



writer **JUDY CHAPMAN**

The girl opposite me, a self-confessed workaholic, is here because three years ago she woke up one morning and was unable to get out of bed. The guy next to her, a high profile property developer, has travelled here to relax (and get away from the wife, who he says is going through the menopause). I'm here, at the newly opened Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat in Queensland, Australia, because I've booked into a seven-day detox retreat. Less than 24 hours in and already I suspect that while most of us have come for the rigorous cleanse, the real reason is an excuse to switch off our mobiles, immerse in nature and recall what it's like to feel relaxed again.

"Stress is the very reason places like us exist," confirms Sharon Kolkka, general manager of Gwinganna. She explains that stress creates an environment in the body where we are more susceptible to disease. In fact it is possibly the number one contributor to degenerative diseases.

Drs Kim Ward and Hilary Stokes from Sanoviv Medical Institute, a hospital practicing Integrative Medicine located in Baja California, Mexico agree. "Doctors now take stress very seriously," says Dr. Ward. "Numerous studies have proven stress to be a direct factor in the development and progression of various physical illnesses, including cardiovascular disease and hypertension, asthma, cancer, multiple sclerosis, immune disorders, infections, and various psychological disorders including depression and anxiety disorder." He reports that stress has been identified as a factor in 80-90% of illnesses.

But it wasn't always like this.

The word stress did not even exist in the context that we know it today until the late 1970's, according to Sharon. Traditionally, stress is defined as a state where the body releases neurochemicals and hormones that prepare us for action to 'fight or flight', however, as Sharon explains, there are now three categories of stress according to modern science. "Acute physical stress where there is immediate physical danger such as some form of violence, chronic physical stress that is an ongoing and cumulative danger to the body such

as starvation, and psychological stress."

But while the stress response is a normal event for the body, the stimuli have changed, and the main reasons why we evoke the stress response now is psychological rather than from any immediate physical danger. "Historically when the stress response was turned on to escape danger there was also the corresponding action, when the danger was passed it was turned off," she says. "Psychology now tells us that psychological stress is ongoing and accumulative."

THE MODERN DAY MALADY

Stress

RIGHT: Relaxing yoga poses calm the mind and the body. OPENING PAGES: Immersing yourself in the middle of nature helps stress drop away. NEXT PAGE: Green, still surroundings are balm to the soul. All pictures are from Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, www.gwinganna.com.

While many of us are not living in a state of famine, for example, we worry and deal with deadlines, time lines, responsibilities, traffic, phones, emails, expectations, finances and relationships and we produce cortisol levels that biochemically mirror there *is* famine. "Adrenal exhaustion is not uncommon in this busy world that we have created, yet it is the thoughts that drive the biochemistry. Strategies to turn off the stress response must be learned and practiced if we are to evolve. Our ancient stress response is not suited to our new environment."

Sharon goes on to cite a study by the World Health Organization (WHO) that revealed that 95% of stress in the world is actually driven by our mind. "Learning to switch on and off from our stress should now be one of our highest priorities."

According to Dr. Demartini, Author of *The Breakthrough Experience*, stress is also a lop-sided perception of an event we perceive as wrong or right. He says that when we have lopsided perceptions and see a situation or a person in our life as 'all bad', these negative thoughts weaken our body's ability to function efficiently. "Your body believes every word you think and say," he says. By bringing our perceptions back into equilibrium, we annihilate their power to create sickness and disease.

Dr. Ward says that research conducted over the past ten years shows that health behaviours such as exercise, smoking, substance abuse, lack of nutrition and compliance with medical treatments also contribute to stress. When we drink coffee, for example, our blood pressure rises, our heart beats faster and our breathing rate increases so our adrenal glands secrete adrenalin and cortisone, the flight or flight hormones. Even the simple act of skipping breakfast tells our body that we are starving and sends us into the fight or flight response. And while you may think that you'll get used to it, bear in mind that changing your body's evolution will take generations, not just weeks, of missing meals.

So why don't we learn to listen to our body when we know it's time to take a breather? "It's essential for each of us to learn to identify our own signs of stress," says Dr Hilary Stokes from Sanoviv.

Stress in today's world often goes unnoticed and unmanaged as many of us have simply become resigned to thinking it's just the way it is. "While in the early stages, stress can 'rev up' the body and enhance performance at work or home, thus the term 'I perform better under pressure'," she explains. "If this condition is allowed to go unchecked and the body is revved up further, performance ultimately declines and one's health degenerates." Each of us is different so it can be challenging to differentiate minor influences of stress from more significant stress related warnings leading to possible burnout affecting our mind, body and spirit.

We all know from personal experience that our bodies speak. Signs that I'm stressed, for instance, include tightness in neck and shoulder, mild anxiety, shortness of breath and a tendency towards red wine as a



remedy. What's interesting is that the age of people experiencing stress is becoming younger. Karina Stewart, wellness director at Kamalaya in Thailand reports that on average they are now seeing guests in their late twenties and early thirties who need to de-stress, where as a decade ago, the average age would have been in their thirties.

