

Take Control of Stress

Not every perceived threat is real. Find out how to gain control over things that needlessly stress you out.

We have a stress epidemic in our nation.

The majority of Americans very likely have excessive stress in their lives, and reports of stress seem to indicate that the percentage of Americans each year who feel under “a great deal of stress” is rising.

It's common to hear people say, “I'm stressed out!” But what does that mean? In my opinion, stress is the pressures of life and how one perceives, believes, reacts and copes with these pressures.

All forms of stress produce a very well-documented physical reaction in the body. The actual definition from Webster's is “a physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation.”

The body's stress response involves more than 1,400 known physical and chemical reactions involving more than 30 different hormones and neurotransmitters. Excessive release of “stress hormones” damages cells, tissues and organs.

For most people, the daily stress hassles are the most damaging to the body. Internalizing stress creates something of a steady drip, drip, drip of stress hormones into the person's tissues, including the brain. The little stressors add up over time and can do far more damage than an occasional negative event that might produce a more massive stress reaction.

The potential sources of stress are endless and everywhere. Anything that could rob us of our peace and joy and eventually compromise our health can be considered a source of stress.

Naturally, some events or situations are more stressful than others. The death of a family member has a more serious impact than being hungry, for example. But all forms of stress can take a toll.

Nevertheless, there is an important principle related to stress that can help you minimize the effect of it on your body, and that principle is this: What you perceive to be stressful to you is.

Your perceptions determine what you label as stressful or not stressful. There's no such thing as an event that is automatically stressful—unless you are the victim of a physical attack. Stress is largely a matter of what you think about external stimuli.

In other words, a high percentage of stress is individualized. What you see as stressful may not be stressful to another person.

Do you become anxious when you are asked to address an important client during a business presentation? Do you stress out at the thought of an upcoming performance review with a supervisor you can't seem to please? Do you feel stressed as you pull onto the freeway every morning?

Perception is everything when it comes to stress.

The reason this is good news is that it leads to another important principle related to stress: You can choose to control the stress level of your life.

How does a person do this? First, I recommend that you become informed about stress. Hosea 4:6 says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." This verse does not point to a shortage of love, faith or hope. It points to a lack of knowledge! There are certain things we each must come to know about the causes of stress and then take action related to what we learn.

Second, you need to make a decision about what you are going to do in response to the information you gain. Just before he died, Moses reminded the Israelites of the need to choose carefully what they would do when they entered the land of promise. He said:

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19).

Choosing life means choosing God’s way over our way; it means choosing a relationship with Him and obedience to Him over our own self-centered desires.

Most factors related to stress are subject to your choice. You can choose to discover why you are stressed out, and you can choose not to be stressed out. Given a number of options about treatment, you can choose which options are of greatest benefit to you. Make this choice today: “I will come to grips with the stress level of my life!” And plan to start right now.

Don Colbert, M.D., *is board certified in family practice and specializes in alternative therapies. He is the author of numerous books on health, including Stress Relief, from which this article is adapted.*