

STRESS!!

Stress management is a vital part of healthy living. So let's take a look at how stress affects our lives and what we can do about it...

Many of you will be feeling stressed at the moment. The economic downturn will make us all feel a little insecure no matter how 'safe' our jobs and savings really are. I know from emails and letters that some of you have family members who have lost their jobs or

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you yourself have, so it's a particularly stressful time at the moment.

Figures from the American Institute of Stress state that 82% of women and 71% of men experience an actual symptom of stress in any given month and I'm sure this figure has risen in recent weeks with the uncertainty that abounds.

If you are working, stress in the workplace may have increased. It's all too

tempting to work longer hours and increase your workload in order to impress the boss to secure your job. Workplace stress is costing the UK billions every year, and according to a survey by the Health and Safety Commission, up to five million of us in the UK feel very or extremely stressed at work. In 2004/5 a total of 12.8 million working days were lost in the UK due to stress, depression and anxiety. In fact stress causes more sick days than the common cold!

Not all bad

Stress isn't all bad, though. In fact a certain level is essential for optimal performance. Each one of us will perform and react differently to different levels of stress, so the first step to take is to observe what your personal optimal levels are. The right amount of stress can make you feel motivated, excited and on top of life, while too little causes boredom and apathy.

Too much can lead to physiological changes such as high blood pressure, stroke, heart and kidney disease. Psychological changes such as irritability, low self esteem, anxiety, panic and depression may also occur. These may lead to alcohol and drug abuse and increased smoking in an attempt to control the situation. So the goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to recognise it and manage it to your advantage.

The fight-or-flight response, which is the underlying cause of stress, evolved millions of years ago when we literally needed to stand and fight, or run away when faced with dangerous situations. It's an automatic response that prepares our bodies for immediate action. Back then it was essential for our survival and those with the strongest response were probably the ones who survived. It's for this reason it has remained with us down the years despite our changing environment.

The fight-or-flight response floods your bloodstream with stress hormones which enable you to run faster, or fight to the death. Back in our caveman days the actions we took dissipated those high levels of hormones and levels would return to normal. However, these days we rarely have to take such action and this can result in high levels of stress hormones remaining in your bloodstream causing muscle tension and a host of other stress related conditions such as high blood pressure, migraine and irritable bowel.

A destructive power

When levels of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol remain in the blood stream, stress becomes chronic and highly destructive. Many conditions have their roots in stress. It can even cause infertility – the body perceives it's in danger, so doesn't want to be lumbered with pregnancy or babies.

Under stress the efficiency of your immune system is decreased leaving you more susceptible to colds and other viruses; a number of studies have shown that people under chronic stress have low white blood cell counts. Your white blood cells are essential for fighting off disease and foreign invaders. In fact, The American Institute of Stress has reported that as many

as 90% of medical conditions are either caused by or exacerbated by stress. According to another American study, long-term workplace stress damages your heart more than gaining 40lbs or ageing 30 years! Stress can even affect your teeth with more of us grinding our teeth at night, make you fat, as cortisol promotes an increase in abdominal fat, and disrupt levels of serotonin!

One of problems these days is that the fight-or-flight response is often triggered inappropriately and can occur when a door slams, or as the result of pressure of work, anxiety or tension, so it can all become a vicious circle. If the levels of stress continue then the adrenal gland also increases its output of cortisol.

The American Institute of Stress has found that we suffer more from stress when we feel there is nothing we can do to change the situation. However we've always said that although you may not be able to control what life throws at you, you can control how you react to it.

The good news is that you can bring stress levels down, but this isn't an automatic reaction – it requires a conscious effort on your part to schedule in some time every day to relax and clear your mind. The difficult part is stopping the mind from wandering to all those

niggly worries or perceived more important tasks we could be doing. This is where your knitting and stitching come in...

Meditation is a highly effective way of lowering stress levels, but it's very difficult to meditate when you're stressed and all those tasks you feel you should be doing keep intruding on your quiet space. Knitters and cross stitchers from all over the world have told us that stitching enables them to enter into a quiet state of mind, away from the troubles of the world.

