# **Self Stressing: Ways to Combat Your Stress**

By: Joanna Cabaj

Have you ever woken up in the morning only to realize that you overslept for an important meeting, ran out of the house and got to the bus stop just in time to be splashed with dirty water by a bus that just took off? Or maybe your computer crashed right before you printed your final paper that should have been turned in an hour ago? Although we do not experience such scenarios every day, surely we can all point out many daily situations that stress us out.

Stress is a physiological and psychological reaction to a situation that we perceive as threatening to our well-being and to which we think that we do not have the ability and resources to cope. This reaction is often called a "fight or flight" response. In a situation of a true danger, this reaction helps us to save our health or life by preparing us to either attack a threat or run away from it. Under stress our body releases about 30 hormones that give us the energy needed to deal with the challenge (Smith, 2002).

Because the "fight or flight" response is automatic, we often think that stress is something that just happens and that we have no control over processes involved in the stress reaction. This is partially true. We cannot, for example, voluntarily stop our adrenal glands from secreting stress hormones into our blood stream. However, according to RU Professor of Psychology Jonathan C. Smith, founder and director of the RU Stress Institute, people often evoke, add to, and prolong stress symptoms. In his book *Relaxation, Meditation, and Mindfulness: A Mental Health Practitioner's Guide to New and Traditional Approaches*, Smith proposes a series of self-stressing processes. This article utilizes this approach and presents some sample exercises detailed in his book.

#### **Stressed Posture and Position:**

Different postures—such as crouching or cringing—that we take under stress cost us a lot of effort and energy to maintain. When our joints are bent and strained, blood flow decreases and less oxygen gets to our muscles. This leads to feelings of fatigue and lack of energy. We may also experience these symptoms in situations unrelated to danger. For example, sitting behind the desk or in the car in the same position for a long time may also lead to the consequences of stressed posture and position.

## Stressed Muscles:

Another way of self-stressing is tensing up skeletal muscles. We might, for example, clench our jaws and fists, or tense up our shoulders, arms and legs. Even though tensing up muscles is a way our body prepares to face danger, we often tend to remain tense long after the challenge is gone or remain in this position in a situation that does not require such a reaction.

# Stressed breathing:

While stressed we experience a change in our breathing pattern. It can either become fast, shallow and uneven or we can hold our breath and take occasional deep gasps. In general, stressed breathing involves "breathing through the chest" (in which we can see our ribcage and collarbones moving up and down) rather than "diaphragmatic breathing" (which involves movement of our abdomen). Although "chest-breathing" is useful during fighting or running away, it requires more effort and is less efficient during more relaxed times. We often breathe in this way simply out of habit.

## Stressed Body Focus:

Our body and mind are closely connected; through our thoughts we can evoke real bodily sensations. For example, think for a moment about a lemon, about its characteristics, its sour taste and citrus scent; by doing so, try to imagine how it would taste. If you are salivating, you have just experienced how mind processes evoke certain bodily symptoms. It works in much the same way when we are under stress. Thinking about how much you are sweating or how fast your heart is beating makes you sweat even more and your heart beat even faster.

#### Stressed Emotion:

Stressed emotion is a result of recalling or imagining the situation that made us angry, upset, or threatened. For example, recall the last argument you had with your partner or boss. Notice that even though the stressor is "just in your head," the situation can evoke similar emotions as though it just recently occurred. This tendency often helps motivate us to act, but because we can reproduce the upsetting experience in our minds an unlimited number of times, negative emotions can persist and extend long after the real stressor is gone. This in turn may make us do things that do not necessarily serve us well. For example, I was once waiting for my boyfriend at the bus stop. I came a little earlier and was wondering if he would be late like last time when I waited for 20 minutes being cold and upset. Immediately, I could feel my anger rise once again, and even though my boyfriend showed up on time, I ended up scolding him for "always being late."

#### Stressed Attention:

While stressed, we tend to divide our attention between different trains of thought. We may think about writing a last minute paper, but at the same time we may worry that we have no time to review the material before the next exam. Even though we try hard to concentrate, we become easily distracted and may end up doing many unnecessary things instead of completing the task at hand.

While reviewing these six self-stressing processes, note that not all of these symptoms apply to everybody. One person might primarily experience a stressed posture and position while another person may deal with intense stressed emotions. Whichever process applies to you, the first step is always learning to recognize the signs of self-stressing. Since self-stressing is habitual, we often do not realize that we are experiencing it. Getting used to the sensation of stress can be paralleled to the sensation of not hearing the noise of a train you are accustomed to hearing. One can get used to self-stressing symptoms to the point where your brain "tunes out" the symptoms. For example, we get so accustomed to tensed shoulders or shallow breath that we tune these sensations out and lose awareness that these are the ways in which we tend to react to stress.

