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Keep calm and carry on

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Rose Dykins investigates how our perception of stress is key to managing it, and puts some stress-busting methods to the test

How much stress do you experience on a daily basis? A moderate amount? A lot? Or are you one of those people who thinks stress is for those who can't cut it?

Recent research suggests that the way you answer this question is self-fulfilling – that having a negative perception of stress, and its presence in your life, potentially affects your health more than the physical effects themselves.

In September, Kelly McGonigal, a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University, gave a TED lecture (ted.com/talks) entitled: "How to make stress your friend."

She said: "The harmful effects of stress on your health are not inevitable. How you think and act can transform your experience of stress. Your heart might be pounding, you may be breathing faster... Normally we interpret these physical changes as signs that we're not coping with pressure. But what if you viewed them, instead, as signs that your body was preparing you to meet this challenge?"

She referred to the results of a Harvard study in which, prior to undergoing social stress tests, participants were taught to view their stress responses as helpful to their performance.

"In a typical stress response, your heart rate goes up and your blood vessels constrict," McGonigal said. "But in the study, where participants viewed their stress response as helpful, their blood vessels stayed relaxed. Their heart was still pounding but their cardiovascular profile was much healthier."

This was backed up by the Whitehall II study published in the online edition of the European Heart Journal in June 2013. Out of some 7,000 London-based civil servants who had been monitored since 1985, those who believed stress affected their health "a lot" or "extremely" had double the risk of a heart attack compared with those who didn't. (Over 18 years of follow-up, there were 352 fatal or non-fatal heart attacks.)

But how easy is it to alter our perception of stress, particularly if the negative effects on our daily life are undeniable?

Emma Mamo, policy and campaigns manager for mental health charity Mind, says: "There's a difference between pressure and stress. Pressure can be beneficial – it can help you to raise your game and perform well, but if you operate in an environment where it is unending and you start to feel like your resilience is depleting, that's when you start feeling stress.

"Stress is when you feel like what is being asked of you is beyond what you or your resources are capable of, and it starts affecting your mental and physical well-being."

It's also important to recognise the combined impact of work- and life-related stress. John Binns is a former senior partner at Deloitte and now runs a programme called Fit for Success, advising Deloitte and other companies on health and personal resilience, following his experience of suffering from chronic stress.

He says: "I was coping with a very busy schedule [at Deloitte] and I then had difficulties in my home life, which, when combined, started to push me into a depression. My view at the time was that I just had to deal with this, and that talking about how I was feeling would be regarded as weakness, and would open up a conversation about whether I was able to do the job."

Binns reached breaking point and was signed off work for three months. Following a course of cognitive behavioural therapy, and with support from his company, he was able to recover and return to work. His advice to those working in a high-pressured environment is “be more self-aware, and recognise that looking after your own mental well-being is important”.

He adds: “Keeping yourself and your team at the top of your game is key to winning in the business environment. Spend time thinking about what it is that you as an individual need – whether it’s more exercise, approaching things in a different way, or saying ‘no’ to taking on more. Know what the danger signs are within you that could potentially lead to catastrophe.”

TRIED AND TESTED: STRESS MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

METHOD: E-stress management course

Developed by Pauline Lummas, a professional stress management trainer, this online course aims to give you a better understanding of stress and offers techniques to help you to control it.

The programme comes as a 367-page downloadable PDF and comprises eight sessions, each of which takes up to an hour and a half to get through. There are also links to worksheets and relaxation audio tracks.

I found the content informative and engaging. The way the course encourages you to analyse yourself through worksheets is useful.

In one, I had to rate myself on a set of personality spectra – the attributes at the higher end of the spectrum were my “stress provoking characteristics”, while those at the lower end were my “helpful characteristics”.

My provoking characteristics were that I was highly competitive and often held my feelings in, while helpful characteristics were that I was able to wait calmly for things, and judged in terms of quality rather than quantity. While you may already know these aspects about yourself, you may not necessarily see the correlation between these traits and your response to stress. The content also covered thinking habits, goal setting and self-esteem.

Did it make a difference?

The course improved my self-awareness when it came to my personal stress triggers and responses. However, a disadvantage of the format was that it was tempting to skip through sections such as the breathing exercises and stress log.

If you can maintain commitment, it should be helpful.

£63; e-stressmanagement.com

METHOD: Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy involves communicating with the subconscious mind by making positive suggestions while an individual is in a deeply relaxed state, with the aim of altering their behaviour for the better.

I visited Hypnotherapy Associates on London’s Harley Street for a session with Bonita Rayner-Jones, a hypnotherapist and transformational coach. We first spent about an hour discussing stressful situations in my life, the way I respond to them, and then alternative reactions I could have.

