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The simple way to fight stress

In this, the Stress Awareness Month, corporate leaders and mental health experts explain why small changes in lifestyle can go a long way in keeping you healthy

Last Published: Tue, Apr 10 2018. 05 57 AM IST

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Jay P. Desai, founder and managing director, UC Strategy, practises the sarod to manage stress. Photo: Aniruddha Chowdhury/Mint

After a recent annual townhall by Mahindra & Mahindra group chairman Anand Mahindra, where MBA interns pointed out that information overload, multitasking, and just coping with city life left them little time for reflection, Mahindra tweeted: “All of us have that problem too. I’ve been meditating for a half-hour every morning to gift myself that Space.”

Work-life integration is fast replacing work-life balance, making us all 24x7 employees. We fail to notice the warning signs that it is taking a toll on our health. Like when socializing with friends begins to feel like a chore or the slightest reprimand from a client feels like a big blow. You may not realize it, but these are all signs of stress overload.

Most of us are so used to being overstretched that we often don’t know we are stressed until we are at breaking point. A study conducted in 2016 among 6,000 corporate employees by 1to1Help.net, a professional counselling company, found that 80% of the respondents who exhibited symptoms of anxiety had been going through it for over a year before seeking professional help. “Stress is not the outcome of one situation, it’s a continuous process,” says Kamna Chhibber, clinical psychologist and head, mental health, Fortis Healthcare. A constant level of emotional exhaustion will eventually lead to burnout. “The earlier you check yourself, the more effective your recovery will be,” she says.

Hidden signs

Many of us are familiar with the typical signs of stress—muscular tension, headaches, increased heart rate, perspiration, etc.—but there are several subtler symptoms to watch out for. Deanne Panday, fitness expert, health coach, and author of *I'm Not Stressed: Secrets For A Calm Mind And A Healthy Body*, says allergies, a growing affliction, are often caused by stress. “I know people who, though super fit, are regularly breaking out into allergies. These are inflammations, a sign that your body is under stress and that your immune system is crashing,” she explains.

Taking a little longer to recover from daily stressors can be another cue. “Ask yourself, were you not able to sleep for one night, or was it three-four?” says Dayal Mirchandani, a Mumbai-based psychiatrist. “When your consumption of coffee, or liquor, goes up, it’s a sign that your ability to handle stress is going down.” A constant feeling of pressure, a shift in your manner of responding to situations, and changes in your social interactions, are all red flags. “Also, consider if the way you see yourself has altered,” says Chhibber.

Let off steam daily

There’s no escaping stress, but experts say finding ways to blow off steam on a daily basis will ensure the pressure doesn’t build up into bigger health problems.

A few hours of solitude can go a long way. Alka Upadhyay, a 46-year-old assistant vice-president at an Indian multinational conglomerate, takes 2 hours out of her busy schedule to read. Panday takes mini holidays every three-six months to “come back rejuvenated enough to take on the world”.

Maintaining offline relationships when social media has overtaken our world may be hard, but it’s essential, Dr Mirchandani says. “Deeper connections that go beyond transactional work friendships are very important for health,” he says. Upadhyay agrees. “Running has introduced me to an eclectic bunch of people outside my profession. We are now a close-knit circle of friends who go on short vacations every two-three months, and that is such a great stress-buster,” she says.

Jay P. Desai, founder and managing director, UC Strategy, a consulting firm, feels the body’s response to stress is adaptive, and that stressful incidents often increase resilience. Desai recalls how a prolonged, intensely stressful period in his life taught him how to better manage high-stress situations over which he had little control. In his case, nurturing a life-long hobby has also proven very effective. “One of the methods I use to manage stress is to practise my sarod, which I have been playing for more than 25 years now. Doing *riyaaz* (practise) three-four times a week transports me into another world, that of notes and beats,” he says.

Harvard Business School’s senior executive leadership program-India, which Upadhyay attended, offered important lessons in building personal resilience. It has helped her internalize concepts like adversity quotient, the importance of labelling emotions, and regular timeouts.

Exercising daily is another great way to reduce the pressure, but Dr Mirchandani warns that chasing fitness goals can be counterproductive at times. “Go for a pleasant stroll instead of heading to a gym where you will be competing with yourself,” he suggests.

While conversations on the importance of employee mental health have begun, experts say we have a long way to go. “Many companies have a fix-it rather than prevent it approach,” says Dr Mirchandani. The occasional stress management workshop or interdepartmental cricket match cannot have the same impact as, say, training on the lines of Google’s Search Inside Yourself programme—which is designed to enhance its employees’ mindfulness and emotional intelligence in life and work. “We’re in a better position today than, say, 10 years ago, but is it good enough? There is still a lot of ground to cover,” says Chhibber.

First Published: Mon, Apr 09 2018. 08 07 PM IST

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