

MANAGING STRESS THAT COMES WITH THE NEW YEAR



As the New Year begins, most of us find ourselves feeling drained of energy following the holidays. Feeling stressed during the beginning of the year is normal for everyone, however, this year in particular has overwhelming contribution to stress levels- COVID-19. Did you know that long-term or chronic stress can negatively affect our musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, nervous, and endocrine system?

The OccFIT Solutions team is here to provide some helpful advice and exercises to help manage long-term and acute stress to protect your overall health.

STRESS IS MORE THAN JUST BEING BUSY

Everyone feels stressed out from time to time. It is a natural response to a challenge or demand. But contradictory to what most people assume, stress is much more than just having a lot of tasks to accomplish. Stress can not only come from an overwhelming to-do list, but any sudden change in your life or a traumatic event. These changes can make someone feel overloaded, out of control, and unable to cope.

ACUTE VS. CHRONIC STRESS

There are 2 kinds of stress that people experience, each with different effects on the mind and body. Acute stress results from specific events or situations that are temporary, such as almost getting into a car accident or public speaking. Chronic stress is a result of repeated exposure to stressful situations, thus repeated release of your stress hormones in your body. This can come from high-pressure occupations, loneliness, and even busy traffic daily travel routes. Scientists believe that our stress response system was not designed to be constantly activated. The overactivity of our stress response system can negatively affect our health and well-being. Symptoms of

Chronic Stress include:

- Forgetting things or having trouble concentrating
- Irritability
- Headaches or migraines
- Muscle stiffness, particularly the jaw or neck
- Digestive issues

HEALTH EFFECTS OF STRESS ON THE BODY

Musculoskeletal System

Muscle tension is a reflex reaction to stress – it's the body's method of protecting itself from injury and pain. When muscles are tense for long periods of time from chronic stress, it may trigger other reaction of the body and even promote stress-related disorders. For example, headaches and migraines are associated with chronic muscle tension in the head, neck, and shoulder area. Relaxation techniques and other stress-relieving methods have been shown to reduce muscle tension, decrease the number of stress-related aches and pains.

Respiratory System

High stress and strong emotional reactions can present with respiratory health problems, such as shortness of breath and rapid breathing. Psychological stressors can exacerbate breathing problems, especially for those with pre-existing respiratory diseases such as asthma and COPD. Studies have shown that acute stress can actually trigger asthma attacks.

Cardiovascular System

The activity of the heart and blood vessels is coordinated in the body's response to stress. Momentary or short-term stress causes an increase in heart rate, stronger contractions of the heart, and elevated blood pressure. Chronic stress can contribute to long-term problems for the heart and blood vessels. The consistent and ongoing increase in heart rate and blood press along with elevated levels of stress hormones can take a toll on the body. This long-term ongoing stress can increase the risk for hypertension, heart attack, or stroke.

Gastrointestinal System

The gastrointestinal system contains neurons that are in constant communication with the brain – this how you fell “butterflies” in your stomach. Stress can affect this brain-gut communication, and can trigger pain, bloating, and even your mood.

Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system has a direct role on physical to stress. Your sympathetic nervous system contributes to the “fight or flight” response the body experiences during stress. This response signals the body release adrenalin and cortisol, which are hormones that cause the heart to beat faster, respiration to increase, blood vessels in the arms and legs to dilate, and your glucose levels to change. Continuous activation of the nervous system can become problematic.

WAYS TO DE-STRESS

The good news is that acute and chronic stress can often be managed through self-help approaches.

Breathing Exercises

Breathing techniques are extremely helpful because it can be used quickly and easily. This can calm your brain and body in just a few minutes. Some great news is, no one around you will even know you're doing them. So, you can practice breathing exercise whether you're in a stressful meeting or in a crowded space.



1. Breathe in through your nose and watch your belly fill with air. Count to 3 slowly as you inhale, hold for 1 second, then slowly breathe out through your nose.
2. While you are breathing in, imagine that you are inhaling peaceful, calm air. Imagine that air spreading throughout your body. As you exhale, imagine that you are breathing out your stress and tension.

Prioritize Sleep

When you sleep, your brain is released from the day's activities and stressors. Avoid caffeine in the late afternoon and nighttime and limit your screen-time before bed, this can help you fall asleep easier and faster.

Avoid Self-isolation

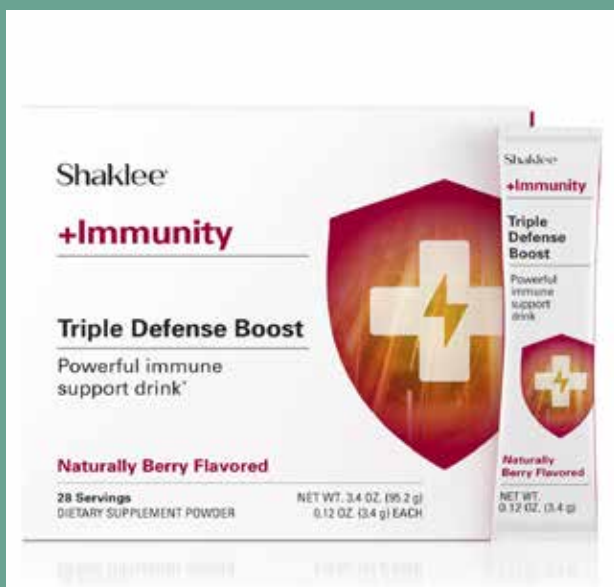
Surround yourself with a network of supportive people who care about your wellbeing. Sometimes just talking with a friend, colleague, or family member helps to relieve stress and have a calming effect.

Exercise

Regular exercise can help return your stress-response system to a more normal balance. When you perform physical activity, your body releases natural endorphins that can reduce stress. Try these types of aerobic exercise to curb your stress:

- **Brisk Walking:** The Anxiety and Depression Association has reported that just 10 minutes of brisk walking can be enough to restore calmness.
- **Jogging or Running:** If your joints can handle picking up the pace, jogging or running is great for releasing stress.
- **Swimming:** For less strain on the joints, swimming is great for the cardiovascular system and offers some light resistance training. Being submerged in water can also be very soothing for the mind and body.
- **Dancing:** Getting exercise with dancing is a fun way to ease stress while getting a workout. Dancing also offers opportunity to be social and foster a sense of connectivity and support, which also plays an important role in stress management.

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