

The 6 Keys to Reducing Stress – presented by Don Huston

There are no known “miracle” cures for de-stressing one’s life. Too bad we couldn’t just choose the ‘pink pill’ and immediately experience a perfect well functioning life experience. That being said there are a number of things a person can do to help alleviate, if not, stave off the symptoms of stress. Research seems to indicate that by applying some very fundamental aspects to one’s daily routine, stress and the accompanying anxiety and depressive symptoms can be minimized. This list may seem mountainous at first but as you read through the six keys ask yourself the following question:

“What is one small step that I could do today that will begin the process of gaining back a stress free life and a better sense of myself?” If you attempt to implement everything all at once you will be destined to fail. Everything is to be done in moderation and in slow incremental steps.

Try to remember the acronym **Ex-PRESS** to help recall these six keys:

1. **EX**ercise Regularly:

The Food and Health administration have sent out numerous warnings that our North American society is made up of couch potatoes whose only form of exercise is working the remote control. If we do not find a way to revamp how we live our lives we will see a large portion of the population impacting our health industry due to the various medical issues that will arise from our lazy apathetic lifestyles.

You hear and see the ads on the radio and on TV trying to get you to buy the latest gadget that will help you lose those 10+ excess pounds. Exercise does not have to be costly nor painful. In fact it’s one of the easiest ways to begin to get healthy. You don’t have to run a marathon every day nor join a gym and work out on all of the latest equipment.

Always remember that a good exercise program should have you doing a combination of these three things: **Moving, Lifting and Stretching.**

- a. **Moving** – Minimum of three times a week (at minimum 20 minutes each time and work up from there) should involve a form of exercise that has you moving (cardio work outs can include house or yard work, sports, walking, running, swimming, and so forth).
- b. **Lifting** - The alternate three days should involve exercises that has you lifting (weightlifting is ideal for this).
- c. **Stretching** – Everyday you exercise should have a stretching component added in.
- d. **Combination** - Any combination of these three aspects of physical exercise makes for a perfect way to stay fit.

Remember: Taking small incremental steps is the key to success. You do not want to become discouraged and drop out if you try too hard to do it all at once.

Try these tips:

- Choose an exercise you would like to try (let's say walking)
- Determine a minimum amount you feel you could do in a day (walking a 100 feet/day).
- Set out to do that minimum amount for the next week or two and then increase it by 2 (walking 100 ft/day for one week and then 200 ft/day the next week, and so on).
- This may seem like a small amount. A more positive way to look at it is that you are walking a 100 feet more than you were yesterday.
- The key is to get moving. That oxygen needs to get into your system somehow. Exercise is a natural way of getting it in.
- Find a walking or exercise buddy to do it with you or take the dog with you.
- Key is to go slowly, increase amounts as you progress through the months, and celebrate the small victories knowing that each step is moving you closer to the bigger goal... a healthier you.

BRAIN TIP: Your brain depends on oxygen to develop and function at top performance. Regular Exercise provides the oxygen your brain needs.

2. Positive Social Network

Not enough could be said about having positive supportive people in your corner, whether it be close family, extended family, friends (long time and short), older or younger, experienced in life or not.

The key is that they have the ability to walk in your shoes when needed, actively listen when spoken to, non-judgemental in the views of you, and cause you to relax rather than become more anxious and stressed about your life circumstances.

Minimize how many nay-sayers, cynics, and negative minded people you have in your life. They can be a toxin for your soul and possibly drain you rather than build you up. If you can't remove them from your life then learn to set healthy boundaries with them.

The hard part for some is finding healthy supportive people.

Try These Tips:

- Figure out what you want in and from a supportive person. It would be hard to identify someone who's in your corner if you don't know what you're looking for.
- Become more aware of people around you with whom you naturally relate to. It may be possible that there are already some supportive people in your life, you just have to recognize them as such.
- Search within your community. There are a number of supportive groups that meet on a regular basis such as church groups, recreational sports groups, supportive care groups, anxiety and stress reducing type groups, and so on. Plan to join a group that appeals to you and see where it takes you. You won't know if you'll like it until you try.

