



Easing the Ravages of Stress

I eat well and exercise – and yet I’m still missing a major component of a healthy lifestyle. I don’t manage stress well. This affects my sleep, digestion and threatens to raise my blood pressure.

Stress itself is not necessarily a bad thing, and indeed modern life is full of both positive and negative stressors. Getting married or starting a new relationship is a happy event, but at some level it is stressful. Losing a job or loved one is clearly stressful; but stressors can be much more subtle.

My main stressor is trying to fit too much (good stuff) into each day. Other stressors include worries about finances or politics, environmental factors like noise or clutter, and even fatigue and overwork.

My brother works long hours seven days a week, and tells me he isn’t stressed. That may be true, but I suspect that he thinks of stress as being emotional or anxious. Sometimes it is, but not always. While there is no formal definition of stress, I think a good way to identify it is to tune in to your breath and muscle tension.

Some tension is good: our energy level often amps up as we get things done and it can be productive time. The important thing is how long that tension lasts. If you are able to return to a relaxed body state with relaxed breath frequently throughout the day, then you are managing stress in a healthy way. If you are like me, and have a tendency to remain mildly tense throughout the day, with shallow or fast breathing, and you find it hard to fully relax your muscles, your stress is becoming unhealthy.

Our body responds beautifully to immediate life-threatening stressors: it’s our built-in survival system. What I find interesting is that our body responds the same to physical and psychological stressors; it doesn’t matter whether we are being chased by a lion or are just rushing to meet a deadline.

When you are stressed, internal operations like digestion are shut down and blood is pumped to the large muscles to power your run for the fight or flight response. Your heart rate speeds up as you pump more blood. Fats and sugars are pulled out of storage to fuel the muscles. At a time like this, you don’t want any excess weight, so you get the urge to empty your bladder and bowel.

If the stressor is short lived, everything goes back to normal soon. It is when these stressors become a way of life that our body chemistry *doesn’t* return to normal. That is when the stress response starts to hurt us, increasing our risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and diabetes.



When the stress response continues over time, the increased heart rate and blood flow raise your blood pressure. Fats and sugars pulled out of storage to provide fuel raise blood sugar and promote insulin resistance, increasing risk for diabetes.

Stress hormones make us hungry, specifically for sugars, carbs, and fats. When stress is over and the circulating nutrients go back into storage, the fats are deposited in the belly. The fuel comes from fat stores throughout the body but is returned to storage primarily in the belly, redistributing our fat in a way that promotes heart disease. Plus craving comfort foods adds extra calories and causes weight gain.

Ironically, it takes a lot of energy to run all these body responses – leaving us feeling fatigued.

Honestly, I’m not trying to add to your stress with this information! We need to recognize that it is there and that it is important, so that we can do something about it.

What can we do? Exercise is a great stress-buster. Eating well can smooth out the big swings in blood sugar, minimize the negative effects of stress and make you feel better. Getting enough sleep and down time is also important. Take frequent breaks during the day to stretch, walk and breathe deeply. Think of it as putting aside stress for a few minutes: it makes a difference.

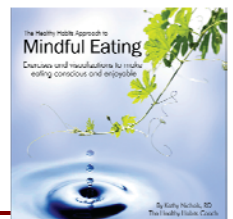
Ultimately, I think it is necessary to change how we think. Everything can’t be top priority. Some deadlines are more important than others. If you, like me, push yourself too hard, try asking yourself what’s really important. What is *good enough*? Learning to be more light-hearted and playful about the events and happenings in our lives allows us to live with stress in a healthier way.

Recipes for the Month

Seafood Stew

Click the links to the recipe, or find them on my blog at

www.HealthyHabitsCoach.wordpress.com.



Save the Date: Mindful Eating CD Party

If you are local, join me as I launch the Mindful Eating CD.

We’ll eat, drink, and have fun. Healdsburg is beautiful in spring! Saturday April 24 from 1- 4 pm.

Email me for directions: kathy@HealthyHabitsCoach.com.

Kathy Nichols: Life Coach & Registered Dietitian

Are you ready to stop dieting and looking for a way of eating that is sustainable, enjoyable and healthy?

Discover Wellness from the Inside Out!

