

# Handling Stress the Tibb way

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A Science of Medicine  
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Many of us are under a great deal of stress these days. What with financial problems, worrying levels of crime, the threat of unemployment, environmental pollution, climate change concerns, the Rand plummeting... if you are not stressed, you probably don't know how serious things are! Stress is, understandably, generally seen in a negative light. However there is a positive spin to it – without some level of stress, we would achieve very little. Stress keeps us focused on the task ahead. It is what gets us up in the morning, what motivates us to get jobs done, and helps us cope with difficult situations. Good, natural stress is an incentive towards achievement, a spur to success. Indeed, without stress life would be dull, boring and featureless. Even so, stress means different things to different people. For some, it's what dynamic, go-getting, deal-making businessmen (and women) thrive on. It also affects virtually everyone: teachers and nurses, factory workers and military personnel, single mothers and harassed housewives, managers and the unemployed. Unfortunately, stress can have a profound impact on our state of health, and on our quality of life. Unrelieved stress can influence the onset of several chronic diseases of lifestyle, and aggravate existing ones. Tibb offers valuable guidance for understanding this disorder, and suggests a number of remedies to counteract it.

Stress can be anything that the body reacts to as a threat initiating a 'fight or flight' response. This is an automatic reflex, and we have no control over it. It controls our basic processes such as breathing, heart rate and hormone release from glands. The overall effect of the "fight or flight" response is to prepare us to react effectively to the threat, so that we flee the place, see better, think clearer, or prepare to stay and fight.

Our response to stressors is both physical and mental. Our muscles become tense, energy production is boosted, more oxygen is provided for the brain and muscles, emotional tension rises, and our mental faculties become fully aroused. For Tibb, stress reflects an intense interaction between mind and body, between alarm regarding possible danger and our personal response.

The typical effects of stress are familiar to all, but vary from one person to another. Typically, we feel anxious and fearful. Our breathing becomes deep and rapid, our heart begins to pound, blood pressure rises and our muscles tense up. We clench our teeth, and our mouth dries up. Our hands feel clammy and cold, our palms become sweaty. Visible trembling of the limbs and evident sweating may occur.

Unbeknown to us, secretion of the stress hormone, adrenaline, surges, dilating blood vessels to supply internal organs with energy. Emotional tension rises, leading in some people to crying and nervous laughter, in others to angry outbursts or mood swings, and in yet others to irrational decisions and impulsive behaviour.

Stress provides a surge of 'energy' associated with qualities of heat and dryness, to certain organs and tissues that is much needed for survival. However, in excess this can dry out the body and chronic stress paradoxically creates a coldness that is not compatible with life.

With time, stress starts to interfere with our ability to live a normal life. Over a longer period of time, stress can actually become dangerous; it starts to inflict damage to both body and mind. The sufferer becomes more anxious, irritable, and sleeps badly. He or she suffers frequent headaches, neck stiffness and back pain, and becomes depressed. Signs such as fatigue, headaches, weight loss (or gain) and elevated heart rate and blood pressure develop. Troublesome symptoms appear – upset stomach, bowel behaviour becomes unsettled, with bouts of constipation and diarrhoea. If unresolved successfully, a racing heart and tightness in the chest may alarm us, as will mental fatigue; our family and friends will worry about our unusual behaviour, such as lack of attention and focus, or outbursts of temper or aggression. Good, sound, uninterrupted sleep becomes a distant fond memory.

Stress can make existing problems worse. If we become sick during a stressful time it becomes harder to recover. Measures to counteract stress therefore have to reverse this imbalance.

The qualities of stress is therefore best initially counteracted by employing activities that increase cold and moist qualities, such as slow and deep breathing exercises and meditation.

The way we deal with chronic stress – our so-called coping mechanisms – largely depends on our temperament. In Tibb, this is the person's unique blend of personality, genetic make-up, and physique. As we know too well, some people handle stress better than others!

Practical ways of dealing with stress include:

- Keep a journal. Writing is an excellent way to purge your anxieties onto paper.
- Light exercises that encourages deep breathing like walking, yoga and pilates. This is an ideal way to release pent up energy stores in muscles.
- Creative expression such as singing, painting and dancing helps to stimulate happy hormones like endorphins.
- Aromatherapy and massage with ylang-ylang is a wonderful way to relieve muscular tension that results from stress.

- Positive affirmations – speak life back into your life. Our thoughts and words are powerful. Whilst driving to work, cooking dinner or combing your hair, get into the habit of speaking qualities over yourself that you long to be like – be it wisdom, patience or beauty. The list is endless. Loving and valuing yourself is critical to instilling a courage that is pivotal to confronting difficult situations, saying no and establishing healthy boundaries.

The above are some practical ways of dealing with stress – all of which will assist Physis, our “doctor within” to restore harmony, and maintain good health.

In conclusion, not all stress is bad for us. In fact, most people benefit from some stress when facing up to challenges. But chronic stress can cause a range of symptoms, and so affect our overall health and well-being. If not dealt with properly, chronic stress overwhelms Physis, especially its immune component, and can bring on several chronic diseases and aggravate other existing disorders. However, Tibb offers a range of actions on how to manage it. Tibb sees lifestyle improvement, especially in relaxation and physical activity, as the natural and effective way to reduce most stress. Improving sleep quality also helps, as does the use of stress relieving herbal remedies and teas. Other Tibb recommended techniques such as aromatherapy and massage are beneficial. The bonus from effective stress relief is a marked decrease in the risk of disorders of the heart, circulation and brain.