- Check with local organizations and churches about programs and group meetings that they have to offer.
- Your family Doctor/therapist may know of some possibilities.

Brain Tip: Healthy relationships with authenticity, helps to fire the neurons in the brain and by so doing establishes new neural connections while enhancing the established neural connections.

3. Relaxation and Breathing Techniques

It is well known that when under high stress and anxiety, people will tend to take short breaths keeping the carbon monoxide from getting out and not allowing enough oxygen in. Deep breathing and relaxation exercises help to change this imbalance, in turn, making you more relaxed.

Try These Tips:

- Find a quiet place in or outside your home.
- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Place your hand upon your abdomen allowing it to move up and down with your breathing.
- Begin to inhale (deeply) through your nose down into your diaphragm and exhale through your mouth.
- “Smell the roses and blow out the candles” is the message of the day.
- A good measuring tool is to inhale to the count of 4, hold to the count of 2, and exhale to the count of 5 using the one one-thousand, two one-thousand counting pace.
- Each week add a second or two to your count. The experts can inhale to the count of 20 and exhale to the count of 21. You do not have to get this good.
- A true athlete practices everyday so that when it comes time to perform, the practiced skill comes naturally. The same goes for you... by practising your breathing and relaxation techniques everyday you will develop a great skill that will come naturally to you especially when you’re facing an anxiety inducing moment.
- While relaxing begin thinking of a calming place:
 - A place where you can go to in your imagination that is quiet/peaceful and does not create any anxiety within you.
 - It could be a beach scene, mountain climbing experience, quiet river, sunset, and so on...
 - Make sure to post “no entry” signs (no anxiety allowed, no stress allowed, and so on) around the perimeter.
 - Only individuals who are uplifting and positive supporters are allowed here.
- Listen to soft, quiet music to help the process along.

- As you start to relax begin noticing where there is tension in your body and begin allowing that tension to ease and soften. Some find it helpful to purposefully tense up those areas one at a time
 - (i.e. if you have tension in your hands then squeeze them into a fist for 5 – 10 seconds and then quickly open your hands and allowing them to relax). Do this with other tense areas and you'll begin to notice those areas loosening up.
- Start with 5 minutes once per day and work up to 10-15 minutes twice per day. First thing in the morning to help set-up your day and the last thing at night to help let go of your day.

NOTE: If you really want to get on track with relaxation techniques go and buy a heart/blood pressure monitor (the kind that fits on your wrist). This little item will help you regulate your heart rate and blood pressure by warning you when stress is mounting. When you notice it climbing, begin relaxation exercises.

Brain Tip: As noted above under exercise, the brain loves oxygen and needs it to thrive and survive. When feeling low or stressed throughout your day whether at work or at home it could be that you need to take a moment to breathe and relax and fill your system with oxygen.

4. Eating Healthy:

There is nothing better for you than eating 3 square meals a day with healthy snacks in between. If you are living a fast paced lifestyle then try eating 6 small healthy meals throughout the day. What is important is that you are eating regular healthy meals every day.

Stress, anxiety and depression take their toll on the body. It needs all the help it can get when faced with such high stressful demands.

Try these tips:

- A Dietician and Nutritionist told me that all of the 60,000 edible items in a grocery store are okay for us to eat, it's all about moderation and balance.
- Make sure to eat the rainbow of fruits and vegetables.
- Red meat and Carbohydrates are good for you but eat them in moderate portions.
- Multi-vitamins, B-Complex Formulas and other supplements are great additions to help combat stress, but careful not to depend on them to do the work for you.
- You don't have to jump into some crazy fad diet plan nor strip entire food groups out of your meal plan.