Stress is unavoidable; but by knowing our stress patterns, we can develop strategies to combat them in ways compatible with our individual needs and preferences. Once you learn how to combat your self-stressing habits, a rainy morning full of potentially stressful surprises can be one less thing that stresses you out. Believe me, that is a lot.

#### **How to Combat Your Stress**

To relax your body and mind try a few exercises targeted at particular self-stressing symptoms.

### **Yoga Form Stretching**

If you feel you are experiencing **Stressed Posture and Position**, some simple yoga-based

stretches may help you correct the stressed posture by reducing the fatigue and tension resulting from it. To perform the two sample exercises presented below, sit comfortably upright and place your feet on the floor. Try to stretch as slowly and smoothly as you can and create a pleasurable rather than athletic stretch.

Arm and Side Stretch: Let your hands fall to your sides. Slowly and gently move your arms up away from your body and lift them over your head. Hold a stretch for a moment, attend to a feeling of stretching and then slowly and smoothly unstretch your arms. Repeat the exercise twice.

#### Back of the Neck Stretch:

To stretch your neck, gently and easily tilt your head toward your chest. Hold the stretch for a moment and then slowly and smoothly lift your head to an upright position. Repeat the exercise twice.

### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

Although it seems paradoxical, one way to combat **Stressed Muscle** tension is to first tense a particular group of muscles up and then to release the tension. The sample Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercise presented below utilizes this approach with one muscle group:

Make yourself comfortable and attend to your shoulders. Shrug and squeeze them to tighten the muscles. Do not tense up any other part of your body. Let the tension grow and then let go, relax your shoulders. Let them stay loose for a while. See how it feels while you are slowly counting to 20.

### **Breathing Exercises**

To combat symptoms of **Stressed Breathing** try exercises that foster diaphragmatic breathing:

The "Book Breathing" exercise can help us see the difference between "chest-breathing" and diaphragmatic breathing. Simply take a book and lay down flat on your back. Place the book on your abdomen. Slowly take a deep breath as if you were filling your abdomen with air, then gently breathe out. Repeat the exercise a few times. If you can see the book moving up and down, you are breathing diaphragmatically.

The second exercise is called *Slight Bowing Breathing:* 

Sit comfortably upright with your feet flat on the floor and let your hands fall to your sides. Take a deep breath, and then slowly breathe out while bowing forward. Pause, and then gently sit up while breathing in. Repeat this exercise for about a minute.

# **Autogenic Training**

By thinking pleasant thoughts about relaxing body sensations we are able to reduce effects of the **Stressed Body Focus**. This is called Autogenic suggestion:

Find a peaceful place to sit down and close your eyes. Simply repeat the words "arms and legs are getting warm and heavy" without putting any effort into it. Simply let the phrase float through your mind. It does not matter if you can actually feel any warmth or heaviness. Let the words "warm and heavy" repeat continually in your mind. You can

repeat the same exercise by saying the phrase: "heart is beating slowly and evenly." Continue the exercise for approximately five minutes.

# **Imagery**

You may calm your **Stressed Emotions** with a relaxing imagery exercise:

First, find a quiet spot where you can sit comfortably alone and close your eyes. Think about a place (a real or imaginary one) where you feel very relaxed. It may be a beach, a meadow, your childhood house, or anything else that causes you to feel calm and peaceful. Think about the details entailed in the image: what you see, smell, hear, taste, how it feels. Use all of your senses. If any part of the image evokes negative emotions or memories, change or adjust it, until it is entirely pleasurable and relaxing. When your image is ready, enjoy it for about ten minutes.

### Meditation

Although distractions and **Stressed Attention** problems are unavoidable, we can learn how to effortlessly sustain focus by consistently and calmly returning attention to the object of concentration after every distraction. This skill can be practiced through simple meditative exercises. Here are two examples:

Find a place where you can sit in an upright position comfortably. Close your eyes and focus your attention to what you hear. It may be a sound of a working computer, a clock, or even silence. Pick one continuous sound and simply focus on it without thinking of what you are listening to. If you get distracted, gently return your attention to the sound. Continue the exercise for up to ten minutes.

In another exercise called *Rocking Meditation*, sit comfortably in an upright position and place your feet on the floor. Close your eyes, and begin to rock back and forth very slowly. Do it gently and effortlessly, at your own speed. For the next few minutes attend to the rocking sensation. If your mind wanders, simply return your attention to the gentle motion.

For a free Audio Relaxation Sampler and more information about stress and the Stress Institute go to www.roosevelt.edu/stress.

References

Smith, J. C. (2005) Relaxation, meditation, and mindfulness: A mental health practitioner's guide to new and traditional approaches. New York, Springer.
Smith, J. C. (2005). Relaxation, meditation & mindfulness: Self-training manual. Lulu Press.
Smith, J.C. (2002). Stress management: A comprehensive handbook of techniques and strategies. New York: Springer.