
PsychMatters
Assessment and Therapy Centre
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Learning how to manage stress is something better done sooner rather than later. It's been estimated that illness and accidents related to stress account for three quarters of all the time lost from work and that stress can be linked to the majority of cases seen in doctors' surgeries, hospital beds and ultimately, the graveyard. As an unconscious response, it sneaks up on most people, doing the damage before they even realise what's been happening. There has been much studied and written lately about stress and disease. Our bodies are remarkably well set up to deal with stress over short periods. The more stress we have and subsequently deal with satisfactorily, the more adept we become at its management. This is seen as a constructive thing – while ever it remains in what's known as the "anabolic" range – implying cell growth. We need this kind of stress for normal growth and development. The unfortunate thing about our present life-styles, is that we can very easily get sucked into more stress than we have time to recover from. This is what becomes dangerous – as at a tissue level, we then enter the "catabolic" range where cells are being damaged. You've heard of; "free radicals" no doubt – well this is when they're being pro-

duced in large amounts and putting the immune system under strain. When there's a threat to the body (either imagined or real), the autonomic nervous system is activated courtesy of the sympathetic nervous system's introduction of adrenalin. The way the body deals with it is to introduce chemicals to return the body to a balanced state. This is done by the parasympathetic nervous system and the chemical is noradrenalin. If however the source of the stress doesn't lessen, a number of things can happen. The by-product of the reaction is a chemical called cortisol, and when its level reaches a certain point, it can begin to damage tissue. It can also have the effect of interfering with the memory part of the brain, the hippocampus. Additionally, you may run low on the noradrenalin – which is attempting to govern this reaction. When this happens, the immune system senses the threat and may give you the feelings of depression, to send you off to bed where you can (maybe), avoid the input which is causing the problem – then let the whole system begin to restore itself. Understanding how the body is trying to regulate itself will start to give you ideas about how to help it do its job more effectively – or at least not stand in its way of doing the job it can do, very well. Some people may need professional assistance to help them regulate their stress.

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