

The Surprising Health Benefits of Stress

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We're often told **stress is harmful to our health**. It has been linked to weight gain, heart attacks and chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes. But studies **such as a recent one** by Kirstin Aschbacher, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California says brief episodes of stress may actually be **beneficial to our health**, protecting us from the effects of aging.

Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, author of *Real Cause, Real Cure* (Rodale Books, 2012) who has studied the effects of stress on immune function, echoes these findings, saying stress in small doses can improve cognitive function and improve our overall health.

Here is their advice on how to use stress to your health advantage:

1. Assess what type of stress you are experiencing.

"When I go skydiving, it's stressful, but it feels good," says Teitelbaum, a self-confessed adrenaline junkie. Anxious feelings trigger a fight-or-flight response that releases the hormones called cortisol and adrenaline for a surge of energy. To determine whether your stress is healthy or unhealthy, Teitelbaum recommends taking a moment to check in with your body and ask whether the stress feels good or bad.

"Some people do best under a deadline. For them, it may be the only time they can function. For others, it's the only time they can't function," says Teitelbaum. If you fall into the latter category, Teitelbaum recommends delegating tasks and planning ahead to reduce stress while under a deadline.

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2. Boost brain power with an adrenaline rush.

When the body feels stress, it releases various hormones such as adrenaline that can have important brain health benefits. Just as a cup of coffee can give you a temporary boost of energy, adrenaline increases alertness and awareness and can improve memory and cognitive functioning, "making you sharper during the period of stress," says Teitelbaum. This may explain why some people say they think faster on their feet.

3. Keep stress short lived for improved body function.

Embracing situations that cause short-term stress that lasts for an hour or two, such as giving a public speech, is associated with better health profiles. Aschbacher's study measured stress-related damage inside cells and says small amounts of stress reduces damage to DNA and RNA. "A little bit of stress may tell your body that it needs to turn up the volume on some of its antioxidant mechanisms [and] be more efficient in its defense against free-radicals (molecules responsible for aging, tissue damage and some diseases)," she says.

This short-term stress may even result in improved immunity. When the body is under stress, it releases a hormone called cortisol, which Teitelbaum says can improve immune function when released in small quantities. Too much cortisol, however, will suppress immune function, which explains why individuals under chronic stress often fall ill.

4. Allow for recuperation.

Aschbacher likens the health benefits of stress to exercise. "If we lift weights, there's a certain amount of physiological stress that we're putting on our body in that moment. Then we take a break and we allow our tissues to recuperate and our bodies actually become stronger through that process," she says.

Just as overdoing it during your workout can cause your muscles to be sore and your body to feel exhausted, even too much good stress can also be harmful. "The stress systems are meant to handle sprints, not marathons," says Teitelbaum. Build in times during the day to de-stress and recharge your body's stress-response systems.

Related: [5 Ways to Stop Stress Before It Starts](#)

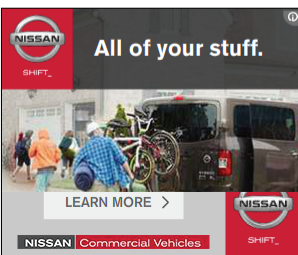
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