxiety; depression; and forgetfulness. Since you can’t eliminate all stress from your life, the key is to find ways to protect yourself from its damaging effects. Here are some ways to do that:

- Practice mind-body exercises such as meditation, deep breathing or progressive relaxation, in which you systematically tense and then relax every muscle in your body.
- Exercise regularly. Exercise helps relieve physical and mental tension as well as strengthen your heart and blood vessels to handle whatever stress you encounter.
- Get seven to eight hours of sleep each night.
- Reduce caffeine. Caffeine can stimulate the release of stress hormones and increase heart rate and blood pressure.
- Follow a heart-healthy diet. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, and lean protein like fish, chicken and soy, and avoid processed foods, unhealthy fats and sugar. Eating this way helps protect your heart against the damaging effects of stress, and strengthens your body to better cope with stress.
- Surround yourself with positive people and limit contact with angry, pessimistic or anxious people.
- Change your reaction to stressful events. For example, if you’re stuck in traffic, instead of getting upset, listen to a new CD, or simply sit and revel in the silence.
- Learn to say no. You do not have to organize the office Christmas party or coach your son’s baseball team. Focus your energy on what is most

important to you. And don't forget to schedule downtime for yourself.

- If you're having trouble sleeping, are experiencing stress-related physical symptoms, or simply feel that your life is out of control, seek help from your doctor, religious adviser or therapist.

"I like the phrase Be kind to yourself, when it comes to stress," Gurgevich says. "Get enough sleep, exercise, follow a healthy diet, manage the environment you put yourself into—that's how you make yourself healthy."

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first appeared: 12/2/2007

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