

To Decrease the Negative Effects of Chronic Stress Overload, Simple Self-Care Must be Included in our Daily Lives

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Abstract

It is well known by the medical community that stress overload negatively impacts the health and well-being of individuals on psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical levels. The results from multiple studies and research show that regular self-care does, in fact, help combat the negative effects of stress overload. However, the year 2020 has created such an elevated level of chronic stress that traditional self-care may no longer be enough to combat these negative effects effectively. By adding a new kind of self-care, called simple self-care to our busy daily schedules when done on a regular basis, has been proven to further reduce the negative effects of stress on a more immediate level. This paper examines the definition and concepts of simple self-care which has been federally copyrighted as a concept and theory of application, along with the benefits it has on creating a healthier lifestyle of stressing less and living happier. These results are supported by an accumulation of multiple studies and research which has been documented in reports and books pertaining to negative effects of chronic stress, human anatomy and physiology, and the benefits of self-care.

The data suggests that by adding short intervals of simple self-care into our daily schedules regularly, we can start negating the harmful effects of stress overload and begin building up our stress resistance to better deal with chronic stress leading to a healthier and happier future.

Keywords: Psychological • Healthier lifestyle • Stress • Physical levels

Introduction

This past year, 2020, has been a year of stress like no other. The pandemic in itself was enough to create havoc and cause sharp increases in stress levels [1] even before the addition of increased parental responsibilities from the lockdowns and remote schooling. To further cause exacerbation of the already present national stress crisis [2], add in the recent events of racial injustice, protests, and the unprecedented presidential election and its aftermath. With this sustained stress response affecting our bodies, not only on an emotional level, but also on a biological and physiological level involving our nervous, endocrine, immune, cardiovascular, and digestive systems, we are facing a true national stress overload crisis.

"I'm at my breaking point!" "I feel so burnt out." "I'm ready to bite someone's head off!" These are just a few of the phrases often heard nowadays as people reach their stress limits. Tempers flare, anxiety, suicide, and depression rates have increased [3], random violence is on the rise, immune systems are functioning less optimally (certainly not ideal in a pandemic situation), and increased complaints of weight gain, insomnia, and hypertension are heard. All these effects can be linked back to chronic stress overload and our inability to effectively cope with its negative effects.

How can we effectively combat the negative effects of, not only everyday stress, but of sustained heightened stress? In the past, taking a long walk, working out at the gym or at home, or taking a yoga class (in person or on line) would have seemed to be enough to control the negative side effects of stress overload. So the question becomes: is there another way to add extra stress reducing techniques at regular intervals into our daily, busy, schedules besides traditional self-care?

To begin to address this question and to find an answer, we must start on common ground and get better acquainted with some pertinent definitions. We must begin our search with defining several terms starting with the traditionally accepted definitions of stressor, stress processing system, stress response, and stress overload. We will then define the terms traditional self-care and simple self-care as they relate to this article.

Stress defined

The experience of stress consists of three different components: the stressor, the processing system, and the stress response. The stressor is the event, situation, or circumstance the individual interprets as threatening and can also be referred to as a trigger. The stress processing system is located in the brain and not only experiences, but also interprets the meaning and implication of the stressor. The parts of the brain making up the processing system are collectively called, the HPA axis, and is comprised of the hypothalamus, pituitary and adrenal glands. This HPA axis is considered the hub of the body's stress mechanism. The stress response consists of various physiological, biological, and behavioral changes that occur in the body in reaction to the perceived threat or stressor. Once the stress response is triggered, adrenaline and cortisol are released and cause a cascade of effects including an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, blood sugar, and muscle tension with a coinciding decrease in blood flow to the prefrontal cortex and digestive tract. The stress response also has a negative impact on the immune and reproductive systems, tissue repair, healing, and growth.

Prior to modern day, this stress response and resultant cascade of effects existed to allow the threatened individual to facilitate either an escape from the perceived danger (flight) or to protect oneself from the threat (fight). However, in present day life in a first world country, we often do not

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encounter, if at all, this kind of life threatening stressor. Robert Sapolsky [4], author of "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers", explains that the stress response should really be all about encountering an immediate crisis, for example, a life and death situation such as the zebra being chased by a lion and not sustained psychological stress as seen as "A recent invention, mostly limited to humans and other social primates" [5].

This sustained psychological stress leads to stress overload and occurs when daily stressors, including imagined or perceived stressors, trigger the stress response repeatedly over days, weeks, and months with no counteractive measures in place. The resulting long term elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol in the body lead to many signs and symptoms of physical, emotional, and behavioral changes often not recognized as related to stress overload. Stress overload can present itself in any of the following signs and symptoms included were memory problems, anxious or racing thoughts, constant worrying, agitation and inability to relax, aches and pain, nausea or dizziness, appetite changes, chest pain and/or rapid heart rate, increased usage of alcohol, caffeine, drugs and experiencing a sense of loneliness and isolation.

