
STRESS MANAGEMENT

5 TIPS TO TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE

Why stress is more important than people think

Stress can take many forms. Some people experience it directly as anxiety, frustration or confusion. Others only vaguely notice that the daily commute leaves them less energetic or that busier times at work leave make them sleep less well.

And it's not just the mind that suffers from chronically high stress. Stress is bad for everything. [When you live a very stressful life, you die sooner](#). People intuitively know this, but they underestimate the effects. As I explained in my [review of hormones and fat loss](#), cortisol interacts with many other hormones. Chronically elevated cortisol production can disrupt the hypothalamic-pituitary axis. Since your hormones are the messenger systems of many different systems in your body, disruptions in this system can affect virtually all parts of your body. This is particularly evident in high stress conditions such as burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder. We think of these things as psychological phenomena, but they affect almost the entire body because cortisol directly links psychology to physiology.

For your physique and fitness, chronic stress has been documented in research to have the following negative effects compared to low stress conditions. (See the Bayesian PT Course topic on the effects of stress for a full review.)

- Reduced energy expenditure.
- Increased appetite.
- Carbohydrate cravings.
- Poorer carb tolerance and impaired nutrient partitioning.
- Up to twofold lower strength development.
- Up to twofold slower recovery post-exercise.

- Reduced muscle growth.
- A roughly twofold increase in injury risk.

As such, it's not an exaggeration that poor stress management can make a twofold difference in the results from your diet and exercise programs. So here are 4 tips to master your stress level and take control of your life.

I. Active vs. passive coping

[In the psychological literature, coping strategies to deal with stress are classified as either passive \(avoidant\) or active \(facing\).](#)

Many people spend their lives being passive and so too they deal with stress. Passive coping means not dealing directly with situations or emotions. Instead, people reach out to others (social diversion) or engage in different activities that ignore the stressor and provide short-term relief such as self-medicating through food or alcohol or via low-demanding tasks such as watching television (task diversion).

[Active coping generally results in better stress management \[2\].](#) Surprise: procrastination and ignoring the problem generally don't make it go away. Active coping means addressing or eliminating the situations or emotions themselves (problem-focused) or manage the resultant emotions (emotion-focused).

You'll often hear psychologists emphasize emotion-focused coping: accepting responsibility, thinking of the bright side, seeking social support, that kind of thing. That can all be useful, but it's at its core still just a band-aid approach. [Problem-focused coping generally works significantly better than emotion-focused coping \[2\].](#) Simply put, you need to address the root cause of your problem.

Got into a fight with your partner? Talk to him or her.

Run into an obstacle at work? Fix it.

Car problems? Call your mechanic or garage right now.

Dealing with the problem immediately and directly takes advantage of the stress. Acute stress is good. It energizes you and motivates you to solve your stressful problems. It's only when the stress becomes chronic that you get problems, so don't let it fester.

2. 'Work hard, play hard'

Stress is unavoidable and indeed it needn't be avoided altogether. It simply needs to be managed. An effective stress management technique is organizing your day into high and low stress phases.

Note that I said day. Stress should have a circadian rhythm. Most people do have phases in their lives, but these phases are called the workweek, where they are chronically stressed if not depressed and weekends/holidays, where the 'relaxation' looks an awful lot like hibernation.

[Research on both animals and high level athletes shows that they suffer much less from stress than the average person, because they are generally more calm \(parasympathetic dominance\) but they get more aroused \(sympathetic dominance\) in times of stress, like exercise.](#) So they experience strong but transient episodes of stress and thereafter let the body recover. The stress is episodic, not chronic. This is perfect in terms of General Adaptation Syndrome.

If you have a regular 9-to-5ish job, this generally means that the first part of your day should be the high stress part and your training should be during this part of the day. When you get home, relax. Turn off your mobile or at least turn off its internet connection. When I was a business consultant, I was literally the only one in our firm without a smartphone (the firm paid for our phones and laptops). I was also one of the few without symptoms of burnout.



