

A person wearing a white long-sleeved shirt is sitting in a meditative pose on a sandy dune. Their hands are resting on their knees in a mudra. The background shows a vast desert landscape under a soft, golden sunset sky.

The Inner Rising

A Complete Step-by-Step
Self-Care and Success Guide to
Developing a Positive, Stress-Free Lifestyle

By Carmen Gilfillan

THE INNER RISING

**A COMPLETE STEP-BY-STEP
SELF-CARE AND SUCCESS
GUIDE TO DEVELOPING
A POSITIVE, STRESS-FREE
LIFESTYLE**

CARMEN GILFILLAN

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MINIMISING STRESS, MAXIMISING RELAXATION

Introduction

Stress is an integral part of our everyday lives. Without a certain amount of stress in our lives, we would not progress and would fail to build up vital defence systems designed to protect us from the negativity of the world we live in.

There are two types of stress: positive stress, which promotes our creativity and helps us to achieve; and negative stress, which puts the body into a state of readiness for attack, or “fight or flight” (see below). This state, if maintained for any significant length of time, can begin to have a damaging effect on the body.

It is, however, possible to induce just the right amount of stress to bring out the best in us. The ideal amount of positive stress excites us, as we feel we’re in control and able to tackle whatever comes our way. Tip the scales one way or the other, though, and we become either apathetic and bored or panic-stricken.

What Is Stress?

Stress could be described as an unwelcome physical response in the body to a situation we perceive as overwhelming or threatening.

The causes of stress may, for example, include trauma (including the physical trauma of illness or an operation) or bereavement. Bereavement is a form of emotional and psychological trauma that affects the physical as well as the emotional body. Pressure at work, such as unrealistic deadlines and other issues, could also contribute to stress.

Family problems, such as arguments, may also contribute to increasing stress levels. Other pressures, such as domestic obligations, can possibly add to an already busy day, thus increasing stress levels.

Other stress factors could include the way in which we handle relationships. They could also include personal issues, such as low self-confidence or self-esteem. If we don't have a strong sense of self, we may experience the stress of trying to be all things to all people, ultimately resulting in not knowing who we are.

A further stress factor can arise from changes in our lives, such as moving house, changing jobs, or changing partners. Any upheaval puts stress on both the mind and body. Part of dealing with this may be accepting that stress could potentially play a part in such changes.

Symptoms of Stress

There are many symptoms of stress, both emotional and physical. Some of the emotional symptoms may include the following:

- feelings of anxiety
- panic attacks
- loss of confidence
- fear
- anger

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- melancholy or depression
- feelings of hopelessness

Some of the physical indicators of stress could include the following:

- headaches
- dizziness
- increase in heart rate
- increase in blood pressure
- twitching of the muscles
- tiredness
- loss of concentration
- lapses in memory
- insomnia

These are by no means exhaustive lists. There are other more severe symptoms of stress, such as breathing difficulties, chest pain, and fainting, according to the mental health advice and support organisation, Mind.

Impact of Stress

Stress can have an impact both on the body and on the psyche. This is known as the fight-or-flight (or the acute stress) response because the body literally prepares itself to either fight or escape.

What follows is a description of this fight-or-flight chemical reaction that occurs in the body when it is under stress. The response, which is designed to protect our bodies from harm, is said to have been first devised by an American physiologist called Walter Cannon in the late 1920s.

The hypothalamus is a specific part of the brain located just behind the middle point between the eyebrows. The hypothalamus

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releases a hormone into the pituitary gland, which is located at the base of the brain and attached to the hypothalamus, and then into the bloodstream when you become either threatened or excited.

This hormone (corticotrophin-releasing hormone) stimulates the adrenal glands. This sets the heart racing and speeds up the breathing. Blood is redirected from the digestive tract to the muscles and limbs, which require extra energy in readiness for fight or flight. In addition, your impulses, sight, and awareness become sharper, your pain threshold rises, and your entire immune system becomes highly charged.

Fight or flight is a physical response during which certain hormones are produced, including cortisol, which is said to increase blood pressure and blood sugar and suppress the immune system. Once the immune system is suppressed, the ability to fight off illness effectively is reduced. Fight or flight also suppresses the rationality of the mind. In this state, we are in survival mode. Everything is seen as a possible threat, making our responses to even the most mundane actions or comments exaggerated.

