

INTRODUCTION

The Equal Opportunity Condition – STRESS

Stress is a condition that affects everyone. If you walk the earth, then you have probably been afflicted by the universal condition known as stress.

The good news is that you were given the gift of life, and the bad news is that with this gift (which is nonrefundable) come challenges. There is no escape hatch, no getaway car and no stunt man to handle them for you.

That's the beauty of our existence – it comes with a lifetime guarantee of unending challenges. And the best part, you get to choose how to deal with them. You can resolve them with equanimity and patience (the happily-ever-after script) and be at peace with the world. Or you can swim upstream, fighting the people, places and things that get in your way of how things should be.

Just remember that stress is a part of everyone's life – whether rich or poor, famous or unknown, brilliant or simple, spectacularly beautiful or homely. But what makes the difference between a happy life and a difficult one is our perception of and reaction to life's events, not the event itself.

That is why I created this book – to share the secret of creating lifelong happiness. *“Stress Rx”* is also a stress survival guide. It will carry you through those difficult and challenging times when you are surrounded by darkness. It is your personal “get-out-of-chaos” card when your life seems insurmountable and your loved ones seem temporarily insane.

The exercises, questionnaires and anecdotes in this book are appropriate for men and women, young and old – and you know why? Because stress is an equal-opportunity condition. Some of us were lucky and had good role models for coping with adversity. Some of us were not.

But one thing I can guarantee: It is how you relate and respond to stress that defines the quality of your life. And if the sages are right when they say “treat every day as if it is your last,” then you might want to climb on board now; a day of stress and strain is one less perfect day in the calendar of your life.

A Manual for Surviving Stress

This book is a stress survival manual. It was written with you in mind. The quizzes, exercises, and other material are meant to heal all who enter. Chances are if you have this book in your hand, then you are the perfect person to benefit from its intelligence and wisdom.

One interesting thing to know about stress is that it was originally created as a protective device. When the cave man was out looking for food he would often encounter wild animals. To alert his body to the dangers that lurked, the cerebral cortex (in the emotional ecosystem) would light up, causing a heightened feeling (or adrenalin rush) called “fight or flight.” The caveman had a choice: stake his claim and battle it out, or run for his life. Today, we may not have to run from a saber tooth tiger, but we might have a stressful job (or no job), prolonged illness, difficult relationships, hectic 24/7 existence or just too many e-mails to deal with.

If you are burdened by the cumulative effects of stress, your body may stay primed for a fight. This works well for firefighters at the scene of a blaze, but for the average person this state of being is not something you can afford. It can cause headaches, nausea, insomnia, fearfulness, panic or illness, and – if prolonged – serious disease.

Stress also has the potential to affect your interpersonal relationships. Sex experts have long believed that stress can lower the libido, therefore putting additional stress on intimate relationships and marriages (and even causing the demise of some.)

Over time this vicious cycle can wreak havoc on the body. It can cause coronary disease, ulcers, sadness, depression, anxiety attacks or chronic fatigue syndrome. People who live in a high state of anxiety are five times as likely to die of a heart attack or stroke. Medical experts estimate that 80- to 95-percent of illness is stress - related.

A 2007 survey by the American Psychological Association found that 62 percent of people said their work caused undue stress in their lives. Seventy-three percent said financial concerns were the number-one factor affecting their stress levels. That is why it is vital to learn coping techniques and exercises to alleviate stress in your life. Stress may be a given in our contemporary culture, but it doesn't have to wipe out the joy and fulfillment in your life. That's what his book is for – to take you on a journey to health and wellness not stress and disease. Remember, it is not what happens to you in life, but how you see and respond to it.

The Culture Vulture – STRESS

Stress related illness is not solely an American phenomenon. In Australia, over 50,000 people are admitted to the hospital each year for treatment for severe stress. The British Department of Health reports that the average age of stress-related hospitalization is 38 for both men and women; the average stay is 18 days.

While we all feel anxious at times, constant anxiety can severely disrupt our lives. It might rear its head as a phobia, obsessive thought patterns, compulsive behavior or panic attacks. A panic attack can be a frightening experience, causing symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, trembling, sweating, feelings of terror throat constriction, dizziness, chest pains and tingling in the extremities.

The Far Side of Stress – What Happens When Stress is Left Unchecked

In some instances extreme stress can cause the demise of one's career – and one's life. Take Hunter S. Thompson, for example. This extremely accomplished author and journalist had everything going for him. He wrote the best-selling novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which later became a popular movie starring Johnny Depp. Thompson was also credited with pioneering gonzo journalism. But it wasn't enough – Thompson wasn't happy. In fact, he was a deeply troubled man.