Self-employed people have to be even more conscious of their lifestyle rhythm, because the office is generally also your home. It helps to have a separate room in your house where you work. Other than that, it's highly individual (self-employed people tend to be eccentric), so you have to experiment. And not just nod. Actually experiment with it. Try working until you fatigue and then doing something else. Try relaxing upon waking up and working at night. As an example, here's the schedule I adhered to in Playa del Carmen when I didn't go out:

03:00-12:00 h: sleep

12:00-19:00 h: work

19:00-21:00 h: train (I generally go train when I get tired of working, within a ~2 hour window)

21:00-01:00 h: work

01:00-03:00 h: relax

I practically never work all the way until I go to bed, because then my sleep quality suffers since I'm prone to insomnia.

Note that you can also have several phases of productivity in a day. You could, for example, have a productivity phase in the morning and in the evening with do-whatever-you-want phases in the afternoon and before going to bed.

3. Mindfulness training

Mindfulness training is one of the few scientifically established tools that can actually help you cope with the negative feelings of stress. The most popular form of mindfulness training is meditation, but there's no need for any of the spiritual stuff.

And yes, most of the studies on mindfulness training are flawed or poor, but that still leaves dozens of convincing studies. Meditation effectively resets your mood state. A digital analogy is clearing out your brain's cache. [Other benefits of meditation are much less documented, but the reduction in anxiety and depression have good scientific backing.](#) It doesn't work for everyone, but the only way to find out is to try it.

Mindfulness meditation comes down to simply focusing intensely on something that does not evoke any emotional response, like a cube or a chair, for several minutes.

It sounds easy, but it's really not and will take consistent practice. It's easier to do in a quiet, unstimulating environment or with ear plugs, with your eyes closed, in a relaxed position (bonus points if you do it in lotus position in a blizzard).



Meditation is inherently still a passive coping strategy, but [meditation makes active coping more successful](#). As such, it can help to meditate before you tackle the problem. The calmth helps you tackle the problem in a more rational manner.

While not necessarily mindfulness training, the cliché coping strategies of imagining your success and pep-talking yourself do actually provide stress relief for some people. [Self-talk and positive imagery can reduce stress and performance anxiety](#). This can also benefit some people in the gym before a heavy set. (Layne Norton, anyone?)

4. Exposure yourself to nature

Another piece of hippie sounding advice with good scientific backing. [Exposure to nature significantly reduces stress in various settings \[2, 3, 4\]](#). [Exercise in nature is perceived as less effortful](#). Even [cancer is less common in greener areas](#).

Getting into nature is of course great, but it's not always practical. Fortunately, [even something as simple as having some indoor plants can significantly reduce your stress level \[2\]](#).

So buy some plants. See if you can take a more beautiful route to your work or the gym, even if it's a slight detour. And try to go out into nature more often when life is stressful.

5. Be flexible

Liften often doesn't pan out as planned. Things don't go the way you want them to. And that's how you experience stress. Often though, this stress is needless neuroticism and you have options that are just as good as your original plan. You just need to let go of your original plan.

For example, one of my clients had planned for his first bodybuilding show in the US in a different state. He booked the show, a flight and a hotel, had his whole contest prep planned out and asked for a holiday that week at work. A few weeks later, however, his boss told him he couldn't really go on holiday after all and they needed him in a different state for a short but important assignment. Fighting his boss didn't prove fruitful. He even thought about suing and changing jobs. He *had* to do that show. Fortunately though, the solution was far simpler: change the show, not the work. There was a similar bodybuilding show in the state he was required to be in for work that week. His work wasn't a difficult assignment and wouldn't interfere with his peak week. He'd have to cancel the other show, hotel and flight and book new ones, but the overall cost was only about a hundred dollars, far less than the bonus he'd get from the extra assignment.

Don't get fixated on the original plan. [Being flexible in how you cope with problems makes you more resistant to stress](#) [2, 3]. So when things don't go the way you want them to, rather than forcing through your plan at all cost or abandoning it altogether, reassess: what is my goal and what are my options?