- **Simply ask yourself:** what is one not so healthy food item that I could eliminate from my meal plan for a trial period (say two weeks). Once you have reached the end of that trial period extend it for another length of time. Before you know it, that food item is history or better yet under your control rather than it controlling you. Then move onto other items.
- **Another helpful tip** is to watch the time of the day you eat. A good rule of thumb is no eating after 7 or 8:00 p.m. If you must eat...eat veggies or fruit as they digest quickly.
- **WATER, WATER, WATER...** Not enough could be said about this wonderful liquid. It is of great importance that you drink a lot of water in proportion to your body size and the amount of exercise you did throughout the day.
 - **Drinking regiment:** 1 glass = a minimum of 250ml
 - **2 glass of water first thing in the morning when you wake up**
 - **1 glass of water one hour before each meal**
 - **1 glass of water before bed at night**
 - **Extra water needs to be consumed when working out**
- **Note:** When you have hunger pangs late at night try drinking water. Your body may simply be thirsty and not really hungry.

Brain Tip: Along with Oxygen, the other two key ingredients that our brains need to thrive and survive is glutamate which comes from our meal plan and water.

FYI. Tryptophan is needed to help the body process the glutamate prior to the brain utilizing it. A meal plan that incorporates this key item is a great meal plan.

- Foods rich in tryptophan are chocolate, oats, bananas, durians, mangoes, dried dates, milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, red meats, eggs, fish, poultry, sesame, chick peas, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, peanuts.
- To help the body process tryptophan and in turn help the brain release serotonin you must take 1000mg of C + 100mg of B6 for every 2000mg of tryptophan. Myfit.ca.

5. Sleep Well:

Everyone is different when it comes to how much sleep is enough sleep. You need to figure out how much sleep you need and work towards finding a way to reintroduce it into your daily sleep routine.

Try these Tips:

- Go to bed at a reasonable hour (10 – 11:00 p.m. or earlier) every night at the same time and set the alarm to go off at the same time every morning including weekends (7 or 8:00 a.m.) This depends on your work schedule of course.
- Take things out of your room that are work intensive: office desk, computer and so on.
- Take the T.V. out of the room if you find yourself watching it until wee hours of the morning.
- Don't watch the news or some stressful show just before bed.
- Don't talk about huge issues with your partner after 9:00 p.m. unless you absolutely have to.
- Practice your relaxation and calm place exercises while lying on your bed (a great way to prepare for sleeping).
- Make sure your jaw is relaxed, your teeth are not clenched together and your tongue is not pressed against the roof of your mouth. These last two help open the air ways for deeper breathing to take place.
- If you still can't sleep try these options:
 - a. Cognitive shifting - Close your eyes, relax and when ready choose a word that has no repeating letters (April) then think of a word that begins with each of the letters of your chosen word. Do this for other words. This allows your mind to shift from the daily tasks, etc... to a non-thinking time of processing allowing the brain to begin to shut down.
 - b. Open your eyes and stare into the dark room until you get sleepy.
 - c. Get up and do something that will relax you and make you sleepy. So what if you can't sleep, the more you make a big deal out of it the worst it gets.
- Ruminating about our day actually spirals us into deeper experiences of stress and anxiety. Finding ways to stop the ruminating especially at bed time is key. (see samples above).
 - a. Try this exercise: If you have a lot on your mind write it all out on a piece of paper and when it comes up again remind yourself that you wrote it down and you'll tend to it in the morning.
- **Two Notes:** The more sleep deprived we are the more we crave unhealthy food items; every day we lose sleep takes approximately two days to recoup that loss.

Brain Tip: Proper sleep patterns help the brain to receive the oxygen it needs; process the glutamate gained from the daily meal plan; and work through the stressful events of the day. By so doing, we have a better chance of waking up refreshed and ready to go for the day.

6. Self Talk: Positive over Negative

Everyone is familiar with the negative self-talk that goes on inside our heads: "I'm a failure," "I can't do anything right," "I have to be perfect in all I do," "I need everyone to like me in order to feel like a somebody," "I should, I ought, I have to," and so on. This negative self-talk can get us into more trouble than the other five keys put together. In fact, it's probably the main reason why we don't do the other five keys.