After, I put headphones on that played relaxing music at a low volume, while Bonita spoke quietly over it with a microphone.

As she asked me to relax each part of my body, I found I was still thinking about other things, but that this wasn’t preventing me from responding to her requests. After a certain point, I stopped being aware of what she was saying, though I knew that she was still speaking.

It felt like barely any time had passed before I was asked to open my eyes, but it had actually been 30 minutes. It took a few seconds before I was able to move my hands, as they were extremely heavy. I also felt like I’d had about a week’s worth of sleep, and Bonita said this was down to the extremely relaxed state I’d just been in.

She gave me a CD recording of the session and told me to listen to it every day for the next week to reinforce the positive messages.

Did it make a difference?

In the short term, the session proved a great energy boost, and left me feeling positive and empowered. When I listened to the CD in a fully conscious state at home, the effect was not the same, but I still found it relaxing.

I did notice a slight improvement in my behaviour – when a negative thought would pop into my head, rather than letting it stew as I normally would, I felt compelled to resist it.

Some people commented that I seemed calmer in the following days, but to assess the longer-term benefits I would have needed to continue with the treatment.

Bonita Rayner-Jones recommends three to five sessions of hypnotherapy, which cost £155 each. 1 Harley Street; tel +44 (0)20 3078 8820; hypnotherapyassociates.co.uk

METHOD: The School Of Life - How To Balance Work With Life class

The School of Life is “devoted to developing emotional intelligence through the help of culture”. It offers a wide range of workshops and therapies to help people tackle their emotional concerns, using ideas from the humanities and arts.

I attended the “How to Balance Work With Life” class at its HQ in London’s Russell Square – there were about 20 people in the session, mostly young professionals.

Cathy Haynes, a London-based curator and founder faculty member of the School of Life, led the session. She encouraged an open discussion about a variety of topics, including our working identities, the concept of “play” and our relationship with time.

Referring to ideas from artists, writers and philosophers, she frequently asked us to turn to our neighbour and answer questions about ourselves, such as: “Is work the measure of what you are?” and “How much of your true self do you bring to the workplace?”

I found some questions difficult to answer but certain things enlightening. For example, I recognised that the way I viewed work and play as polar opposites wasn’t particularly helpful, and placed further pressure on me to pursue “balance”, which added to my stress levels when I didn’t feel I was achieving it.

Did it make a difference?

The main thing I gained was reassurance – there was a great sense of solidarity from the group, and it was good to recognise that my predicaments were shared.

£40. Other School of Life topics include “How to Stay Calm” and “Resilience”. The School of Life, 70 Marchmont Street; tel +44 (0)20 7833 1010; theschooloflife.com

METHOD: Acupuncture

Acupuncture is used to treat symptoms of stress such as anxiety, back pain, headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, insomnia and depression. A key practice of Chinese medicine, it works by identifying areas of the body where blood flow – or “qi” – has stagnated, and then increases circulation to these spots.

I visited the Espa Life spa at London’s Corinthia hotel and met with James Mutkin, a practitioner of Chinese medicine. He began by asking me questions about my health, examining my tongue and feeling my pulse, as these gave him clues about how my blood was moving around my body.

I then experienced cupping, whereby James placed hot glasses on my back and slid them around, creating suction to look for problem areas. This was not painful, though he warned there may be some bruising, which there was.

Then it was time for the needles. When they were inserted I felt no pain, though after a few minutes James would wiggle them to encourage the qi to flow better, which created a dull ache. I had needles placed in my back, neck, shoulders, feet, wrists, collarbone, forehead, scalp and ears.

After they were removed, five seeds fixed on to tiny plasters were inserted on to different pressure points in one of my ears (a National Acupuncture Detoxification Association, or "NADA", technique). James told me to leave them in for a few days and press firmly on each seed when I felt stressed, while taking a deep breath in, holding it, then breathing out. The idea was to stimulate the acupuncture points in the ear.

Did it make a difference?

Straight afterwards, I felt warm and alert, and the tension around my neck and shoulders had pretty much disappeared. I also felt rather light-headed. I experienced quite a lot of bruising from the cupping, which took a few days to vanish.

For two days afterwards, I felt surprisingly energised. I tried the NADA technique several times and found the mindful breathing made me feel calmer.

James recommends four to five sessions of acupuncture for stress management. The initial session costs £145, with follow-ups £90 each. Espa Life at Corinthia, Whitehall Place; tel +44 (0)20 7321 3050; espalifeatcorinthia.com

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