



## Mitigate the effects of chronic stress before it damages brain, genetic code.

by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor

**S**tress. It's something we all experience, but do you have effective ways to manage and diffuse your stress? Why is that important? New research is starting to suggest that prolonged, chronic stress can be especially damaging to our brain and DNA.

A study reported earlier this year by the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services highlighted research conducted by a team of scientists at John Hopkins University. They found that high levels of corticosteroids, which are released into the blood by severe stress, are associated with changes in brain functions that influence our behaviors and changes in the DNA methylation of the human genome site Fkbp5. In laymen's terms, this means stress can change brain chemistry and behavior, as well as the genetic information passed along to offspring. A growing body of research literature has had similar findings.

Since stress is a normal part of life, the important thing to recognize is that chronic stress must be managed in order to reduce body chemicals associated with stress, namely adrenalin and cortisol.

### Talk it through

While regular exercise comes to mind as a way to combat stress, another strategy that Mark Britzman likes to advocate is communication. Britzman is a professor in counseling and human resources at South Dakota State University. He emphasizes that communication is integral to the recovery process after experiencing any hardship or stress.

It is important to acknowledge that change is a part of life and avoid seeing a crisis as impossible to overcome, Britzman explains. "It is important for individuals and families to understand we cannot control everything

in life, but we can learn to control how we react to challenges within our life."

While a common response to stress or negative situations is to work harder, Britzman says you still also have to deal with the emotions and find ways to let go of anger, cynicism, anxiety and depression.

Britzman says coping mechanisms include:

- ▶ recognizing it's normal to have negative emotions;
- ▶ reminding yourself daily of the things for which you are grateful;
- ▶ allowing for adequate rest and healthy food choices;
- ▶ recalling other hardships you've overcome;
- ▶ remaining focused on the positive; and
- ▶ helping others.

He also advises the importance of taking an inventory of what is going well and having a strong social support system to bolster your hope and optimism.

Lastly, Britzman says, "It's not a sign of strength or courage to deal with emotional problems alone. Seek support from a doctor, pastor or mental-health professional."

### Find balance

Balancing work, family time and other commitments — including allowing for enough rest — can also be an important strategy for dealing with stress. Arianna Huffington, president and editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post*, is fond of pointing out this fact: "Look at how careful we are about recharging our smartphones as opposed to our brains."

After her own health scare brought on by stress and exhaustion, Huffington is on a mission to create a workplace revolution that is less focused on power and money and more balanced with well-being.

In her new book titled *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder*, Huffington notes, "Our eulogies [will] have nothing to do with our résumés — have you

### Unplug for a better tomorrow

In order to grab the rest we need, we must put ourselves before our devices. Experts offer this quick list of things to do at the end of each day to help reduce stress and recharge for the next day.

- ▶ **Review your to-do list.** Don't save this task for the next morning. It will help your brain prepare for the next day.
- ▶ **Do a brain dump.** If any thoughts are running wild in your head at the end of the day, write down what's on your mind. Not everything has value, but once it's on paper you can usually rest easier.
- ▶ **Set a firm shutdown time.** Email and texting can go on all night. Make a decision to stop checking a few hours prior to bed. Most things can wait until morning.
- ▶ **Center yourself.** Find 20 minutes in the evening to relax and allow for introspection. Let go of negative feelings.

ever heard a eulogy that said 'George was amazing, he increased our market share by one-third?' ... It's all about the other stuff — how we made people feel, did we make them laugh, what did we mean to our children and our loved ones. We [need] to start running our lives in a way that gives a eulogizer something to work with."

Huffington likens the drive for money and power to two legs of a three-legged stool, noting they may hold us up temporarily, but sooner or later we're going to topple over. She suggests we need a third leg — a third metric for defining success — to truly thrive. That third metric, she writes in *Thrive*, includes our well-being, our ability to draw on our intuition and inner wisdom, our sense of wonder, and our capacity for compassion and giving.



**Editor's Note:** Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and a cattlemaster from Whitewood, S.D.

