

Unbeatable silent killer

Dr Leow Chee Seng, Certified Stress Consultant Professional (US), Fellow of British Institute of Homeopathy (UK).

The much-misunderstood concept of stress within each one of us needs to be better managed. Don't just cope with it, beat it!



If you could go back in time and browse through any newspapers or magazines prior to 1970, you would be hard-pressed to find the word stress in text or the headline. The stress phenomenon became an epidemic only later – so much so that the word “stress” now is used as commonly as the terms “health” and “medicine”.

Current estimates show that over 70% of all visits to physicians are for stress-related disorders – most notably chronic diseases such as coronary heart-disease and hypertension. The common cold, migraine, warts, female infertility, ulcers and insomnia are also directly associated with stress – because stress affects our immune system.

Unfortunately, not many people understand the concept of stress and most of us wrongly assume all stress is bad for us. In fact, there are three types of stress – eustress, neustress and distress.

Eustress is good stress that motivates us to complete a task or work. Getting married might be an example of eustress; meeting our prime minister to get an award may also be a type of eustress. I would describe the eustress situation as being enjoyable and not life-threatening.

Neustress is a type of stimuli that does not have any consequences or effect which can be categorised as good or bad. News of an earthquake in China might

fall into this category, especially for those who are not staying in that area.

The third type of stress – distress – is considered as bad and often is abbreviated as stress.

Daily exposure

In fact, we are faced with stress each day – both acute and chronic stress. Acute stress is quite intense and disappears quickly. Chronic stress is not so intense but is prolonged.

Let's share with you one example. While I was using cell phone to send messages (SMS) to my brother, a police car pulled up behind me and flashed its blue lights. My heart was racing, palms were sweaty.

In fact, the policemen were trying to tell me my tire was flat. After that, my heart was calm, palms dried and I started to sing along with the song on the radio. The threat was over. The intensity of the acute stress may seem cataclysmic, but it was just for a short period of time.

Chronic stress is not so intense but can be unbearably long. For example, being stuck with the "team mates from hell," credit card bills that seem to grow despite monthly payments or maintaining a relationship with a spouse that seems bad to stay in but even worse to leave.

Enjoying stress

Learning to enjoy the challenges of stress will take practice. It can be fun, as you have the ability to cope and enjoy life.

In fact, stress management is very much like learning to ride a bicycle. At first you need training wheels or someone to guide you. Later, after practice, you are able to take the training wheels off and ride the bicycle alone.

However, remember that stress management training is not a cure-all. Instead, it is a change in lifestyle and a new way of viewing the world.

In this article, I will share with you the basic concept of stress management including body awareness,



effective breathing techniques, visualisation, and rational emotive behaviour therapy. In fact, there are many other methods to control stress like thought-stopping, meditation, worry-control, panic attacks, stress inoculation techniques, learned optimism and others.

During clinical sessions and training, I would use a combination of methods instead of one – depending on the severity, personality and behaviour of the person.

Awareness registers

Body awareness is the first step toward acknowledging and reducing stress. The ability to recognise how your body reacts to the stress in our lives can be a powerful skill.

Most people are more aware of weather, time of day, bank balance and children's education than they are of the tension in their own bodies or their personal stress responses. In reality, your body registers stress long before the conscious mind does.

HEALTH MATTER

To check your stress levels, I recommend doing a body inventory, stress awareness diary and record of general tension.

In body inventory, we will use the body awareness method to identify areas of tension. The following are steps to conduct the body inventory.

First, we have to focus on the external world. For example, "I am aware the radio is on, the fan is moving, a dark brown sofa is next to me and there are a lot of books on the table."

Then, shift to focus on your body and physical sensations, which are known as the internal world. "I can feel my bladder is full, eyes are tired and neck muscle is tensed."

Relate to both the internal and external environments. "I am aware the wind is blowing my hair." Through this method, you will differentiate between the inner and outer worlds.



In this exercise, I would always encourage participants to conduct "body scanning" exercise. This exercise is rather simple. You just have to close your eyes. Starting with your toes and moving up your body, ask yourself: "Where am I tense?"

When you have discovered a tense area, exaggerate it slightly so you can become aware of it. Then say to yourself, "I am tensing my leg muscle ... I am hurting myself ... I am creating tension in my body."

Turning to the stress awareness diary, we would like participants to record the time of the stress event and symptoms during the event. Through this method, we will be able to identify and keep track of stress events.

Stress reduction

Effective breathing techniques help to reduce stress. Breathing awareness and good breathing habits enhance your psychological and physical well-being.

To practice it, you have to sit or lay down. Make sure the place is comfortable. Breathe in deeply from your abdomen. Let yourself pause before you exhale. You may count "One ... Two... Three....." when you inhale and exhale. Notice your breathing gradually slowing, your body relaxing and your mind calming as you practice this breathing technique.

In stress clinics, I always advise my patient to use alternative breathing, especially for those suffering from tension or sinus headaches. This can be done by sitting in a comfortable place with good posture. Then, place your index and second finger of your right hand on your forehead and close your right nostril with your thumb.

Inhale slowly and soundlessly through your left nostril. After that, close your left nostril with your ring finger and simultaneously open your right nostril by removing your thumb. Exhale slowly and soundlessly through your right nostril.

Close your right nostril with your thumb and open your left nostril. Exhale through your left nostril. Finally inhale through your left nostril and repeat



the exercise. Try it out and you will get unbelievable results!

Other than that, you can use the enormously powerful gift by our creator – visualisation. Usually we will combine this technique with rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT). Visualisation research conducted on cancer patients has found that the imagination far exceeds that of the will.

Sometimes, it is difficult to get yourselves in a relaxed state, but you can imagine relaxation spreading through your body, and you can visualise yourself on a beautiful beach or by a waterfall. In clinical psychology sessions, this technique is used for pain management among cancer patients. This method stimulates our subconscious mind and our body becomes more energetic.

For example, I have a patient who has a phobia related to the smell of fish. Every time he visits a wet market, he will bathe and continue washing

his hands long after up to a point where they hurt. I would associate this trait with obsessive-compulsive behaviour.

During psychotherapy sessions, I asked him to imagine that he visited a wet market. Then, I encouraged him slowly and gradually to move to the fish stalls. He was so hesitant to move there. After support and encouragement, he imagined walking towards the stall.

Then, I asked him to pick a fish. Subsequently, I explained to him the rationale not to be afraid of fish and the smell and I made him notice how he did that. Finally, he has to change himself – by talking through his imagination.

Remember, you have a choice to stress or not to be stressed. It is good if you are able to detect and overcome the stress before this silent killer attacks you. Let's create a stress-free environment and build up authentic happiness within us. **OH!**