

Four Ways to Manage the Physical Symptoms of Stress

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The Connection Between our Physical & Mental Health

Medicine – and society in general, for that matter – is increasingly recognizing the intertwined nature of our physical and emotional health. Gone are the beliefs of traditional medicine that purported that we could somehow separate our physical state from our psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

The experience of stress manifesting itself as physical symptoms is a common one: Most people who are dealing with chronic stressors experience some impact on how they feel physically. Research demonstrates the comorbidity rate between physical and emotional health conditions (those with psychological conditions who will also experience impairing physical symptoms) to be as high as 80 per cent, and vice-versa.

How we Experience Stress

The way our stress reveals itself depends on myriad factors, including our childhood history; personality and genetic predispositions; how we observed our parents dealing with stress; and whether or not overt emotional displays were viewed as ‘acceptable’ ways to communicate stress in our family.

Individual differences exist in the degree and intensity to which emotional issues manifest physically, but the most common physical symptoms are stomach/gastrointestinal problems (tension, nausea, constipation, diarrhea), pain (headaches, back pain, chest tightness), appetite changes and sleep problems

What Can we do About it?

So how can we effectively manage stress when the physical symptoms become distressing and potentially damaging?

- **A good first step is to consult with your medical doctor.** They can offer objective input into the contributors of your physical symptoms and ensure that nothing more serious is going on.



- Next, **get very structured and rigid about ‘the usual suspects’ – sleep, diet, and exercise.** Aim for a minimum of 7 to 8 hours of sleep, ensure you are getting at least half an hour of movement in a few times a week, ensure you are eating healthy meals a few times a day (with an emphasis on plant-based and non-processed options), and reduce and ideally eliminate the use of substances, such as alcohol or smoking.
- Another way to effectively manage stress is to **incorporate deep breathing and mindful practice** into your daily routine. Even just five minutes at a time, a few times a day, can be extremely helpful. If you need help getting started, or a refresher on these techniques, we have videos on mindfulness and 4 stage breathing for guidance on our YouTube channel (YouTube.com/DrJoti).
- Finally, **learn the basics of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT).** CBT is an effective evidence-based stress-management approach, which helps you change unhelpful cognitions (thoughts, feelings, and beliefs) that contribute to your stress. CBT provides strategies for problem-solving to tackle primary stressors in your life (such as finances, relationships, or work-related challenges) and teaches behavioural strategies, like breathing and relaxation, to target the physiological manifestation of your stress.

