



In today's fast-paced, ever-changing world, it's hard not to encounter stress. Working adults constantly face the stress of bosses and deadlines, parents face the stress of taking care of their kids and the household, while school-going children face the stress of homework and exams. There are also daily irritants like being stuck in traffic jams, and personal crisis like financial problem.

What Happens to Your Heart When You Are Stressed

A stressful situation triggers a chain of events in your body. When you feel stressed, your hypothalamus, a tiny control tower in your brain, sends out the order for your adrenal glands to release stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol,

which temporarily cause your heart to beat faster, your breathing to speed up, your blood pressure to rise and your muscles to ready for action. Your body is now in a "fight or flight" position.

While more research is needed in how stress can contribute to heart disorders, we do know that having high blood pressure over an extended period can weaken and damage blood vessels, causing them to narrow, rupture or leak. In fact, uncontrolled high blood pressure is a major risk factor of heart attack and stroke.

The Daily Mail newspaper reported that an eight-year study of 130,000 postmenopausal women found that those with

the highest resting pulses (more than 76 beats per minute) were more likely to have heart attacks, and that this risk was independent of how much exercise the women took.

Meanwhile, for those who already had heart disease, a resting heart rate of over 80bpm might cause rapid deterioration of your health.

Besides a higher heart rate and blood pressure, stress also causes people to indulge in behaviours that increase their heart disease risk, such as overeating and turning to comfort

foods like nasi lemak, fried chicken, ice cream and cake. These foods are usually high in cholesterol, sugars and fat, which can contribute to obesity and artery damage. Some people also turn to bad habits, like smoking and drinking too much alcohol, both which are detrimental to the cardiovascular system.

Severe and sudden (acute) stress is even worse. People who've received traumatic news—like the death of a loved one—have, in rare cases, suffered an immediate heart attack. The condition, known as "broken heart syndrome," is much more common in women, even those with no history of heart disease.

Ways to Manage Stress to Help Your Heart

Stress is inevitable in life, but what you can do is not to let it overwhelm you and affect your health. The key to this is managing stress the right way.

Effective stress-busting methods include:

1 Exercise

Exercise provides direct stress-busting benefits. It activates your brain to release feel good chemicals that give you an overall sense of wellbeing and happiness. This condition is often referred to as a runner's high – a feeling of euphoria coupled with reduced anxiety. The best activities that elevate you to this state are prolonged aerobic exercises, like hiking in nature, tennis, jogging and swimming. In addition, exercise helps you to focus on the task at hand and temporarily forget about whatever is bothering you, thus regaining your calm.

2 Make time for fun and relaxation

Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Set aside time every day for some "me time" where you get to do anything that you enjoy. You can do this by developing your own "Stress Relief Toolbox" – listing down all the enjoyable activities that can help you to relax and unwind and try to implement one or more of them each day. Taking a break from all responsibilities help to recharge your batteries and restore internal balance.

3 Maintain a positive attitude

Positive thinking means that you approach unpleasantness in a more positive and productive

way. You expect the best to happen, not the worst. Maintaining a positive state of mind starts with self-talk. Stop all the negative things you said to yourself in your head and turn them into positive ones. When you encounter a challenge, focus on the benefits it brings. For example, if you get stuck in traffic, think about how you now have more time to listen to your favourite podcast or music.

4 Connect with people

Having a network of supportive family members and friends is an enormous buffer against stress. On the flip side, the lonelier and more isolated you are, the greater your risk of succumbing to stress. So, make time for your friends and family, even when you are busy. There are various ways to reach out to people and reconnect with them. Plan a holiday with your extended family. Join a group that shares your interest or volunteer for a cause that touches your heart. Invite your neighbour over to your house for dinner.

5 Seek Professional Help

If you have tried various self-help methods and still find yourself overwhelmed with stress, it's best to seek out professional help. You can see your primary healthcare provider, who may recommend you to a psychiatrist or psychologist who may use psychotherapy to help you work through your stress and anxiety. Your therapist may also teach you applied relaxation techniques. There are also NGOs that provide free counselling such as Befrienders and Woman's Aid Organisation (WAO).

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