



Stress: An Ayurvedic Perspective

by Kester Marshall

Life is pretty busy these days... bordering on frantic. We cram more in than ever before and yet somehow still feel like we never have enough time to do what we really want... This super fast pace and the resultant pressure that we often feel to 'get things done' is no small thing and the effect it has on our body/mind runs far deeper than we might expect. It is not a minor inconvenience, it is a matter of life and death and we are all, literally, stressing ourselves sick!

Stress is defined by the Encyclopaedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health as, "the sum of the biological reactions to any adverse stimulus, physical, mental or emotional, internal or external, that tends to disturb the homeostasis of an organism. Should these reactions be inappropriate, they may lead to disease states." There are thousands of homeostatic control mechanisms in the body. A few of the most important ones include: regulation of body temperature, nourishment of cells, elimination of wastes and the balance of hormones. So 'stress' is a very broad term and can manifest in many different ways, but has the potential to disrupt some pretty important life-supporting physiological processes!

One of the first ways in which stress affects homeostatic control is through the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system. There are two divisions of the autonomic nervous system - the parasympathetic and the sympathetic systems.

The parasympathetic system is essentially an energy conservation and restorative system and, under 'normal' circumstances, it predominates. It ensures proper digestion, absorption, elimination of wastes and a slow, steady heart rate.

The sympathetic system, on the other hand, is like an accelerator that prepares us for emergency situations. In times of emotional or physical stress it supersedes the parasympathetic system and produces the following effects: increased heart rate and blood pressure, decreased blood supply to the digestive organs, a rise in blood sugar due to the conversion of reserves in the liver and fat tissue, stimulation of the adrenal glands and tensing of skeletal muscles.

These effects, although useful when running from danger or fighting off a bear, are not desirable and definitely not sustainable in the long term, especially with our sedentary lifestyles. Let me explain.

These physiological stress impulses are designed to be expressed physically. When they are not, when they are merely expressed mentally as we try to think-our-way-out-of stressful situations, it has direct physiological ramifications - our heart works too hard, our blood pressure rises, our blood sugar mechanisms work overtime and our digestion and elimination are compromised. Over time, we may begin to suffer from indigestion (belching, bloating, pain), muscle tension and pain, a lack of energy, hypo/hyperglycemia and a myriad of other health concerns.

The mental ramifications of long term stress are also significant. Our mind becomes more contracted, increasing our propensity for fearful, anxious and confused thoughts. We may develop difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping and even suffer from anxiety disorders or panic attacks.

When our body/mind is held in a 'stress response' state for a long time, none of our tissue are nourished correctly and our immune system becomes depleted, setting

up a solid platform for the development of chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes and even cancer.

In Ayurveda, a body/mind under long term stress can be seen as a deep imbalance of Vata. The Vata dosha is responsible for all movement and communication in the body. It governs the nervous system, coordinates the senses and is the organizer of all physiological processes. When it becomes disturbed or imbalanced, it is the cause of the majority of all disease. This is because Vata is the most subtle and changeable of the doshas and therefore the most susceptible to imbalance. This natural instability coupled with a fast-paced, overly complicated lifestyle, accounts for the number of people (both adults and children) suffering from deep-seated Vata imbalances and associated 'stress-related illnesses'.

A large part of the problem is that our society actively encourages a hectic way of life, our media encourages fear-driven, 'keeping up with the Jones's' consumption and our technological age keeps us out of contact with many of the sensory impressions that would naturally soothe and calm us. Is it any wonder we are so on edge? But it doesn't have to be this way. We do have some say in it all. We do have a choice.

Sometimes it may feel like the only remedies to stress are medication with the numerous leisure and prescription drugs on offer, psychotherapy or withdrawal to a hermitage!! The first option is the one most often turned to, and most socially acceptable. But of course, these drugs only hamper our homeostatic intelligence further and cause far greater problems in the long term. So, what to do?

Realistically, there are only two sustainable ways to diminish stress that are actually good for us:

1. **change our 'external environments' by altering our lifestyles, and**
2. **change our reactions to our 'external environment' by changing our 'internal environment'.**

The first may seem very difficult. Most people balk at the idea of even the smallest change to their lifestyles. But deep down, don't we feel like this is necessary? Really, really necessary? Starting small is the way to go. Ayurveda recommends a number of simple practices we can incorporate into our lives, one-by-one, to pacify Vata and therefore, reduce stress. They may sound simple, but they can make a profound difference. Here are a few to get you started...

Daily exercise is very beneficial. It helps to express some of the physiological drives of the stress response which, in turn can help to relax the body/mind. Gentle exercise that helps you slow down and that you really enjoy is best. Gentle yoga, tai chi, qi gong, walking in nature and gardening are all great. Daily rest is equally important but often overlooked. Aim for 15 mins a day of doing absolutely nothing, preferably in shavasana or just sitting.

Try to reduce Vata aggravating activities such as excessive driving, too much time on the computer/mobile, excessive socialising and multi-tasking. Mindful, mono-tasking is best. If you are eating, just eat. Avoid cold foods, drinks and environments. Stay warm.

Make your work and home environments as peaceful as possible using plants, pictures and calming images. Balancing work with other activities such as musical or artistic pursuits is also very important. So is laughter, play and having fun!

Reduce inappropriate sensory impressions such as violent, fearful or stressful images as these feed our fear and

anxiety at a subtle level, regardless of what we may tell ourselves.

Try a media fast. In fact, try only getting your news from the radio or newspaper. You'll be amazed by the difference this simple shift can make.

Finally, regular massage with warm sesame or almond oil is an excellent antidote to mental and physical stress. If you can't afford to get a massage from someone else, try a soothing self-massage in the mornings before your shower, at least once a week.

The second consideration - changing the way we react to our external environment by changing our internal environment is perhaps even more challenging, but it is also the most important.

Stress is caused in the body/mind by almost anything we see as 'adverse' or undesirable. In life there are plenty of undesirables ready to upset our fairly tentative sense of poise and balance! To see these parts of life for what they are and to deal with them more appropriately (without causing ourselves some sort of physiological imbalance) takes a great deal of practice. But we do all have the capacity to change the way we see and relate to the world, to others and most of all, to ourselves.

For this to be possible we first need to learn about the mind and the way it behaves. We need to become more intimate with it. To sit with it, quietly, and get to know it well.

Ayurveda and Buddhism provide excellent models of understanding and methods of developing our minds so that we can eventually relate to them with greater stability, equanimity, patience and kindness.

However, it is important to remember that essentially the medicine for a busy, frantic life is to apply the opposite qualities - to slow down. Indeed, to occasionally stop altogether... and rest in the new life that arises, here, now.

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