

Chronic stress is linked to the six leading causes of death

BY DEBORAH S. HARTZ-SEELEY

As the rising sun imparts a glow to Biscayne Bay, Dr. Ashwin Mehta, 37, steps onto his balcony. From here on the 49th floor, he can see Government Cut, the cruise ship port and AmericanAirlines Arena.

After checking out the view, he spreads his charcoal gray mat on the white tile and begins his daily yoga routine. For the next 20 minutes, he'll enjoy a mind/body workout that will help him deal with the stress of being the medical director for Integrative Medicine at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Farther north in Lighthouse Point, Dr. Alexander G. Justicz, 53, calms his stress by heading to the beach, where he unfurls his red and blue kite and readies his Jimmy Lewis kiteboard. When the wind is blowing from the northeast, he's eager to be on the water.

"I am a sucker for kiteboarding," says Justicz, a cardiac surgeon at Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale. He finds that being out here helps break up his exercise routine that also includes running and biking, all of which he finds are important for controlling stress.

"Stress in the 21st century is a huge problem for men," he says.

The body does a good job of dealing with acute stress such as a traffic accident or being chased by a dog. When such events occur, the sympathetic nervous system sets the body up for a "fight or flight" response that helps you escape and be safe.

In doing so, the body releases hormones that increase the heart rate; cause rapid, shallow breathing; constrict blood vessels supplying digestive organs; and tighten muscles.

When the danger is passed, the body leaves its "fight or flight" mode and begins to "rest and digest," Mehta explains. But for many men today, the pendulum doesn't swing and stress becomes chronic.

The traffic on I-95, a favorite shirt damaged at the cleaner, a lost child support check or an argument with the boss can add up to a heavy dose of daily anxiety.

According to the American Psychological Association, chronic stress is linked to the six leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide. And more than 75 percent of all physician office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.

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Chronic stress can affect your brain, suppress your thyroid, cause blood sugar imbalances, decrease bone density and muscle tissue, raise blood pressure, reduce your immunity and ability to heal, and increase fat deposits around your abdomen that are associated with heart attacks, strokes and elevated “bad” cholesterol.

In Coral Gables, Sameet Kumar, 42, starts his day comfortably seated on the floor of his bedroom. While his wife feeds his two sons breakfast, he calmly settles into some belly breathing and mindful meditation that helps him relax by focusing on the present moment.

“Meditation actually alters how the brain reacts to stress,” says Kumar, a clinical psychologist at Memorial Cancer Institute and the author of *The Mindful Path Through Worry and Rumination* (New Harbinger Publications, 2010).

Kumar decided to do something about his own stress once his first child was born.

“I want to be as healthy as I can for as long as I can so I can see my children grow up,” he says.

But the wake-up call for many men comes in the emergency room after they have had a heart attack or a hypertensive crisis. At that time, they may also be diagnosed with uncontrolled diabetes.

“You realize all this stuff has been going on for a long time. It just hasn’t been treated,” says Kumar.

Of course chronic stress can affect both men and women. But studies have shown that men are less likely than women to express their concerns or to see a doctor or therapist for help. If they turn to alcohol and smoking, they will only make matters worse.

There are, however, healthful coping mechanisms out there. For example, coping with chronic stress can begin with something as simple as getting perspective on your situation.

“Take a step back and circle the bait,” Justicz suggests.

He also recommends that his patients see a doctor about any underlying medical problems.

“I think that it’s a stress relief if you address the things you can. It makes it easier to not worry about the things you can’t,” he says.

Then like Mehta and Kumar, consider adding a mind/body practice to your daily routine. Besides yoga or meditation, you might consider biofeedback, writing in a journal, devotional practices such as prayer, guided imagery, creative visualization or breathing exercises.

Kumar not only practices mindful meditation in the morning but also in the evening after his children are asleep.

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Adding aerobic exercise to your daily routine also is important in dealing with stress. It gets the blood moving, improves the cardiovascular system, rejuvenates the body with plenty of fresh oxygen and aids sleep.

Aerobic exercise also is one of the best anti-inflammatories out there, says Mehta, who tries to use the treadmill, elliptical machine or bike at his gym for 20 minutes, three nights a week.

He knows that aerobics can help mitigate the adverse effects of prolonged stress and inflammation on the immune system, heart and lungs.

Kumar turns to kettle bells that he tosses about on the deck of his home for 20 to 30 minutes five days a week.

Dr. Porter McRoberts, 43, director of interventional spine and pain medicine and neurosurgery at Holy Cross Hospital, rides his Cervelo road bike in the morning before work, covering 20 to 40 miles three to four times a week.

“You cannot think about anything else when you are riding a bike,” he says.

Diet is also important for stress relief because your body associates stress with famine.

“It’s built into your system,” says Kumar.

Thinking it’s going to starve, the body, when stressed, produces cortisol. This hormone makes you crave fat and sugar and to store fat around your belly.

“And that belly fat is a tremendous risk factor for diabetes and heart disease in men,” says Kumar.

So most of the doctors we spoke to suggest a Mediterranean diet based on whole grains, fruits and vegetables, seeds and nuts, legumes and beans, olive oil and seafood.

“It’s a diet that runs counter to the kinds of things you crave when you are feeling stressed,” Kumar says.

And it gives your body all the building blocks it needs to heal itself.

And finally, if you want to manage the stress in your life, find a way to help your fellow man. When you do, your body produces the hormone oxytocin that, in your brain, boosts trust and empathy while decreasing stress and anxiety.

“Compassion and some sort of community service are very important components of mitigating stress,” Mehta says.

He serves on the board of directors at Mindful Kids Miami, which is bringing mindfulness to children in schools and pediatric hospitals, teaches yoga and honors some sage advice.

“So many grandmas told us to say our prayers and count our blessings before going to sleep. If you really want the essence of stress management, it was all in your grandmother’s advice,” Mehta says.

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