

Stress Management for Better Health

Karen K. Ross, PhD. Originally published in the Dystonia Dialogue, 2003

Many people with dystonia have told me that when they are under stress, their dystonia symptoms become worse. My son, Michael, who has dystonia, says that when he is feeling the pressure of a work deadline as a newspaper editor he notices that his dystonia symptoms are more extreme. My husband has essential tremor and when he is stressed, he will experience much more shakiness. This is not surprising since research has known for a long time that stress sets off a chain of chemical responses in the body, and one of the prime targets of stress chemicals are the muscles.

Stress will make muscles contract and become even more tense, which is not a good thing for dystonia patients. In addition, stress is linked to heart disease, immune deficiency, insomnia, and high blood pressure. Stress can also damage our mental well being, leaving us more tired, more anxious and depressed. The newest studies show that the effects of stress are more profound than we have thought. The chemicals that are released in the body when stress becomes routine can be destructive to our bodies.

But stress is a part of everyday life and not all stress is bad. Stanford psychiatrist David Spiegel says, "Living a stress-free life is not a reasonable goal. The goal is to deal with it actively and effectively." Stress can be a positive force when it is linked to motivation that makes us feel better or to the excitement and high we feel at an amusement park or football game.

It is also true that some people are more stress resistant than others. Researchers have found that "Some people weather devastating experiences like captivity, torture, illness, or loss with uncanny serenity." This was reported in a recent *Newsweek* cover story on stress. The article goes on to say that that people who are the most stress resistant tend "to focus on immediate issues rather than global ones."

Identifying Stress

It is essential to be able to recognize your stress in order to do something about it. Hidden stress comes with the pressure and worries of everyday life. In addition, living with a chronic illness or living with someone who has a chronic illness produces its own kind of stress. Sometimes we get so used to the stress and strains we don't realize how stressed we really are.

Awareness is always the first step in changing behavior. One technique that I use to increase awareness when I am leading a stress reduction workshop is to ask participants to imagine a measure from 1 to 100. One is the calmest and most relaxed you could be (for me lying in a hammock on Maui) and 100 is the highest (like a major catastrophe, for me our last big earthquake). Right now, yes this moment, ask yourself where are you on this scale?

This stress scale is by no means scientific, but it can give you a rough idea where you are in relation to the continuum.

The Best Stress-Busters:

Worry less:

Haven't we all heard "you worry too much" or "Just stop worrying." But worry can become a habit. It grinds away at us keeping us on the edge and robbing us of peace of mind and joy. So if you find that you worry too much about too many things, you need to break the habit. *Here is how:*

Write about your worries:

If writing is not possible, then talk into a tape recorder or use whatever means of communication you can. Start by finding a quiet place. Don't plan on showing your writing to anyone. Keep it in a safe place or destroy it afterwards. Write about your deepest thoughts and feelings and don't be concerned about grammar, spelling, or making sense. Write continuously for 15 or 20 minutes. If you run out of things to write about then do some sentence completions. For instance, "The thing I worry about most is...or I feel upset about...It makes me angry when " Keep going until you exhaust your thoughts.

Do this on a daily basis if you can. Even though you might not feel immediate results, over time you will have a better perspective on your life and you will get a sense of relief at having an outlet to express your deepest thoughts and feelings. In addition, writing acts as a catharsis, allowing us to release pent-up emotion and tension. I have used this technique personally for 25 years and have always recommended it to my clients in therapy.

Recent research reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* has shown that writing about stressful and worrisome experiences can reduce stress and relieve physical symptoms of chronic illness.

Talk to yourself about your worries:

Ask yourself in the scheme of life, how important is this? Will I care about it in five years or in five months?

Usually we worry in order to control something we have no control over. It is like a cow ruminating; over and over we worry about the same thing with little awareness that we are even doing it. Try using the Serenity Prayer, the one that is used in all twelve-step programs. If you don't relate to the word "God" then say it in a way that is meaningful to you.

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Practice Relaxation and Visualization:

The relaxation response is a set of physiological changes that offset the stress response. If you have dystonia and it is hard to be still, you can still calm the body and the muscles to some degree by actively imagining a calming experience. One man I spoke to learned how to do self-hypnosis and guided imagery when he found out he had cervical dystonia. He says that he has been practicing these techniques for years, and his symptoms have been greatly reduced.

I started to practice various forms of relaxation and stress-reduction when my back was injured, and I was in excruciating pain for months. In addition, I was having frequent bouts of serious viral and bacterial infections. I began a daily routine of easy yoga-type stretching, mindfulness meditation, and a relaxation exercise called the body scan.

I continue this practice on a daily basis, even though I may not do all of it every day, I at least do some of it each day.

This is an easy visualization:

Find a comfortable position to either sit or lie down. Take a few deep breaths and let your eyes close. Start at the top of your head and go through each body part, letting go of tension where you can.

You might imagine the muscles being warmed by the sun and relaxing. Now pick a favorite place, one you have been to or one you can imagine in your mind's eye and visualize yourself in this setting-perhaps a mountain stream with wildflowers blooming and trees swaying in the breeze or a lovely beach where you can sit and feel yourself relax even more.

Use all of your senses to bring your place alive- perhaps ocean waves or a babbling brook. Now feel the warmth of the sun or a soft white light penetrating your forehead, cheeks, muscles around the eyes, releasing tension. Now feel the temperature of the air-balmy and warm or the coolness of a soft breeze-the fragrance of flowers or trees.

Stay with this visual setting for as long as you can, letting yourself relax even more deeply. Think of words like softening and melting and heavy to further relax muscles and the body. When you are ready, slowly bring your awareness back to where you are and begin to move your body

Practice Mindfulness:

Mindfulness is basically living in the present and mindfulness meditation, which comes out of the

Buddhist tradition, is a practice whereby one takes 20 or 30 minutes each day to sit and calm the mind by focusing on the breath and the sensations in the body.

I learned this practice from reading Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. I also ordered the audiotapes and listened to them. Jon Kabat-Zinn is the founder and director of The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts where his work has helped thousands of people over the years to live with chronic illness and stress. The program also includes stress-reduction classes for physicians.

Find activities that calm you:

Find a physical outlet to use on a regular basis even if you have limitations, there are many activities that you might be able to engage in. Do not underestimate the ability of a walk or a swim to help calm inner tension and distress.. And sometimes distraction is the best thing of all, like a TV show that makes you laugh or a great movie or a good book.

I have focused on my favorite stress-reduction methods that seem the most helpful to people I have worked with and the people I know. But there many good books, tapes, and articles that are available. You need to find what works best for you.

The most important thing to know about reducing stress is that you want to counteract stress before it becomes overwhelming. You want to create a life-style where stress reduction becomes a way of life.