

Stressed Out? Work Out!

As you step out into the street, out of nowhere comes a truck heading right for you! With lightning speed and almost superhuman strength, you jump out of harm's way.

Isn't it reassuring to know that your brain and body are wired for such a life-saving reaction? A little part of your brain is always ready to help you fight danger or flee from it. Too bad it can't completely discern an actual threat from an imagined one. A funny look from your boss, a bounced check or a glance at your "to-do" list can trigger many of the same chemical changes in your brain and body as that truck coming toward you. That chemical response to anything you perceive as threatening is called stress. The slang term "stressed out" actually means anxious or even depressed.

If you need the fight-or-flight response for survival, can you do anything about your stress reaction prompted by daily burdens, frustrations and worries? Yes—you can exercise regularly.

Move the body, soothe the mind

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the popular claim that exercise produces relaxing rushes of chemicals called endorphins is not supported by research, but studies *do* suggest that exercise increases a chemical in the brain called norepinephrine. The APA maintains that this chemical plays a major role in the stress response. When you increase this chemical in your brain, you are getting similar systemic effects as you would with some antidepressants. Consider some other stress-busting effects of exercise, designated by the APA. Exercise:

- enhances the body's ability to respond to stress—your body endures stress with less damage to your health
- adjusts the responsiveness of the stress system in the brain—you develop a longer "fuse;" you are less overreactive
- gives the body a chance to practice dealing with stress—you get a physical demand without any threat

If the chemical names and talk of the brain don't quite reach you, latch onto this other research finding: For *whatever* reason, people who exercise regularly are less likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than those who don't. Perhaps these benefits appeal to you as well:

- increased sense of well-being and relaxation
- improved sleep
- more energy

Find what suits you

So exercise reduces stress. Is it possible that working out will be yet another anxiety-provoking chore on your to-do list? Don't let that happen! It's very important to find exercise that you enjoy.

You can walk, run, bike, swim, take aerobics classes—just get your body moving and your heart pumping faster. If those choices don't appeal to you, try a cardiovascular machine such as a stationary bike or elliptical trainer and read a book or watch TV while you work out. Still not certain? Work with a personal trainer for a program designed just for you.

The bottom line is to be consistent—strive for 30 minutes of aerobic activity three to five times a week. Be sure to check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

Quick fix

Regular exercise helps change your brain and body over time so that you can cope better with stressors in your life, but what about right now? Same Rx—get moving, if possible. Those chemicals that expect you to fight or flee prepare you to *move* immediately, so try to take a quick walk around the block or climb a few flights of stairs if you feel you might explode. If you can't get away, focus on breathing slowly until you have an opportunity to move around. And, remember, as you begin to exercise regularly, your brain and body will become less reactive to some of those same stressors!

Resources

American College of Sports Medicine
www.acsm.org

Ultimate Fitness: the Quest for Truth About Exercise by Gina Kolata. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003.

Undress Your Stress by Lois Levy. Barnes and Noble Books, 2002.

Sources: “Exercise Fuels the Brain’s Stress Buffers,” *Psychology in Daily Life*, American Psychological Association; American College of Sports Medicine; *Ultimate Fitness: The Quest for Truth About Exercise* by Gina Kolata. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003; *Undress Your Stress* by Lois Levy. Barnes and Noble Books, 2002.

By Laurie M. Stewart
© 2003-06 Achieve Solutions