

STRESS

A well-known feeling, though not always understood at the biochemical level, stress can be incredibly damaging, particularly if you experience it on a regular basis. Sitting just above your kidneys are two walnut-sized glands called the adrenals, responsible for producing your stress hormones (e.g. adrenaline and cortisol), and which are hard at work throughout your day.

Think about how you felt when your alarm woke you suddenly this morning; how frustrating the traffic was on your way to work; how you feel about your current workload; how regularly (and what kind of food) you eat; whether or not you take artificial stimulants, such as tea, coffee, cola etc. All these stressors affect your adrenal glands and, if left unchecked, can ultimately result in adrenal fatigue (when your adrenals become so tired due to their constant workload that they eventually just can't keep up and simply don't produce enough of the necessary hormones to keep you in good health). If this situation continues, adrenal failure may happen, which can have disastrous consequences for your long-term health.

Stressors play a significant role with regard to habits. A habit is simply a repetitive pattern of behaviour (with either an absence or low level of consciousness) triggered by certain circumstances or events. Habits can be either health enhancing (e.g. exercising when angry; meditating when anxious), or health damaging (e.g. smoking when pressured; comfort-eating when depressed). It would be helpful to understand what sort of habits you have, and what triggers them. In the example above (in the case of negative habits), the triggers were pressure and depression. Being conscious of the fact that these two triggers result in smoking and comfort-eating could help you make a different behavioural decision next time ... perhaps going for a brisk walk around the block to help release some stress and talking to a friend/counsellor when you're feeling down.

It's vital to find realistic ways of changing your behaviour, so that these changes don't impact

negatively on your life. For example, don't go for a run or walk when feeling stressed, if you dislike both activities; rather, look for an activity you'll enjoy, so that the new association between stress and physical activity is a positive one. Keep a diary for a couple of weeks and take note of both the events that evoke a response in you, as well as your resultant behaviour. You may notice a pattern occurring, making it easier to understand whether your habits support a healthy lifestyle, or are detrimental to your health.

From here, you could develop a plan of action with specific goals and relevant time frames (see January's article on goal-setting) for the changing of any negative habits. Some examples of positive behaviour choices that can be taken in response to stressful situations may be physical activity, meditation, expressing feelings, sleeping, going for a massage or just doing something fun.

While some of these might not be appropriate at the time you're experiencing the stress, others may be. The trick is to find the most effective possible way of dealing with a stressor at the time, or very shortly after it occurs. Since stress accumulatively impacts on our health, it makes sense to deal with it sooner rather than later, by means of healthy behaviour choices.

In next month's issue, we'll look at ways to prevent stress, in relation to both diet and lifestyle. In the meantime ... don't stress!



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