This state goes back to prehistoric times when a person's very survival would be threatened and that person would literally need to either fight or flee. In those days, the threat from, say, the attack of an animal would be short-lived; the chemical reaction in the body would therefore also be short-lived. Soon this fight-or-flight state would subside and the body would return to normal.

Today's Pressurised Society

In today's pressurised society, however, many of us are (sometimes unbeknownst to ourselves) living lives of high stress, where this chemical reaction is being set off many times a day. The threat, however, is not necessarily from an animal attack. It may be an impending deadline; traffic lights that turn red when we approach them; arguments with friends, family, or colleagues; or just too much to do in too short a space of time.

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Because situations such as these occur on a regular basis each day, the adrenal glands become overworked, pumping adrenaline and other stress hormones into the body on a constant basis. As a result, we're in a constant state of fight or flight. This state, if left unchecked, can stifle our attempts to rise and take our lives to another level. The body is designed to cope with this state in short bursts; it is not, however, designed to withstand it on an ongoing basis.

The upshot can be complete physical and mental shutdown, resulting from exhaustion of the body. This shutdown can manifest itself in the form of complete withdrawal, a state in which you feel you cannot face the world. Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), chronic fatigue syndrome, and fibromyalgia are three forms of what are known as chronic exhaustive conditions. These are conditions in which the body and mind have overexerted themselves and you end up completely exhausted mentally, in physical pain, or both.

The following extract sums up the serious implications of constant stress on the body and mind:

We can begin to see how it is almost impossible to cultivate positive attitudes and beliefs when we are stuck in survival mode. Our heart is not open. Our rational mind is disengaged. Our consciousness is focused on fear, not love. Making clear choices and recognizing the consequences of those choices is unfeasible. We are focused on short-term survival, not the long-term consequences of our beliefs and choices. When we are overwhelmed with excessive stress, our life becomes a series of short-term emergencies. We lose the ability to relax and enjoy the moment. We live from crisis to crisis, with no relief in sight. Burnout is inevitable.¹

¹ Neil F. Neimark, "Dr. Neil—MD," www.thebodysoulconnection.com, accessed 5 June, 2022, <http://www.thebodysoulconnection.com/EducationCenter/fight.html>

Life Balance

Stress and frustration can come about as a result of having insufficient balance in your life. The following is a very useful exercise much used in life coaching circles and is called the wheel of life:

Exercise: Wheel of Life

1. Take a piece of paper and draw a large circle that takes up most of the space on the page.
2. Split the circle into quarters by drawing a vertical line down the middle of the circle and a horizontal line across that intersects the vertical line at the centre.
3. Split the circle into eighths by drawing a diagonal line across the circle from top left to bottom right and a second diagonal line from top right to bottom left (see diagram below).
4. Now consider eight key areas of your life: work/business life; home life; family, hobbies, and interests; social life; personal development; and so forth.
5. Look at the wheel you've drawn and imagine each of the spokes represents an area of your life. On each spoke, draw markers from zero to ten, starting with zero at the centre and working outward to ten at the edge of the circle.
6. Label each of the spokes with a particular area of your life.
7. Rank how you feel you're doing in each area of your life. Choose a number between zero and ten for each area, and mark a small cross on the relevant number to indicate where you think you are on the scale (with zero being at rock bottom and ten being completely at the top of your game).
8. Join the crosses together to form a circle.
9. The rounder the circle, the more balanced you are in terms of the eight areas of your life.

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10. If the circle is jagged, it means you have areas of your life that you're in charge of and others that need a lot of work.
11. Once you've established where in your life you need to do the work, you can then shift your focus onto those areas in order to introduce more balance into your life and minimise the stress.

A simple Internet search on “wheel of life” will offer a myriad of examples of templates you can use, completed wheels, and even wheel-of-life assessments.

This is an extremely valuable exercise designed to enable you to have more control over your life. Once you've completed the exercise, you may come to realise that areas you thought needed to be worked on don't require quite as much attention and that you may have been totally neglecting others.

Repeat this exercise regularly (once a month or once every two months) to chart your progress in each of these areas. When you redo the exercise, you can use a different colour on the same chart so that you can see your progress.

The Wheel of Life

