



de-stress & re-fuel the body...

Within the busy whirl of our daily lives, stress can often creep in and seemingly kidnap our senses. Anna Middleton looks at this 'fight or flight' state which our bodies often get stuck in, and the positive impact healthy eating habits can have.

Combating stress is one of the great 21st century challenges. Many of us associate stress with aspects of life which, when we think about it, are generally out of our control: facing new situations or dealing with emotional challenges such as losing a job, the end of a relationship or financial concerns. However, most of us fail to realise that we often create stress for ourselves, with both the thoughts we have and by what we put into our bodies. We can, inadvertently, cause ourselves additional stress at a deeper, cellular, level.



The good news is that, in small amounts, stress can be incredibly helpful, enabling us to reach goals at work and in our personal life and helping us deal with life threatening situations. Our body's stress-response is a survival mechanism which gives us the strength and speed to 'fight or flight' from a threat. But, when it persists, stress places us at risk of: obesity, heart disease, depression, cancer and a whole host of other illnesses. Interestingly, whether we are stressed from frantically working to meet a deadline or whether the stress we are under is due to drinking too many cups of coffee and not enough water during a day, the response in our body is the same.

what happens when we get stressed?

Firstly, all our senses are heightened to help us gauge how much danger we are in. If the situation is judged as being threatening then the hypothalamus, at the base of the brain, sends signals to the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and cortisol. These trigger a state of high alert and give us endurance to deal with the situation we are faced with. The majority of our blood moves away from the digestive system and into our muscles, as our priority is to have the strength to fight or run, rather than to eat. Blood is also cut off from our frontal cortex, which is the part of the brain we need in order to be rational and to reason; the blood moves to our hind brain which helps us to react quickly. Our heart beat increases, we sweat more, our pupils dilate and our blood is able to clot faster (useful to avoid excessive bleeding): all of which sounds intense, which it is, but, given a chance, our body will calm down after we have experienced stress. Sadly, due to our fast-paced modern lives, that chance often isn't available. It's all too common to find ourselves

bombarded with a continuous cocktail of negative thoughts, toxic substances and late nights that drip feed a constant supply of stress. How often do we think positive, loving and compassionate thoughts, get to bed at a reasonable hour or give our digestive system a break from stimulants such as coffee, chocolate, caffeine or sugar?

These patterns are often habitual and unintentional so bringing in some awareness can really help. A constant supply of cortisol entering our system can lead to chronic stress on physical, mental and emotional levels. Constant displacement of blood, keeping us in a state of readiness to fight or fly, can lead to a compromised immune system and make us more susceptible to colds, flu and illness. Remaining in a constant state of stress also reduces our ability to think clearly, concentrate or be rational. We are more likely to experience: exhaustion, sleep problems or restlessness alongside emotions such as anxiety, anger, aggression or depression.

what can we do about it?

The main culprits are those well known stimulants: sugar, caffeine (including coffee, tea, chocolate and energy drinks), alcohol, tobacco and drugs (both pharmaceutical and recreational). Other foods to cut down on are the white processed foods: white flour, white rice, white sugar. Unfortunately, this does include all those croissants, bagels, cakes, biscuits, bread and pasta, which have been stripped of much of their nutritional goodness. But, before we despair and get stressed, thinking about a life without all the foods we love, let's remember that it's not necessary for us to cut out everything. However, it is useful to be aware of everything we consume which can cause stress. Eating too many of the more 'toxic' foods can give us momentary pleasure but ultimately result in us feeling low. An important step is to become more aware of how we feel after eating different types of food.

Another negative consequence of particular foods and substances, which further stresses the body, is their dehydrating effect. Stimulants trigger the stress



response which leads to a displacement of fluid in our body and a loss of water. Some of the processed foods and other substances mentioned dehydrate us because they use so much water in the digestion process. A rather unappealing example of this lies in wheat and grains which contain gluten (a sticky glue-like substance). The gluten lines our intestines and can take days to move through the body (especially if combined with butter and cheese) and, in effect, turns into bowel glue which, I think we can all agree, doesn't sound beneficial to the health of our stomach!

Whilst it's great to be aware of everything that can stress us, and then do our best to minimise these factors, the most effective thing to do is to focus on making healthier decisions. Often we find that as our thoughts become more positive we feel healthier.

stress-busting tips

- 1. Hydrate:** drink more water and herbal tea and try to eat more fresh fruit and veg. Try drinking hot lemon and ginger (freshly squeezed and grated) as these will help boost the immune system. Drink medicinal teas full of superfoods which boost the immune system and reduce stress – try a mix of goji berries, ashwagandha, reishi mushroom & fo-ti root. Websites like www.rawliving.eu have a wide range to choose from.
- 2. Eat more dark, leafy greens,** high in magnesium and nutrients, which help boost energy naturally and balance blood sugar levels.
- 3. Mix sprouted seeds** into your meals (alfalfa, mung beans, peashoots etc); all burst with enzymes and b-vitamins essential to help during periods of stress.
- 4. Wholegrains:** choose short grain brown rice, quinoa or millet which are full of b-vitamins, serotonin-producing carbohydrates and healthy fibre.
- 5. Healthy fats:** whether from chia, hemp or flax seeds or from oily fish. The omega 3 oils help prevent the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline from peaking.
- 6. Keep blood sugar levels stable** as a drop can lead to a decrease in physical, mental and emotional energy. Keep packs of mixed seeds available, or make energy balls from dried fruit and seeds to munch on when in need of a snack. Try eating sweet potatoes or root vegetables in place of wheat or white potatoes – they can satisfy any urges for carbohydrates and sweets which arise during periods of stress. They also release sugar into the body at a slower, more stable, rate.
- 7. Exercise:** movement is a brilliant stress reliever and can help release "feel-good" endorphins. Going to the gym for a 20 minute workout is great, but so is a brisk walk, a 20 minute aerobic routine or a bounce on a trampoline.
- 8. Relaxation:** whether we spend time meditating, book ourselves a massage or have a sauna, hot bath or an early night, taking the time to unwind and look after ourselves is both nurturing and stress relieving.
- 9. Positive thinking:** our thoughts create chemical reactions in our body. Positive thoughts will help us feel good, calm us and reduce stress.
- 10. Laughing stress away:** humour and laughter have been shown to strengthen the immune system. Not only that, they can lower the levels of stress hormones in the blood, reduce blood pressure and even lessen pain.

For further details about naturopathic techniques & holistic nutrition, go to Anna's website: www.annamiddleton.com

linseed tea

Benefits:

Helps hydrate body
Reduces stress & nurtures the kidneys
Has a calming, soothing & reassuring affect on us
Gently introduces essential fats into our body

Method:

Place 3 tablespoons of organic flax/linseeds (either golden or brown) into a Thermos flask
Fill with boiling water, screw lid on and leave 8-12 hours (good to make before bed, leave overnight and drink the following day)
Drink the fluid and discard the seeds (seeds can be consumed for healthy bowel movement but not necessary for hydration)

