

[IMAGE]

# **Stressed? Five Ways To Manage It Before it Affects Your Health**

By Julie T. Chen, MD

Stress plays a huge factor in anyone's overall health. The reason is because it affects you in your mind, your body, and your lifestyle habits.

When people are stressed, many people stop doing some of the things they used to do that's healthy such as exercising, eating healthy, making time to see friends and loved ones, and getting quality sleep. Stress also causes a dysregulation of your body's hormone system and leads to elevated secretion of your stress hormone cortisol. Our hormonal system is very intricately tied together so long term stress also can affect your brain chemicals as well as your thyroid and your metabolism, just to name a few affected factors.

So, how can you keep your mind, body, and healthy habits from falling apart?

Here are some tips I like to give to my patients in my integrative medicine clinic in San Jose CA:

1. Write down what your stressors are
2. Write down your ideal situation or solution to the stressors
3. Brainstorm ideas about how to realistically achieve the ideal solution
4. Prioritize time every day for exercise for however long you have time for it
5. Make sleep and nutrition a priority no matter how stressed you are...but prep for it

Let me explain this process...

First, you may feel stressed but sometimes we think we know what's stressing us but when you sit down and think about it, usually, there's more than one thing. For example, you might be stressed about a job presentation coming up. But many patients find that when they give themselves a few days to compile their stress list, they see that it's not just the presentation, it's also the fact that now you have no time to pick your kids from swim practice or cook dinner or you feel like your spouse is not supporting you enough at home when you have time crunch issues, etc. So, take one to five days to write down your list of stressors.

Then, after you have fully identified your stressors, I want you to write down the ideal situation for each. Once you do that, give yourself another few days to brainstorm ideas as to how to realistically achieve this solution. For example, you might be able to ask other mothers or fathers in the swim team to take turns picking up and dropping off kids so that you only have to do it once a week. Or, you can get a consensus from the family and do a week where you guys eat mostly salads or do take-out from healthy restaurant options when you have extra busy weeks. You can also ask your spouse to swap chores or roles in the household for each other so that when your spouse is busy, you pick up the slack but when you are busy, your spouse will.

When you are busy and stressed, don't expect that you'll have the same amount of time for exercise so go easy on yourself but you should still keep moving. Even 10 minutes every day or every other day of exercise can help you to be more efficient at work and at home and give you a bit more energy.

You should also set aside time to sleep because sleep is essential to you being effective and efficient at work and at home. If you are exhausted and not sleeping, the work you do will not be at your best. You'll take twice as long to get the work done if your mind and body is exhausted. So, make sleep a priority and set a lights-out time for sleep. This way, when you are awake, you can get more done and the quality of the work will be better...you'll be more efficient.

Finally, food is essential to how you feel and how you feel is essential in how effective you will be at managing your stressors. The best way to do this is to prepare for it. What do I mean by that? I mean, have groceries delivered to your house that's easy to prepare like pre-packaged salads or pre-cut vegetables or pre-marinated meats. These can end up being your lifesaver when you are short on time. If you only eat out at fast food restaurants, you will become more sluggish and you won't be able to produce the high quality of work you are usually able to do because processed foods worsen your quality of sleep, slows your body and makes your mind foggy. Just remember, athletes eat clean so that they can function at their best. When you are stressed, you need to function at your best...so make sure you are feeding your body the cleanest fuel it can get.

The point is that management of stress should be addressed in a systematic way just like you address your to-do lists. If you can make an organized attempt at managing your stress, it will seem more manageable than just feeling helpless about the chaos of whatever is causing your stress. Just remember that if you need help, you can't get it unless you ask.

So, look for support from friends, family and co-workers. You might be surprised how many other people are feeling the same way and maybe they are also looking for help. If you are able to shoulder more when you have less on your plate then they can shoulder more when you have more on your plate.

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**Dr. Julie T. Chen** is board-certified in internal medicine and fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, Calif. She is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations, is on several medical expert panels of Web sites and nonprofit organizations, is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines, and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates various healing modalities into her practice including, but is not limited to, medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback. To learn more, visit [www.makinghealthyez.com](http://www.makinghealthyez.com).

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