

The Chi Farm Acupuncture Clinic, Publications and Seminars

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Information and Education Series

Stress and Your Health

What is stress?

We often hear the term “stressed out” or may even describe ourselves as “being under a lot of stress”. But what exactly does that mean? The word itself is an engineering term that implies outside forces are acting on an object that results in the object yielding or deforming in some way. Extending this principle to people, it can be said that stress is some force that requires you to adapt. It is from this adaptation that you feel physically, emotionally and spiritually stressed.

What is stressful to one person may be normal routine to another. Perception plays a major role in how much adaptation you must go through. Who you are, your genetic make up along with your prior life experiences, all contribute to how you experience situations. How healthy you are in combination with the quantity and frequency of stressful situations you encounter all contributes to how successfully your body, mind and spirit adapt.

The stress response

Fight or flight is the most commonly known stress response and is an adaptive mechanism that is intended to keep you alive. When you perceive acute (immediate, short term) danger several hormones (chemical messengers) are released into the bloodstream (including adrenalin and cortisol) that result in adaptations by several body systems. Your heart rate and blood pressure increase, your concentration and focus become sharper and your body releases stored glucose for rapid energy needs. Ideally when the acute threat is over, all of these systems return to normal and your body has a chance to recover. This adaptive process is known as *allostasis*, which literally means *maintaining stability through change*.

When you are under chronic (long term) stress, whether real or perceived, your body has no time to recover. Higher and higher levels of stress hormones are produced resulting in continual adaptations that lead to wear and tear on your body. This condition is known as *allostatic load*. If stress-reducing changes to your lifestyle are not made, eventually *allostatic overload* takes place resulting in a variety of health problems including high blood pressure and heart disease, menstrual issues and erectile dysfunction, obesity, anxiety, depression, irritability, digestive and respiratory disorders, and weakening of the immune system.

What can I do if I am experiencing stress-related health issues?

While the most obvious answer is to reduce the stress in your life, you may find that difficult to do or are unsure how to accomplish it. The problems you may be experiencing may be at the stage where you may need to see a healthcare practitioner.

Some simple steps you can do to reduce the effects of stress include regular moderate exercise (consult your physician before beginning any exercise regime), seeking support from others and making wiser choices about the food you eat. Many people find that regular acupuncture treatments not only reduce the levels of stress and the resulting allostatic load, but also support them in making more thoughtful decisions about the lifestyles they choose.

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