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Chronic Stress

Everyone knows that feeling. The clenching in your chest. The tension in your head. The racing of the mind. It's all part of the shared experience we call stress. It accompanies the work deadline as you're racing against the clock. It enters as you argue with a partner, or as your eyes glance over your bank statement. Stress, in response to difficult situations, is a universal experience.

But, ever increasingly, there are those for whom stress is anything but situational, for whom stress is not a response but the status quo. This chronic stress permeates every aspect of their lives, and it's a common denominator for countless mental health diagnoses, including depression and anxiety. What is stress? Why do rates of obtrusive, disproportionate stress continue to rise? And most importantly, what can we do to manage and minimize stress to protect our modern brains?

So what even is stress? It's not a molecule or a neurotrophin we can point at on a blood panel. It's not a particular brain wave we can measure. It's not even a simple emotion. Rather, stress is the body and brain's engrained response to perceived danger or challenging situations. It's meant to put you in a high-alert mode that equips and encourages you to efficiently deal with an immediate problem--like when you encounter, say, a predatory animal or natural disaster.

When you find yourself in such a situation, a region of the brain, the hypothalamus, sends alarm bells throughout your nervous system. In response, your adrenal glands pump out adrenaline, raising your heart rate and giving you a jolt of energy. Increased concentrations of the hormone cortisol bolster your fight or flight response. Bodily functions unnecessary to the danger or problem at hand decrease--things like growth, digestion, and the

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reproductive system. The brain shifts gears, altering your perceptions around mood, fear, and rational thought.

All of this meshes together into a well-tuned, highly honed brain state that works wonderfully when we are faced with acute, short-term danger. And once the situation has been resolved, the mind returns to its standard *modus operandi*...growing, digestion and reproduction. It's only when stress becomes intrusive, lingering, and constant that it becomes an issue.

When patients talk to me about stress, they talk about their schedule, how their relationships often just become about meshing schedules. They talk to me about how they can't sleep, how their mind is racing and worried about things even if they know it's not the most rational thought. When a patient walks in you can just see the chronic stress. They look undernourished, under slept, and just frazzled and overwhelmed. Chronic stress overwhelms us as our minds worry and worry about things even if rationally we know they might not be as big a deal as we're feeling.

For millions of people, however, stress *is* a constant, and rates of chronic stress are skyrocketing.. In fact, in 2020, two out of three adults reported that they felt increased stress versus the previous year. And with these prolonged feelings of stress come increased risks for prolonged and magnified side effects in both the body and brain: a consistent feeling of dread, dysfunctions with hunger regulation, mood variance. People with increased levels of stress report fatigue, and insomnia. They describe lower self-esteem and diminished sex drive--headaches, fatigue, and a disorganized train of thought. Stress is a major cause of inflammation, which, as we've discussed, is a major cause of depression and anxiety. In fact, stress is shown in the *majority* of diagnosed cases of clinical anxiety and depression.

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This chronic stress can also lead to reduction in habits and behaviors that constitute a healthy routine. In a recent UK study, 46% of respondents reported that they had either over-eaten or changed their diet for the worse due to increased stress. Meanwhile 29% of respondents increased alcohol consumption, and 17% started, re-started, or increased their smoking habit.

Much of what I do as a clinician revolves around stress and how it manifests within people's lives. Chronic stress is simultaneously, and seemingly paradoxically, a result of the patterns by which we live our everyday lives, and a potential motivating factor in fostering those very same habits, acting as both cause and result of less-than-ideal choices. For instance, 43% of adults have reported stress as a primary cause of insomnia, while 45% of people exhibiting chronic stress report even more heightened stress levels when they get fewer than the recommended hours of sleep. This can leave many feeling trapped in a vicious cycle. But by learning best practices for managing stress, you can break this cycle and reduce stress to more manageable, healthy levels.

We've already discussed many of the major root causes of chronic stress--poor nutrition, isolation, lack of connection, lack of exercise--but any effective effort in changing these habits results from mindful self-awareness and self-examination.

Start by identifying triggers in your everyday life. Both chronic and acute stress can be exacerbated by circumstances you encounter regularly. Think about this for a little bit. Is the little red number on your phone screen that shows how many unread work emails you have contributing to your mental health? Are you worried about your finances? Are you concerned or anxious about the people in your life that you care about?

The bottom line is that the first step in reducing stress is really creating a map of the stressors in your life, understanding which of them are acute, which are chronic, and eventually understanding which are most easy for you to modify.

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And how about the news and social media you consume every day? Several studies now show a correlation between stress levels and increasing usage of social media platforms. Take a hard look at the people, pages, and brands you follow; and how long you're spending on these platforms. You may consider taking a sabbatical from social media all together, just to see how it affects how you feel.

Once you've begun to identify the stressors, it pays to consider your own psychology, goals you have for yourself, routines and habits that you have, and your overall outlook. Do you find yourself catastrophizing--creating mental images of the worst case scenario for any given problem, regardless of the size of the problem? Ask yourself why you're feeling the way you are, and try to trace back to the root cause. Sometimes for people it helps to think when they started to feel that way, or if there are certain situations, or individuals, or pieces of information that they're aware acutely increase their anxiety.

Millions of people have lived with the specter of chronic stress for so long that they don't realize that there's an alternative. But by really examining the root causes of this perpetual unease, you can begin to relearn how to reclaim your own agency over stress.