

Common SENSS Stress Control

By Dr. Tanja Haley

Statistics show that all of us experience stress at one point in time or another. It is no longer a question of whether or not we are stressed, but rather how much stress we can tolerate. A consistently high level can lead to many physical ailments such as gastro-intestinal problems, sleep disorders, headaches, heart attacks, flu, frequent colds, cancer, skin problems, depression, and chronic pain. For example, it does not mean that every single incidence of heart attack is caused by stress, but the bulk of evidence suggests that stress is an important factor. The goal in stress control is not to eliminate stress, but to create more of a balance between your demands and coping resources. The first question to ask is “Do I actually want to be less stressed?”

If you answered “yes” to the above question, there are some simple things you can do to increase your capacity to cope with demands: The Common SENSS approach, otherwise known as **S**leep, **E**xercise, **N**utrition, and **S**ocial **S**upport.

Sleep is a great way to control stress. On days when you are well rested, you will have a greater capacity for dealing with the minor issues that arise. Often simply getting enough rest can produce a substantial reduction in stress.

Regular Exercise helps to control stress in three ways. First, exercise, especially repetitive activities like swimming and jogging, can create a mental tranquility similar to meditation. Second, engaging in regular exercise that improves aerobic functioning will help you to experience a more rapid recovery from stress. Third, vigorous exercise helps reduce the level of stress hormones in the blood stream when stress occurs.

Nutrition is another area in which you can help prevent a demand-coping imbalance. First, reduce caffeine intake, as caffeine has been shown to increase the body’s level of sensitivity to stress. Second, Vitamin B is utilized in helping the body return to normal after stressful experiences; if you experience frequent stressors you may have depleted your stores of Vitamin B. As a result you might recover from stress more slowly than usual. Third, refined sugar tends to slow down the rate at which you recover from stress. A high sugar diet, especially when combined with low levels of Vitamin B, can produce a condition where the body takes a long time to get over a stressful experience.

Social Support has a well-documented positive effect on stress. If you have a strong social support network, you will be less likely to be overtaxed by the demands that come up. The size and composition of the support group and how often or where it meets does not seem to be important. The mere fact that the group is available and offers positive support, serves to reduce stress.

The common SENSS approach is usually the first line of defense against stress because it requires just a few simple lifestyle changes. However, these changes need to be consistent over a longer period of time in order for you to notice the effects. If you put these changes into practice consistently and still notice high levels of stress, you may need to make more extensive changes or consult with a professional for further guidance.

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