

MANAGING STRESS

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Everyday we hear people talking about "stress". "It's too much" or "It's going to kill me" etc. As a psychologist in private practice I often see people who have stress related problems. Often when people seek help for coping with their stress it is because its manifestations are creating larger problems for them. Often this comes in the form of anger, irritability, anxiety or depression.

But what is this thing we are all talking about? What exactly is this thing we call stress? The easiest way I know of defining stress is as follows: Stress is our body's reaction to the demands of a changing environment. In other words, it is the cost our body pays for coping with any change that occurs in either our internal or external environments.

When explaining this to my clients I often ask them to imagine a stress free life. They often paint a picture of freedom from financial worries, few physical demands, and positive emotional experiences. I agree that such images suggest a more comfortable existence, but does that mean a stress free life. My answer is NO! By the definition, stress results from coping with **any** change in our environment. For example, walk outside and experience a change in temperature. Our body must adjust accordingly. Eat a sandwich, our digestive system must respond. I maintain that stress is unavoidable in life. The only way to truly be stress free is to be dead!

Most research on stress divide "stress" into two categories. "Distress", which is what most of us tend to think about when we are feeling stress. The other kind of stress is called "Eustress". Eustress is the cost of coping with the good things in life like getting a promotion, buying a new home, getting married, or going on a vacation or "Distress" is the cost of coping with the side of life most of us find distasteful like paying bills, dealing with traffic, or conflict with those around us. Managing stress then is not about attempting to live stress free. It is about reducing the total cost to our body. It is about finding ways to renew the resources that we spend dealing with stress. It is about eliminating unnecessary stress. It is about recognizing that a considerable percentage of the stress load most of us carry is something we choose in one way or another. For example: The physiological cost of coping with urban traffic is high enough. However, many of us make this cost even higher by the way we choose to think about it. If we think that most other drivers are either incompetent or intent on slowing us down, we begin a thought process that in and of itself creates additional stress. Stress that is unnecessary.

Stress management is about becoming aware of all of our stressors and all of the ways we release or recharge our body. In particular, it is about being aware of how we balance the two.