In the future, Hilary believes the potential for experiencing stress will only continue to increase, as witnessed by the constant advancement of technology, ongoing threats of terrorism and rise in degenerative diseases that often touch close to home. However, she says the opposite side of this is that mind-body practices are now the most popular complementary and alternative medicine therapies used to balance our lives. "Retraining your response to stress involves a practical and results-oriented approach. Strategies aimed at relaxing your mind by releasing distressing thoughts and emotions are powerful stress relievers. As we continue to move towards integrative medicine and thus treating the whole body, we will continue to gain insight into effective ways to relieve stress and create health."

Karina agrees that our stress levels will continue to rise as our pace and rhythm of life continues to accelerate, due to the fact that we live in a world where multitasking and technology (think blackberries and globalization creating near 24-hour work days) are glorified, so ultimately it will be our response to all these pressures that will make all the difference.

"Thankfully more people are now willing and able to do something about it. Yoga, qi gong, tai chi, pranayama, and meditation are all increasing in popularity and living a holistic lifestyle is now a desirable goal. I believe stress is something that will decrease as people make the choice to live a life that is more balanced and centered."

As I depart Gwinganna, I overhear the property developer booking his wife into the 'Women's Discovery' retreat that offers women tools and education on how to remain balanced (and stress-free) during the menopause. I smile, inwardly thinking that it's probably when we are relaxed and stress-free that we can truly help those around us.

CONCLUSION

My experience of life so far has shown me that I am most relaxed when I am living spontaneously, going with the flow and trusting in life. Then life really does look after you. Living with a mindset that we are supposed to be always perfect, always peaceful, vital and relaxed can be dangerously stressful. Feeling that we must control everything, even our health is also stressful. An overabundance of information can be stressful as well.

Robert M. Sapolsky, author of the great book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* explains: "If you think, "Whew, that was bad, but imagine how much worse it would have been if I hadn't been in charge," a sense of control is clearly working to buffer you from feeling more stressed. However, if you think, "What a disaster and it's all my fault, I should have prevented it," a sense of control is working to your detriment."

The moral of this story?

Don't get stressed about being stressed! 🌿



KEY SYMPTOMS

Physical stress – headaches, chest pain, pounding heart, high blood pressure, shortness of breath, muscle aches such as back and neck pain, clenched jaws, grinding teeth, tight dry throat, indigestion, stomach cramping or bloating, constipation or diarrhea, increased perspiration often causing cold, sweaty hands, fatigue, insomnia, weight gain or loss, diminished sex drive, skin problems such as rashes, eczema, and hives.

Emotional and mental stress – anxiety, restlessness, worrying, nervousness, irritability, depression, sadness, anger, mood swings, feelings of insecurity, lack of concentration, confusion, forgetfulness, resentment, guilt, tendency to blame others for how you feel, negativity and panic attacks.

Behavioural stress – overeating or loss of appetite, sudden outbursts with little provocation, increased use of alcohol and drugs, increased smoking, withdrawal or isolation, crying spells, changes in close relationships, job dissatisfaction, decreased productivity and burn-out.

TURNING OFF THE STRESS RESPONSE

1. Are you in control to change the situation or not?

It is your emotional reaction to any given situation that stimulates the stress response, so change what you can and let go of what you can't. Buddhists say if you can change something, why worry, and if you can't change something, why worry. Sometimes the only thing you can control is your reaction to the situation at hand.

2. Is the situation serious enough to warrant turning on the stress response at all? If not, acceptance of the situation is the best advice. The Serenity Prayer says it all: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

3. If you are juggling many tasks in addition to the stressful one, close them and end any feelings of being overwhelmed. Evaluate, prioritise and then deal with each one, one at a time.

4. Breathe deeply. Deep breathing sends a no danger signal to the body. Essential oils cypress and citrus blends are especially cleansing.

5. Take a break for five minutes and do something that is totally unrelated to work – a change of environment and positive internal dialogue or simply turning on your iPod can help. Don't waste this escape time running the situation video in your head, and avoid coffee and processed food.

VISUALIZE YOURSELF WELL

Our thoughts, our perceptions, our feelings, and our words can make us sick. But they can also make us strong and help heal our bodies. Program yourself for health by thinking healthy thoughts, focusing on your improvements, and believing that soon you will be in the state of health you desire. Watch funny movies, read inspirational stories and books, and fill your mind with powerful thoughts of strength, health and vitality. Thoughts are our mind's nutrition.

- Everything you think and say makes an impression on your mind and body.
- When you think or say the same phrase over and over again, your mind and your body begin to believe it, whether you mean it or not.
- The emotional charges of fear and guilt are stored in your muscles and organs and affect your health as long as you believe in their illusions.
- It's almost useless to treat functional disorders until your mind has found inner balance and peace through unconditional love.

This is an extract from *Count your blessings* by Dr. John F Demartini.

LINKS

Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, Queensland, Australia

www.gwinanna.com

Sanoviv Integrative Health Care, Mexico www.sanoviv.com

Kamalaya, Koh Samui, Thailand www.kamalaya.com

READ

Dr. Demartini *The Breakthrough Experience*

www.drdemartini.com

Robert M. Sapolsky *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (Owl Books)

www.amazon.com