

## Latest News

# Controlling stress a vital health move

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This weekend, I had the pleasure of speaking at the Parkinson Society Manitoba annual conference on the topic of surpassing stress. Stress has subtle yet unmistakable physiologic effects on the body. Its onset can be insidious, and its significance is often overlooked.

Many patients I meet with say they are not stressed. And yes, since this is important to their health, it's absolutely something we discuss. The surprising thing is, as we continue our discussions, we might uncover how they're in the process of selling a home and moving, caring for their parents with chronic health issues, chauffeuring their kids to sports practice, then trying to balance the bills despite the latest financial setback. Or some combination of the above -- if not more.



We need strategies to reduce stress.

People have a tendency to push through and carry on -- a positive intent that is admirable and can be helpful to wellness, within reason -- but often fail to connect their symptoms of insomnia, feeling "pressed for time," weight gain and fatigue as side-effects of stress on the body.

One doesn't have to look far to see examples of stress affecting lives. At the Parkinson's conference, I was impressed with the dedication of the people I met, both those diagnosed and their caregivers, to live their fullest lives and overcome obstacles. Yet, they acknowledge that chronic health conditions take a toll on everyone's lives. It makes one wonder about the role stress might play in the sudden passing of a hard-working politician in a demanding high level position. And what role you can play in helping minimize the impacts of stress on your loved ones and yourself.

When the body is under stress, our adrenal gland works hard to pump out cortisol, a major stress hormone that helps us cope. We need cortisol in proper balance. It regulates everything from our sleep-wake cycles, to muscle growth and repair, inflammatory control and immune support.

However, stressors are additive, be they acute (like being caught in traffic), chronic (like a diagnosis of a chronic condition), good (like moving to a new home) or bad (like the passing of a loved one).

Our body can only adapt optimally for so long before symptoms such as feeling burned out, unable to cope, mind-racing, sweet and salt cravings, morning sluggishness, foggy thinking and downright exhaustion appear. Ultimately, these symptoms progress into overt illness.

Unchecked and unsupported, unbalanced cortisol -- sometimes referred to as adrenal fatigue -- can affect the function of our thyroid, hormones and immune system. In menopause, for example, cortisol imbalance leads to more hot flashes, sleep disturbance and changes in mood. It can exacerbate fatigue, constipation and dry skin in hypothyroidism. It is responsible for waist-centred weight gain, sugar cravings and the subsequent afternoon low by affecting our insulin response. And it can make us more prone to colds and flus, food sensitivities and autoimmune conditions if unattended.

Supporting our bodies through inevitable stressors is possible, with a focus on "treating the person, not just the disease." The first step is acknowledging stress has impacts and recognizing them in your body. Once you do, make sure your health-care practitioner will listen. With the proper support, which we'll discuss more in the coming weeks, this is one health hurdle you can conquer in any season of life.

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