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MENCONNECT

Information Tailored for Men

Stress: The Predator Within

By Dr John Ashfield

Everyone knows what it's like to experience stress. And most people would agree that it usually isn't very pleasant. Not surprisingly, our stress now supports a growth industry, which markets stress reduction workshops and all manner of consumables – from relaxation tapes to seat covers that massage. But there are still many people who aren't clear about what stress is, or what it might be doing to them.

The "stress response" has its origins in our primitive past – when our ancestors frequently faced dangerous predators or enemies. It provided quick bursts of energy, strength and alertness, needed to stand and fight – or run away. Still "wired" into our brains today, it involves a complex array of chemical reactions and changes in body function. Trouble is, because the mundane aggravations of daily life can also activate the stress response, we experience the same surge of body chemicals and changes in body function, actually designed for much less frequent major threats. Stressed too frequently, or for prolonged periods, our bodies take a terrible pounding.

This biochemical onslaught can compromise our immune system, making us vulnerable to infection and disease – including cancer. Hormones unleashed by stress can damage the digestive tract and lungs; they can also weaken the heart, leading to stroke and heart disease. Prolonged stress can eat away at every body system like an internal predator. Though it can protect us, it can also turn on us.

Recent research indicates that some people are more prone to stress than others. Losing a parent, being traumatized, or in some other way being exposed to a high level of stress in childhood, may permanently rewire the brain circuitry, making it much more difficult to deal with everyday stress in later life. But whatever our individual tolerance for stress, it can – and needs to be managed.

Here are some ideas:

- Learn to become aware of tension in your body – and respond to it quickly with a relaxation technique. The more you ignore it, the harder it will be to bring under control. Relaxation switches off the stress response.
- Improve the threshold of your stress tolerance by practicing relaxation *several times a day* - even if you're not stressed (see a simple technique below)
- Learn to take things slowly – don't go about things at a 'break neck' pace
- Learn to control your thoughts. Discipline yourself to think rationally about challenges and problems. Avoid catastrophising – it generates a lot of unnecessary stress. Instead, focus on fixing the problem – which you'll have to do anyway
- Learn to say "no" when you need to – and mean it
- Exercise regularly: it's important for burning off surplus adrenaline
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine from your diet, and stick to a low risk alcohol intake
- Learn about stress reduction techniques. One size doesn't fit all. Discover techniques that work for you (there are lots of ideas on the web)
- Develop the discipline and cycle of getting to bed at night and waking in the mornings at much the same time – and make sure you get plenty of sleep

Relaxation Technique – 'Belly Breathing'

- *Breathe in slowly and fully through your nose.* Make sure your shoulders are down and relaxed. In this exercise, your stomach should expand, but your chest should rise very little. So, if you want, you can place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest so you can feel how you are breathing.
- *Exhale slowly through your mouth.* As you breathe air out, purse your lips slightly, but you're your tongue and jaw relaxed. You may hear a soft "whooshing" sound as you exhale. That's good, listen for that sound every time you practice and learn to value it as the sound of relaxation.
- *Repeat this breathing exercise for several minutes.* Make your outgoing breath as long and smooth as you can. The outgoing breath is the key to relaxation so give it your full attention and practice breathing out in a long slow controlled way and you will quickly feel the benefit.

*If you haven't had a complete medical check-up lately, do yourself a favour and make an appointment with your doctor.

Country and Outback Health, is providing free and confidential counselling services in response to the Pinery fire. Contact: **(08) 8209 0700**