Here is a great illustration of how the negative self-talk can get us into trouble: Imagine that everyone, including yourself, has a Gremlin sitting on their shoulder whose primary job is to feed them these negative messages. Here's an example of how he/she/it works:

You hear about a party/gathering that your friends are planning and you have yet to be invited. You begin thinking/saying to yourself "I wonder why I wasn't invited?" The little gremlin (your negative self-talk) speaks up and says, "It's probably because they don't like you." "You're not pretty or smart enough for them," "You're not as liked as you thought you were."; and so on.

With each little statement that you entertain, self-doubt begins to set in and you start believing these statements. By the end of the day you are fully convinced that your friends have snubbed you off because they feel you don't fit in. You begin to believe this with all your heart even though you have yet to ask anyone why you weren't invited nor have evidence to prove your theory.

Feeling angry, hurt, and beat up emotionally you go home only to find that all your friends are there with a surprise party for you, disproving all your assumptions and negative thoughts.

What went wrong? The little gremlin (your negative self-talk) helped you make assumptions that led you down an unhealthy path for potential "self-destruction."

Here are some things you can do to deal with your negative self-talk/thoughts:

- 1.** Begin identifying events and triggers that set you on a course of negative self-doubt and talk. They can be as obvious as the nose on your face or as subtle as can be. The trick is calling them for what they are when you notice them. Subtle ones could be a tone of voice, a certain look someone gives you, a particular smell, types of behaviour, and so on. The key is to notice when your mood changes from happy-go-lucky to sad or mad at any given moment. These quick changes in mood are a great indicator that you came face to face with a possible trigger.
- 2.** Write them out on a piece of paper when they come up. Ask yourself some questions: What was I doing when things changed? Who was I with? What were we talking about?, etc... .

3. Begin looking for the faultiness in those thoughts and statements: What's wrong with that thought or statement? What is another way of looking at this situation? Do I have other options of how to understand what is going on?
4. Defend yourself against those negative messages. "I made a mistake...I'm human and make mistakes but it doesn't mean I'm a complete failure just because I blew it this one time."
5. Look for evidence to the contrary. We get so used to looking at life from one perspective, which is typically a negative one, we tend to ignore or overlook the evidence that disproves our negative perspective. Our best friend could be complimenting us on a job well done but we only hear their statements from a negative slant. We twist their comments in ways that confirm our sense of failure rather than accept their comments as honest and genuine.
6. Watch the ruminating process. This constant thinking and brooding about an event, or something someone said, or a negative thought that we can't seem to let go of gets us into a deep funk if we aren't careful.

The key to turning our negative self-talk, and ultimately our negative self-image around, is to continually challenge those negative messages with proof to the contrary. It has taken our whole life to create and maintain this low self-image not to mention create a stress filled life style. So accept the fact that it will take some time to turn things around.

When it comes to stress, anxiety and depression the process is similar, only you're dealing with anxiety provoking/depressive inducing circumstances. You need to work through a daily routine of countering those stress/anxiety/depressive symptoms. All of these six keys will help and if practiced on a daily basis will begin moving you out of the muck.

A Seventh and Eighth Key: Therapy and Medication

With stress, anxiety and depression, there may be times when they are so overwhelming that any attempts to work through the six keys falls to the way side. Therapy and/or Medication may be needed for a period of time to allow us the strength and will-power to process through the six keys. Once we are at a better 'place" emotionally, mentally, and physically, we, with consultation with our doctor, can then wean ourselves off the medication as well as bring counselling to an end.

A Note of Caution: There are cases/situations where medication may have to be permanent such as: a genetic history in the family, accidents causing brain trauma, an unexplained/incurable chemical imbalance, and so on. This is where individuals will have to work on learning how to live/cope with their permanent mental condition. Therapy can help with this process.