Many knitters, who also meditate, have told us that the rhythmic repetitive hand movements, gentle click of the needles and the texture of the yarn running through their fingers enables them to enter a mind state akin to meditation. It facilitates their meditative state.

The stitching solution

As you knit and stitch your heart and breathing rate will decrease, and previously tense muscles will relax. It enables your body to switch its attention away from that fight-or-flight survival state to less vital, but nevertheless highly important tasks such as digesting the last meal, healing itself, and strengthening the immune system. Dr Herbert Benson of the Mind/Body Institute in Massachusetts has stated that knitting is one of the

repetitive activities which evokes the 'relaxation response'. The relaxation response is a state of deep relaxation which he describes as the opposite to the fight-or-flight response. His clinical trials have found regularly evoking this state lowers levels of stress hormones with the consequent affect on stress related conditions. It may even increase fertility. His trials found that 42% of infertile women became pregnant when they combined a programme of daily meditation, gentle exercise and healthy eating! Many find that knitting or stitching to relaxing music

can enhance this deep state of relaxation.

Activity helps

Exercise is another activity which has been shown to be effective in lowering levels of stress hormones, so try to incorporate some activity into your everyday life – even if it's only a walk to the bottom of the garden. You will gain as long as you're doing even a little more than you were before. Try to increase the levels as your stamina improves.

Taking steps to manage your stress levels should be high on your priority list and shouldn't be shunted down or eliminated altogether! It's

all too easy when times are difficult to assume everything else is more important than your personal well-being whereas, in fact, it is the most important issue in the world. After all, what good is anything else if poor health stops you in your tracks?

Don't forget chatting to supportive friends on the Stitchlinks Forum will help to so why not login today to catch up.

There's more...

You'll find lots more tips on managing stress below – combined with a daily dose of knitting or stitching they'll help you live a more balanced life.

Your quick guide to stress management...

- **Identify your stressors** – *Be aware of how you react to situations. Plan to change the things you can.*
- **Get organised** – *We spend 20-30% of our time looking for things. Put things where you can find them.*
- **Meet up with and chat to friends** – *Supportive friends can be a big stress reliever. Why not start by saying hello on the Stitchlinks Forum?*
- **Accept change** – *Learn to adapt. Don't see change as something that should be feared.*
- **Modify your reactions** – *Count to ten slowly and take slow deep breaths to normalise your heart rate.*
- **Accept imperfection** – *Don't try to please everyone. Nobody's perfect.*

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- **See the bigger picture** – *Look at things within the bigger picture. It will help you put your problems in perspective.*
 - **Exercise** – *It distracts from problems, strengthens the heart and circulatory system and brings down levels of stress hormones.*
 - **Eat a healthy diet** – *Colourful fruit and veg are full of antioxidants which help to combat stress.*
 - **Cut down** – *Drink less caffeine and alcohol and stop smoking altogether.*
 - **Get enough sleep** – *A good night's sleep relaxes and helps you to view problems more realistically.*
 - **Be kind to yourself** – *Don't try to be a super hero all the time!*
 - **Re-evaluate your priorities** – *Put enjoyment and quality of life at the top of your list but don't leave chores altogether as this could become a source of stress. Do a little every day so they don't build up.*
 - **Knit and stitch** – *These are highly effective stress management tools. Not only will they distract you from your problems but anecdotal evidence is strong that they induce a meditative state and promote relaxation. Choose a pattern or chart which you find relatively easy, so you can 'get lost' in your work.*
 - **Laugh** – *Read some funny jokes (see the jokes section of the Forum), watch a funny film. Laughter is a fantastic stress reliever. It's good for you!*
 - **Get back in control** – *People feel most stressed when they feel out of control. Plan your days. It's important that any goals you set are achievable and meaningful to you, not just to please other people.*
 - **Bridge the gap** – *Look at what you can comfortably achieve in life and be at peace with this. Don't let other people or the media set these standards for you. Take control.*