I learned firsthand. It was my idea to ferry Mr. Thompson to Miami to speak at the International Book Fair. Although everyone in command of the event was against picking Thompson because of his reputation to erratic behavior and for abusing drugs and alcohol, I wanted to hear from the legendary writer who had written for Rolling Stone and Playboy magazines.

But I quickly learned that Thompson was more than even I could handle (dealing with stress compounded by self-destruction is a lethal combination). He was pretty much out of it when he landed at the airport and barely even knew what day it was. Shortly after arriving he pulled a disappearing act; I found him at the bar downing a margarita and some scotch while simultaneously consuming coffee and an ice-cream bar. Once in the car with me, he began spooning a white substance into his nose. He became extremely paranoid and reluctant to speak to the audience of people that were in attendance at the Miami Book Fair. When Thompson finally did get up to address the group his voice was garbled and his delivery was not on par with our intellectually curious audience. I was concerned by his extreme methods for handling stress and the level of dysfunction that resulted.

When I was told not to let this prolific writer out of my sight (by his New York agent) I couldn't believe his demons could be that bad. But I found out they were much worse than I expected. On the way to the airport at 7 a.m. the next morning, I asked him to autograph my worn copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* after telling him, "I don't think you'll be around much longer," Hunter laughed, took the book, and inscribed it, "Edwin, thanks for getting me to the goddamn airport on time."

That was the last time I saw Thompson. At 5:42 p.m. on February 20, 2005 – 16 years later – in Woody Creek, Colorado, he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Although an extreme example of what happens when stress is not dealt with – and even fueled

to escalate – Thompson was living proof that intense anxiety and self-abuse can be a lethal combination.

After the Fact – The Stressful Life

Although Thompson was known to have panic attacks, he self-medicated them with alcohol and multiple drugs. That’s why it is important to understand what a panic attack looks and feels like. A panic attack can sometimes feel like a heart attack, and you think you are dying. These attacks are usually followed by a feeling of despair or depression, accompanied by irrational thoughts that it will happen again.

Why does the body respond physically to emotional anxiety? Well, our stress response is triggered by the mind; fearful or worrisome thoughts produce a chemical reaction in the body. When this fight-or-flight response is invoked by a situation that we see as threatening, the hormones cortisol and epinephrine (also known as adrenaline) are released into the bloodstream. When this happens, the heart beats faster, blood pressure soars, the muscles tense and the extremities might feel cold and clammy.

The good news, however, is that stress disorders can be treated and eliminated. Studies show that stress management programs and techniques like the ones in this book can help people relax, thereby reducing the risk of heart attack – and other ailments – by 72 percent! “*Stress Rx*” is your prescription for success; it can help break the cycle of anxiety-related disorders and help you heal yourself. While no one is ever completely free of stress (except perhaps for brief periods while lounging on a beach in the Bahamas), you can learn how to manage stress and enjoy more in life.

The Road Map to Relaxation: Stepping Up

Life can be a pressure cooker, with stress as a primary ingredient. It is increasingly important therefore that we learn how to handle this insidious challenger. Having experienced many stressful situations myself, and having witnessed the negative effects of stress on other people’s lives, I became inspired to help others cope more effectively with stress.

To accomplish this goal, I teamed up with some excellent doctors to create The South Florida Stress Reduction Clinic, which was modeled after a program by the Center for Mindfulness Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. The techniques taught at the clinic became the core material for this book, and over the years I developed a step-by-step program that will help you attain a more relaxed approach to life.

The program includes breathing techniques and exercises that reduce muscular tension and restore mental focus. By incorporating these simple relaxation techniques into your daily routine, you can attain a sense of mastery and relaxation.

What I found among patients at the clinic – regardless of their socio-economic background, age or medical diagnosis – was a perception that stress was a defining part of their life. They believed their lives were stressful. But, once we challenged and shifted their perceptions (through the application of these practices) they were able to slow down, take a better look at their lives, and begin living with renewed exhilaration.

The patients were then able to accept full responsibility for their health and well-being. They were able to see that their illness or dysfunction was created by how they were interpreting their life situations. This learning freed them from the shackles of disease and opened up the avenues of healing. When we realize that we can control our destiny, then our destiny is guided by our dreams, not our nightmares.

If you want to make the most of life's journey with the least amount of stress, then regard this book as your valued tour guide.

If you have a physical problem causing severe stress, or if you want to prevent unwanted disease from occurring, put these tools into practice and transform your life.

Some of you may already be doing your best to reduce stress by exercising regularly, meditating and eating healthy foods. That is an excellent start. But if you want to move through blockages that are preventing your joy and happiness, then jump in and read on, or visit my website; www.stressreduction.com. While it might be challenging at first, it gets easier with practice. As they say, the best things in life are worth it.