



Time to de-stress

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Social media is filling up with memes about saying “good riddance” to 2021, a year that many of us will not remember with much nostalgic pleasure. The stress of living through the pandemic and coping with the fallout in economic, social and other terms has been intense for so many of us.

Chronic, constant stress has very real impacts on our physical health. It floods our bodies with a range of hormones like cortisol, among others. These substances prepare our bodies to face danger and possible injury, but if they are constantly pumped out in response to chronic stress, they can cause lasting harm.

While most people have read about the role of stress in the development of heart disease or uncomfortable gastric symptoms like diarrhoea or bloating, many don't realise that the effect goes much further than that. For example, stress can affect sperm in men; it can worsen menopausal symptoms like hot flushes; it can alter the gut bacteria which affect our mood and brain health; and long-term stress can even alter our bodies' ability to mount a defence against a pathogen like SARS-CoV2.

Fortunately, we have three natural, inexpensive and very accessible tools to help us manage stress. Two of these are sleep and exercise.

Sleep

Sleep is often elusive when we're stressed. If that's true for you, some tips are:

- Follow a sleep schedule – go to sleep and wake up at more or less the same time daily.
- Practise good sleep hygiene – keep screens out of the bedroom, and make sure the environment is dark and quiet (use light-blocking curtains if necessary, and sleep with earplugs).
- Eat at least two hours before bedtime, to avoid going to bed feeling full or empty.

Exercise

We know that exercise is a profound intervention that affects body and mind in many ways, including improving mood. Get going and keep going with some simple tips:

- Set yourself goals – “I'll increase my number of reps with the dumbbells to 20 by New Year”; “I will take my bike out three times a week”; “I plan to be able to swim 20 lengths by the time I go away”, for example.

- Choose activities that are enjoyable. There's no point in planning to do a physical activity if you really don't like it – you'll drop it very quickly. It's better to do some strenuous digging in your veggie garden instead of weights at the gym, if the pleasure of digging beats the grind of lifting weights hands-down.
- Incorporate exercise into your daily routine wherever you can – dancing to music you love at home with family or friends, parking far away from the shops so you add some steps to your day, for example.
- Reward yourself. When you reach a goal, give yourself a treat – buy that new song or give yourself flowers.

If you have are concerned about your physical ability to start an exercise programme, or you have any aches and pains that concern you, consult your physiotherapist, who will assess your fitness and condition and offer helpful advice.

To find a physiotherapist, go to www.saphysio.co.za.

References

<https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352289521000047>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/sleep/art-20048379>