Simple self-care solution

Self-care, in general, is defined as any intentional action you take to care for your mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health [6]. Self-care helps our bodies switch from the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) to the parasympathetic nervous system (resting and digesting) allowing heart rate, blood pressure and respiratory rates to return to normal levels and allows the body's other systems, affected by the stress response, to return back to more normal function [7]. In much simpler terms, self-care notifies our brain that we are not in immediate danger, in other words, it helps our brains identify the stressor as not life threatening stressor and reduce the negative impact of stress overload, thereby, helping maintain better health and well-being.

Traditional self-care includes all types of exercise, planned time away, and a variety of relaxation methods. Examples include lifting weights, hiking, swimming, yoga class, spa treatments such as massage, manicure, pedicure, or facials, meditation, and cycling. Typically, traditional self-care involves planning, travel time, change of clothes and/or shoes, and usually involves considerably longer time frames and much more effort, motivation, and desire to perform.

According to the large amount of antidotal data I have gathered over the last several years working with the participants of Stress Less, Live Happier Master Class Series [6] and members of my Stress Less Community, doing research for my book, and the input I have received from my stress management presentations, the general consensus is traditional self-care typically occurs at the beginning or end of the workday or perhaps, as a break mid-day. Rather than taking place daily, it is usually scheduled several times a week as opposed to daily. The more intensive planning aspect limits its usefulness for the more immediate overwhelmed stress-reduction, frustration control often needed. In addition, it is easier to delete out of your daily schedule when things get busy, deadlines need to be met, or fatigue sets in again a common thread of conversation from my clients and participates in my workshops and classes.

Simple self-care, on the other hand, is defined as any intentional self-care action that can slide effortlessly into your day, and is not complicated nor complex [6]. Examples include performing several jumping jacks or squats on the spot, doing shoulder rolls and stretching while sitting at your desk, taking several intentional deep breaths, writing things down to make a to do list, journaling, or repeating positive affirmations. These kinds of simple self-care require little or no planning, there are no times constraints involved, no change of clothes or shoes, and consist of much shorter time frames with little effort, motivation, or desire needed to perform. All is needed is a thought, a whim, or a gentle reminder from an electronic device to notify you it is time for your simple self-care.

When these simple self-care techniques were used by my clients, and performed intentionally on a regular basis, my clients reported an improvement in their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. They reported feeling happier, less overwhelmed, more productive and energetic. They also reported a decrease in their stress overload score assessment before and after participating in the four to six week period of engaging in regular simple self-care along with weekly education and being held accountable (Stress Less Live Happier Master Class Series).

Setting my clients up for success is one of the main focuses of my stress management programs; therefore, finding a simple self-care technique that resonates with each individual has led me to create three different categories of simple self-care. By creating a tailored and personalized list of suggestions, the overall consensus from my clients and workshop participants was that everyone was able to find a simple self-care technique, within these three categories, that not only worked for them, but resonated with them and was enjoyable.

These three categories of simple self-care were developed while working with my clients in one on one conversations, workshops, presentations, and during my research and are in the moment techniques and activities allowing your brain to reset itself by focusing on the here and now by redirecting the endless chatter in your minds that is often experienced when overwhelmed.

Movement exercise has been well-proven to counteract the physiological and biological effects of the stress response. Our ancestors would engage in short bursts of physical activity in response to their stressors and immediate threats (fight or flight response) so giving ourselves that opportunity to engage in shorts bursts of physical activity producing the same or similar benefits.

Mind fullness also referred to as brain dumping, or more technically referred to as mind clearing. This is done by diverting your attention away from the stress response to calm the mind and body by activating the parasympathetic nervous system. These types of activities include making lists, creating to do lists, coloring, doodling, playing games, reading scripture, journaling, and meditation.

Discussion

Stress, in itself, is a complicated, multi-faceted, and complex biological, emotional, and physiological set of events, occurring in the body when triggered by a perceived threat. If these perceived threats and stress responses occur over a long period of amount of time with little or no relief from the onslaught of stress hormones flooding the body, the body will be thrown into altered states of illness and disease.

Finding a method to successfully combat and counteract the effects of this sustained stress overload, must be not only effective, but simple, practical and doable. Traditional self-care certainly has its benefits and fits part of the need. However, so often, because of time constraints, depleted energy levels, and bursting at the seams schedules, traditional self-care often falls by the wayside. Unfortunately, like so many things, traditional self-care won't provide any of its great benefits if it isn't performed regularly.

By introducing a new type of self-care called simple self-care along with its three simple categories consisting of: in the moment, movement, and mindfulness, may very well open the door to finding such a stress overload combating method. Simple self-care provides a wide range of self-care activities that slide effortlessly into a busy schedule, hence the name, and can be integrated into a busy daily routine with a minimum of planning and effort, little to no time constraints, and a minimal amount of performance time needed.

Simple self-care provides all these benefits and conveniences and has a positive impact on the negative effects of sustained psychological stress all with noted stress-reducing and well-being improving results.

Conclusion

This past year has been a year of sustained psychological stress like no other in modern history. The recent landscape of events we have had to navigate has created a national stress overload crisis punctuated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, violence, illness, and death.

The preliminary data suggests that by adding short intervals of simple self-care into our daily schedules regularly, we can start negating the harmful effects of stress overload and begin building up our stress resistance to better deal with chronic stress leading to a healthier and happier future with less negative effects of sustained psychological stress.

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Conflicts of Interest

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