
What You Need To Know About Cumulative Stress

Whether it's self-care or work-life balance, everyone's talking about stress reduction. And as a physical therapist, you have the added pressure of being a caregiver on top of your regular life. So how can you deal with stress? Start by understanding what it is, and how it shows up in your brain and body.

What's Cumulative Stress?

Stress is a natural part of life. And in the moment, acute stress can be helpful. When you face a stressor, your body reacts with internal signals to help you cope. You can leverage those stress signals to increase focus in the mind and energize the body.

That might mean extra energy on days when you're seeing back-to-back clients, or the ability to tune out distractions while completing important paperwork. But here's the rub: Once the stress signal has done the job it was designed for — that brief burst of focus and energy — the positive returns of stress quickly begin to diminish.

Physical and mental stress both tax your body. And even if you take a rest day after a hard workout, your home life and job might be adding mental stress that keeps you from recovering fully. This cumulative stress keeps your heart rate high at night, triggers cravings, and weakens your overall performance.

Over time, a repeated and persistent onslaught of stress chemicals can start to wreak havoc on your overall well-being. Physically this includes negatively impacting your blood pressure, cardiovascular system, and even your reproductive and digestive systems.

Psychologically, the effects of stress over the long haul can be equally as devastating, starting with increased mental fatigue and often progressing to clinically significant anxiety, depression, and a host of other poor mental health outcomes.

How To Fight Back

Learn to turn on the stress signal when it serves your short-term interests, and then turn it off when it's no longer needed. Sounds simple, right?! Not quite, but you can do it with the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. The sympathetic side of the autonomic nervous system is commonly referred to as the fight-or-flight system. By contrast, the parasympathetic side, also called the rest-and-digest system, activates actions that push back, or downregulate, the stress response.

We all possess an impressive ability to influence how our autonomic nervous system operates by tapping into either our sympathetic or parasympathetic systems. And, luckily, two of the most powerful tools we know of to influence the stress response are free and available anywhere: breath and vision.

Activating Your Parasympathetic System

To use the parasympathetic nervous system to relax and de-stress, try these two simple strategies:

Parasympathetic strategy 1: Slowing your exhale

One of the simplest ways to stimulate a relaxation response is to control your breath. More specifically, focus on making the exhalation longer than the inhale (e.g., a four-second inhale followed by an eight-second exhale). You'll quickly see heart rate and blood pressure drop as the relaxation response starts to kick in.

Parasympathetic strategy 2: Relaxing your gaze

Another way to access the relaxation response is to relax your gaze. Instead of focusing intently on a fixed point (e.g., your phone or a computer screen), try looking up or staring out a window for a brief time, letting your entire visual field come to you at once. It's no coincidence we feel so at peace when we stare out across an open ocean or into the sky at night. It's a hard-wired relaxation mechanism, but like your breath, you can access it on demand.

Using Your Sympathetic System

On the other hand, activate your sympathetic nervous system when you want that focus and feeling of readiness in the body that the stress signal provides. To get fired up before a workout or wake up before a meeting, switch on your sympathetic system with these strategies.

Simple strategy 1: Slowing your inhale

To bring about that stress response on demand, do the reverse of what you did to relax and make the inhalations twice as long as the exhalation.

Simple strategy 2: Focusing your gaze

Similarly, switch your vision out of daydream-mode and lock in on a fixed point (again, preferably not a screen but something maybe six to 10 feet away from you). Using your focal vision in this way will further encourage those chemical signals to switch on when you get ready for the next challenge.

And of course, don't forget that the most powerful weapon against stress is consistent quality and quantity of sleep.