Your Most Important Life Hack – How to Beat Stress

Stress isn't something that we often associate with having serious consequences in our lives. However, research indicates that stress does impact physical and mental health. Poor health has other consequences, including a potentially shortened lifespan, sub-par quality of life, unhappy relationships and even financial difficulty. In today's unprecedented time, it is important to focus and find ways to ensure that we live a healthier and happier life and ultimately learn how to beat stress.

Recognize When You're Stressed

"Many people are caught off guard," says Grant Brenner, MD, and co-founder of the Neighborhood Psychiatric Associates of Manhattan. "They don't know they are getting stressed out and wait until they are already experiencing burnout and have serious issues."

Brenner says that awareness and prevention of stress symptoms are the keys to beating stress long-term. He recommends learning to pay attention to your body's responses and your state of mind so that you know when a stress response is rising. Realizing that you feel overwhelmed, paralyzed by decision-making or that your heart rate is rising and you are entering a "flight or fight" response can be clues that your stress levels are becoming too high. Difficulty breathing and thinking can also be signs of an anxiety attack. You'll be better able to counteract it if you recognize the situation and respond before it gets out of hand.

Take Care of Your Physical Health

Brenner says that healthy eating and regular physical exercise are vital parts of easing stress. When we feel good, we are better able to cope with stressful situations. Any physical activity, from body-weight training to deep-stretching to online-guided workouts can be useful in stress relief. Healthy eating, including plenty of fruits and vegetables and whole grains, as well as moderate amounts of lean protein, can contribute to feelings of health and wellness.

Brenner warns against over-exercise, though. He says that sometimes people exercise too much or engage in activities that they aren't ready for in times of high-stress. Over-extension causes other forms of stress and can lead to injury.

Fight Sleep Deprivation

Even those who exercise and practice good nutrition often miss an important part of the equation, though. "Most people overlook the importance of sleep," Brenner points out. "Every day we see more information about how important good sleep is." Sleep helps our minds sort through the information of the day and sets the stage for better decision-making. It also allows your body to rest and prepare physically. Tiredness makes it harder to cope with challenging situations, and therefore increases stress levels.

Carve out time for adequate sleep so that your body and mind have time to reset. Research from the National Sleep Foundation indicates that a set sleep schedule can help, as can creating an environment designed for falling asleep. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes and heavy meals in the evening. It also helps to avoid computers with "blue light" before bed, since this type of light can stimulate your brain and make it difficult to fall asleep.

Meditation and Yoga

Brenner points to the benefits of meditation as a useful tool in reducing stress on a regular basis. "Mindfulness meditation gets a lot of attention, and for good reason," he says. Mindful meditation encourages practitioners to focus on the present moment, recognizing what they feel and think about. "Research shows it helps people take a step back and assess the situation without getting anxious," continues Brenner.

Daily meditation practice, even if it is only a few minutes at a time, can help you maintain perspective and reduce stress. Develop a habit of mindfulness, and Brenner says you'll be better at knowing when stress is presenting a problem — and better at tackling that problem.

Yoga can also help. Not only is it exercise, but it can also promote a meditative state. Brenner recommends using the slower, gentler hatha yoga to promote mindfulness while moving, as well as pranayama breathing exercises to reduce stress.

Quick Fixes for Stress

If you find yourself in a stressful situation, here are a few quick tips for beating stress in the moment:

- Take a few deep breaths and avoid hyperventilating.
- Engage with your pet since petting an animal can be calming.
- Sit with someone; interactions and conversations can relieve stress.
- Engage in an artform or creative exercise like drawing or puzzles.
- Journaling to jot down your thoughts can be a great stress-reliever.
- Decrease your screen-time and put away your phone and TV.

Look for a distraction. Reading a book you enjoy or focusing on a different issue for a few minutes can take your mind away from your current issue.

Regular practice can help you beat stress and live a happier and healthier life.