

## The Impact of Stress on Weight

Stress has been big business for quite some time now. Main steam media outlets like talk shows, special news reports, books, and magazines never seem to run out of stress-related material. They repeatedly hold stress accountable for problems big (high blood pressure) and small (a grumpy mood) alike. They are very efficient at reminding us that stress can lead to conditions that threaten our physical and mental well-being. All too often however, the media comes up short in the area of what we can do about it. We need to look elsewhere for practical solutions. Because when we arm ourselves with a better understanding of stress in our lives, we can better face the realities of its effects on our personal weight loss challenges.

With that in mind, let's consider a few key questions:

Is all stress bad? If not, how can I know the difference? How is stress weight-related? Can anything be done about stress?

You may have guessed that the fact that we even asked that first question must mean that the answer is no, not all stress is bad. And you're right. Some stress is actually good. Good stress is a motivator. It's that lower level of pressure we feel that moves us to solve a problem, get a job done, write a letter, create art – all positive things for sure.

Now let's complicate it further before we conclude that, in all cases, the lower the stress level the better. It's not that easy. If stress levels are too low (Yes, such people exist), boredom, fatigue, and overall dissatisfaction can result. On the other end, when stress levels are too high, heart rate increases, muscle tension, and over-perspiration could result.

As for how much good stress a person can tolerate before it crosses the line into bad stress, that's different for each person. We all know people who seem to thrive on chaos. And in contrast, we know people who freak out over a hangnail. That's a pretty big swing in stress tolerance.

So the first big step in dealing with stress is to determine our own personal stress parameters. Unfortunately, this is mostly accomplished by trial and error. Fortunately, those trials and errors have probably already taken place at various points in our lives. With a little effort, we should be able to recall experiences where stress or pressure motivated us for good, and those where it caused us harm. Making a list of those occasions is helpful. From there, we should be able to establish a pretty good feel for our personal levels of stress tolerance.

Below is a scale that can be very helpful too. It allows you to measure how stress has effected your life in the past year. Each event category is assigned a number between 1 and 100 for its relative stress level. Take a few moments and try to determine the stress areas where you may personally need the most work.

Life Event	Score
Death of a spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation	65
Detention in jail or other institution	63
Death of a close family member	63
Major personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Fired from work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sexual difficulties	39
Gaining a new family member (through birth, adoption, oldster moving, etc)	39
Major business re-adjustment (merger, reorganization, bankruptcy)	39
Major change in financial status	38
Death of a close friend	37
Change to a different line of work	36
Major change in the number of arguments with spouse	35
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a major purchase	31
Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan	30
Major change in responsibilities at work	29
Son or daughter leaving home (marriage, attending college)	29
Trouble with in-law	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse beginning or ceasing to work outside the home	26
Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	26
Major change in living conditions	25
Revision of personal habits (dress,	24

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manners, associations)	
Major change in working hours or conditions	23
Change in residence	20
Change to a new school	20
Major change in usual type or amount of recreation (a lot more or a lot less than usual)	19
Major change in social activities	19
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a lesser purchase (car, TV, freezer)	18
Major change in sleeping habits	16
Major change in the number of family get-togethers	15
Major change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas season	12
Minor violations of the law (traffic tickets)	11
Total	

### Scoring for the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Scale

Less than 150 life change units	30% chance of developing a stress-related illness
150-199 life change units	50% chance of developing a stress-related illness
Over 300 life change units	80% chance of developing a stress-related illness

In many ways, the role stress can play in weight gain is a matter of biology. Here's how it works:

When we encounter a stressful situation, our bodies respond by activating a series of hormones to fight the stressor. (So far, so good). These hormones include adrenalin, which gives us instant energy, and cortisol. Cortisol's job is to replenish our bodies after the stress has passed, and can cause our appetites to increase (Uh oh). This system works fine when the stress promotes physical exertion, because calories are burned. But when the stress is from non-physical situations, like trying to balance the checkbook or deal with an angry customer, cortisol wants to replenish nutritional stores that were not used. To further complicate the matter, insulin levels also increase, creating the perfect conditions for the body to store fat.

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So let's review. We're at a crossroads here. Our body thinks we used energy when we didn't. And it's now telling us it's hungry when it really doesn't need the food. So far no harm done, because we haven't at this point given in to the impulse to eat. If we do give in, harm is indeed done. Because our body has no choice but to make new fat. Meanwhile, the stressful situation hasn't changed. Only the waistline has.

The healthy alternative is to understand that we can wait this thing out, and in a 10-15 minutes, the urge will subside. Remember, eating in response to stress is a learned habit that is encouraged by our brain chemistry. We have the wonderful ability to replace one learned habit with another one. A better one. We do not have to let the impulse win. We can create distractions. We can do something that's not conducive to eating, like taking a shower, talking on the phone or going for a walk. We can use it as an opportunity to learn new skills, start new projects. Yes, we can choose to turn bad stress into good stress

And in the end, as we find with all good choices, we're healthier.

#### Tips for reducing stress

- Plan ahead and get organized. Disorganization is a breeding ground for stress.
- Work to understand the situation. This will decrease the fear of the unknown, and better provide you with options to control, change or adjust to the situation.
- Set and accept limits. Say no to activities that you do not have time for. Say yes to achievable goals. You'll feel confidence in your ability and a sense of success when the goals are met.
- Find regular escapes from the pressures of life with a hobby or activities that you enjoy.
- Check your attitude. Replace those negative thoughts with powerful, positive thinking. Our outlook on life can effect our physical and emotional health.
- Get regular exercise. Exercise is unequalled for releasing the tension of stress from our bodies.
- Don't shortchange yourself on sleep. Stress hormones can rise when you become sleep deprived.
- Avoid caffeine, sugar and junk food.
- Talk it out. Expressing your anxieties or fears to a friend, therapist, or family member can be incredibly helpful.
- Stress isn't the event or situation; it's the reaction to that event or situation. Learn to react in ways that minimize the stress threat.
- Learn a relaxation method and take regular relaxation breaks throughout the day. See below.

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The Relaxation Response\* is a proven method for achieving a stress-free emotional state. These are the steps:

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed.
4. Breathe in deeply and slowly through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word, "ONE," silently to yourself. For example, breathe IN...OUT, "ONE"; IN...OUT, "ONE," etc. Breathe easily and naturally.
5. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes.
6. Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Don't rush it. Permit relaxation to occur at its own pace. When distracting thoughts occur, ignore them by not dwelling upon them and return to repeating "ONE." With practice, desired peaceful result should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes affects the results.

\* The Relaxation Response, Benson, H., William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1975

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