HELP ! I AM STRESSED OUT ……

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Stress is universally present in our lives. I notice how I and those around me suffer the effects of it in different ways. Some of it is helpful, allowing us to achieve our goals and meet deadlines. Problems arise when there is insufficient repair and regeneration in our bodies or the stress becomes excessive. Stress is therefore a disturbance in the normal equilibrium in the body, with counterproductive effects. The emotion we experience when we feel overwhelmed and lack control over our lives can also be termed 'stress'.

What are the common symptoms of stress?

Mood changes such as depression, anxiety and irritability are what we often see. Sleep is also affected, which unfortunately does not help one recover. Stress in its most extreme form is called 'burnout'.

I feel stressed, I am not sure why; doesn't everyone have the same pressures – job, family, children etc……?

A poor work life balance, busy schedules, emotional upset, sleep deprivation, relationship issues, job loss or excess alcohol intake can be typical of modern-day living. All have a role to play in the stress that we feel. Chronic illness in oneself or a near and dear one is another causative factor.

One must remember that there are unseen 'functional' stresses which are perhaps as important. By these we mean poor digestion, the presence of unhealthy gut bacteria and parasites, food intolerances or a poor diet that is nutrient deficient, chronic infections such as mycoplasma or glandular fever, over-working and over-exercising. They translate themselves into a chemical imbalance and potentially wreak havoc across many systems of the body. Autoimmune diseases which typically generate chronic inflammation as well as environmental toxins in the environment behave as stressors. It is important to address these with a doctor who has a holistic approach rather than medication alone.

Which systems experience the effects of stress ?

Sadly, stress does not spare any of our vital organs. The following effects may be noted if the stress is not alleviated over a prolonged period of time.

- Heart and lungs - Changes in the blood pressure and pulse, breathing rate
- Digestive tract (diarrhoea or irritable bowel syndrome)
- Mood and nervous system changes – Low mood, panic symptoms, headaches, poor sleep, foggy head, link with early memory problems.
- Hormones - sugar cravings or hypoglycaemia (sugar balance), upset menstrual cycle, inability to regulate blood pressure, exaggerated premenstrual symptoms/ tension, low libido.
- Skeletal system - weakened bones (skeleton), loss of muscle mass.
- Immune system is weakened.

What is the physiology behind this?

The primary hormones that mediate the effects of stress are the adrenal hormones - cortisol, aldosterone and adrenaline. The adrenal glands are tiny glands that sit on top of the kidneys and produce cortisol in a pulsed fashion over 24 hours. The hormone peaks in the morning and gradually reduces to being at a very low level at night allowing the sleep hormone melatonin to rise. Our morning energy, motivation and mood can be attributed to a peak in cortisol in the morning. Cortisol is the hormone that is supposed to control the 'fight or flight' response and was meant to be released by the gland in a pulsatile fashion in response to stress. This worked well for our ancestors who did not require cortisol after twilight and the gland was allowed to rest and repair its stores of hormone.

Modern day living and multi tasking means that we pretty much require this response from the minute we wake up to the time we go to bed. Cortisol levels gradually dwindle towards the evening and allow our sleep hormone melatonin to allow relaxation and sleepiness. Stress can upset the reduction in cortisol as one stays hyper-stimulated initially disrupting the sleep cycle. Blue light and exposure to devices further disrupts melatonin production producing a fertile ground for poor repair and rejuvenation of the adrenal gland.

If there are no measures taken to address these warning signals, the adrenals start to get exhausted and one is faced with a slump in energy that lasts all day and yet poor sleep at night. Adrenaline bursts can lead to feelings of panic with a baseline chronic fatigue followed by physical symptoms as described above. Any number of supplements, dietary changes and exercise cannot make a difference without the stress factors being addressed at this stage. One may start to experience the bodily changes mentioned above.

How can I deal with stress ?

General advice - Learning to say 'no', prioritizing, making practical to do lists and better time management are simple ways that will help. Perfectionist and Type A personalities are more vulnerable and may need to ' let go'. Surrounding oneself with positive people.

Diet – Fresh food, rich in good quality protein and adequate vegetables will provide you essential building blocks for dealing with stress. Avoid processed foods and sugary foods as these cause cortisol rises that stress the adrenal glands.

Sleep – This is probably the most healing in stress. Aim to sleep before midnight to avoid a cortisol surge that would disrupt sleep. Switching off from emails, messages on the phone and keeping devices away from your bed will help. Magnesium and occasional use of melatonin may help.

Exercise - In the early stages of stress when people find exercise therapeutic, it is easy to over exercise and tire the adrenals. After all, exercise triggers cortisol release. Therefore 'listening to one's body' and slowing down is the key message.

Role of meditation, mindfulness practice, gentle yoga or restorative practices like Tai Chi – these tend to relax and assist release of stress and tension, therefore are recommended for stressed people.

Role of herbs – Certain herbs and supplements used for many years in ancient forms of medicine like rhodiola, ashwangandha and ginseng have been used to support relaxation as well as calm the mind and improve energy levels.

In conclusion it's important to understand that our unique response to external circumstances or how we perceive things determines out individual tolerance in dealing with stress. An individual looking at problems as a challenge/ learning opportunity rather than grudging or feeling bitter is likely to handle stress much better.