

Dealing with stress

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Life is stressful enough when times are good, but when money gets tight? Well, then things we've taken for granted – having a job, being able to pay our bills, providing for our loved ones – become iffy and our stress levels spike.

Experts agree there isn't much we can do to make the external world less stressful. "The most you get to control in life is how you react to stress," said Gina Rubinsky, a Montreal-based registered psychologist, stress and pain management counsellor. "As for everything else? Well, that's just what you get to deal with."

Reacting to stress starts with looking at your own life, and how you are living it. It's been said before, but it bears saying again: People who get enough sleep and exercise, and who watch their diets, deal better with stress than those who don't. How much sleep you need is a personal thing: Some people can get by with six or seven hours; some need eight or nine. The key is to get enough sleep so that you wake up each morning feeling rested. If you wake up exhausted, you're already starting the day from a disadvantage, and that doesn't help your stress level.

Although a gym membership can help boost physical fitness, the cost may be out of reach during a recession. At the very least, get out for a 30-minute walk each day. This will help your heart, while letting you burn off the stressful tension that gets stored in your body. If you prefer biking, doing yoga, playing hockey or tennis, or anything that gets you into motion, then do it. Just get moving!

Face facts: Smoking may provide a calming effect, but the long-term damage it does to your body more than negates its usefulness as a stress-reliever. So does drinking alcohol. Eating poorly also hurts, because a body that isn't getting proper nutrition is not in peak performance to cope with stress.

Now onto some stress-relieving strategies: Beyond her other skills, Gina Rubinsky is a certified yoga instructor, so she has the know-how to teach clients how to reduce their stress levels through exercise and mind-calming meditation. In particular, she emphasizes "meditation as a stress-relieving practice that helps to calm the nervous system and restore balance to the mind and body. In addition, it increases awareness of 'catastrophizing' thoughts that often accompany pressure-filled situations and compound our experience of stress."

But coping with stress goes beyond calming

the body and mind, Rubinsky said. It cuts right to a person's perception of themselves in the universe.

"People stress themselves out by living in the past and worrying about the future, especially during a recession," she said in an interview. "But the truth is that the past is a memory and the future just speculation. All we really have is the moment we're in, which I call the 'now.' I work to get my students to live in the now, to let go of their regrets and fears and instead consider what is actually happening to themselves. How do they feel? What thoughts are they having that are either helping or harming them? Chances are, when you cut through the regret and fears, you'll find that your current existence is not as stressful as you've been perceiving it to be. Ironically, once you realize this fact, your stress level will start to drop." To enhance this feeling, Rubinsky teaches her students how to control their breathing, to enhance their sense of calm and well-being.

Matthew Maher has a different take on reducing stress for others. He runs the gaming site www.MindHabits.com, which offers a face-hunting game designed to reduce stress.

"Research done at McGill proves that, when you show people images of sad and happy faces, depressed people are more prone to focus on the sad faces," Maher said. "Our game, which you can download and run for free before deciding to buy it, makes you hunt through a series of facial images for smiling faces as the clock ticks down. By motivating you to focus on smiling faces, the game actually raises your mood, improving your ability to deal with stress."

Sound too simple to be true? Playing the MindHabits game reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol by 17 per cent, says a study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

These are just two options for reducing stress in a recessionary world. There are many others: listening to music, reading, hobbies, or just doing whatever works for you personally to make life more enjoyable – as long as it doesn't abuse your body or health.

"Fundamentally, reducing stress is all about how we see our place in the universe and how we choose to affect this perception," Rubinsky said. "This is why dealing with stress requires more than popping a pill and watching TV; it's about life and choosing how to live it."

"The best news is that this choice doesn't have to cost you any money, and can't be taken away from you by a boss, bank or government!"