

# STRESS REMEDIES



HOW TO REDUCE STRESS AND  
BOOST YOUR HEALTH IN JUST  
15 MINUTES A DAY



DR. DONI WILSON

A Companion Guide to Dr. Doni's book, *The Stress Remedy:  
Master Your Body's Synergy and Optimize Your Health*

# **Stress Remedies: How You Can Reduce Your Stress and Boost Your Health in Just 15 Minutes a Day**

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[\*The Stress Remedy: Master Your Body's Synergy and Optimize Your Health\*](#)



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# Part 1:

## Has Stress Thrown Your Health Off Track?

One of the most important factors determining the state of your health is stress. And yet, stress is also one of the most misunderstood factors. When I ask my patients to define what stress means to them, I usually hear something like "pressure," "worry," or "too much going on for me to handle." These definitions aren't wrong, exactly. But they are certainly incomplete.

Here's a different definition of stress, one that you might never have considered:

***Stress is your essential relationship to life.***

I realize this is an unusual way of looking at stress, but in fact, it's simple biology. Life is a series of challenges: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Rising to the occasion to meet those challenges stresses our minds and bodies. But it is also stressful for us to live *without* challenge, mired in a life that we find too boring, confining, or routine.

We are stressed by the challenges we wish we could avoid—a loved one's illness, layoffs at work, the end of an important relationship. But we are also stressed by the challenges we actively welcome. Falling in love is stressful. So is giving birth and raising a child. Actors who live to perform and athletes who love nothing more than to play their chosen sport are stressed by playing and performing. Even watching your favorite team play a game can be stressful as you cheer for their successes and bemoan their defeats.

### **KEY IDEA:**

***Any physical, mental, or emotional experience that demands our participation is a type of stress.***

The great advantage of about adopting this view of stress is that suddenly, we become much more empowered. Rather than viewing stress as a bad experience that we would like to avoid, we can accept stress -- both positive and negative -- as an inevitable aspect of being alive. Then we can focus on supporting our bodies, minds, and emotions through stress—both the kinds we welcome, and the kinds we don't.

Supporting ourselves through stress is important, because stress is one of the most important factors that determines your health. Your relationship to the stress in your life determines whether you are healthy, energized, and operating at the peak of your abilities, or fatigued, unmotivated, and just dragging through the day. Stress is a major factor in just about every illness you might face, from acne, colds, and infections to diabetes, cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disorders, and cancer.

In Part 1 of this book, I'll explain to you why too much stress can throw your health off track. Then, in Part 2, I'll offer you a wide variety of approaches you can take to reduce stress and support your health -- in just 15 minutes a day.

## The Biology of Stress

Let's begin by looking at what happens to your body when you're stressed. While we each have individual responses to stress, these responses all fit within a certain basic biological response, known (not surprisingly!) as the **stress response**.

The popular term for this biological event is "the fight or flight response," leading us to imagine early humans faced with situations in which they needed to either fight or flee. But fight and flight are only two possible responses to stress. Early humans experienced the stress response when they had to "fight or flee," but also when they met other types of challenges, such as dragging a heavy fishing boat out of the water, giving birth, or trekking slowly across the tundra in a yearly migration.

It's more accurate, then, to think of the stress response as your reaction to any type of challenge. Your stress response kicks in whenever you need to mobilize your physical and mental resources. In fact, you experience the stress response any time you identify a goal and pursue it: when you gear up to ask someone out on a date, when you play a game that you'd like to win, or when you decide to drive halfway across town to get to the opening of that new movie you can't wait to see. In all of these cases, your stress response helps mobilize your mind and body for action.

### **KEY IDEA:**

***Any time you gear up for a challenge-whether you perceive that challenge as positive or negative, physical or emotional-your stress response is involved.***

Your stress response also involves the *sympathetic nervous system* -- the part of your nervous system that prepares your body to take action.

Let's take a closer look at the sequence of events involved in a *healthy* stress response.

### **Step 1: Your brain perceives a potential or actual challenge.**

The first thing to remember is that stress begins in the brain. Your brain decides what is and is not dangerous to you, so that it can decide when your system goes on "high alert" and when it can remain "at ease." Your brain also decides what is and is not desirable to you, deciding when you need to mobilize your physical and mental emotional resources to pursue your goal, and when the prize is just not worth the effort.

One of the great things about stress, I've found, is that it lets us know what is important to us, what matters most. If you're playing a game of basketball and you really want to win, your stress response will be on high alert as you mobilize all your resources to think clearly, notice opportunities, and respond quickly and effectively. Likewise, if you're going on a significant job interview, completing a

major assignment, giving a talk to a group of colleagues, or conducting an important meeting, your stress response will be in high gear.

The stress response doesn't necessarily make you feel nervous, anxious, or even pressured. You might revel in the challenge before you and really enjoy the opportunity to perform at your best. Or perhaps you feel a mix of emotions: nervous *and* excited, pressured *and* motivated.

However, you personally experience the stress response, the net result is that you are alert, focused, and ready to take action, thanks to the biological support that your stress response provides.

Although you experience the stress response in your body, it always begins in your brain. If you perceive a person as a possible threat, your body goes on high alert when that person is in your presence or even when you just imagine that you might run into them. A friend meeting that same person and perceiving no threat might be completely relaxed.

Likewise, if you can't wait to see that new movie and your friend doesn't really care, your stress response will be on high alert, all geared up to pursue your goal, while your friend remains calm and indifferent. Your stress response always starts in your brain, with the decision that something matters to you.

## **Step 2: Your brain cues your hypothalamus as well as the sympathetic nervous system.**

Your *hypothalamus* is an organ located deep within your brain, right at the base of your skull. In evolutionary terms, it's one of the most ancient parts of your brain, much older than the rational *cerebral cortex* that is located up around your forehead. The cerebral cortex is the portion of your brain that evaluates, judges, and makes complex decisions, like, "Would I prefer that shirt in red or blue," or "How do I multiply the square root of seven by the square root of 11?" or "What's the best way to execute a marketing plan that will actually sell this product?" Logical, rational, and nuanced decisions are made in the cerebral cortex. Your hypothalamus, by contrast, has a much simpler vocabulary: "Mobilize" or "don't mobilize."

I'm exaggerating just a bit, because your hypothalamus does distinguish between, say, "mobilize a lot," or "mobilize a little." If you are suddenly confronted by a ravening tiger or a four-alarm fire, your brain will cue your hypothalamus to put your body on high alert. If you see Bob in the office break room and you'd just as soon not talk to him right now, your brain will cue your hypothalamus to prepare your body for a much smaller challenge. But your hypothalamus can't tell the difference between, say, running into "annoying Bob," catching a glimpse of a new romantic prospect, and needing to make progress on a pressing deadline. All three challenges "feel" the same to your hypothalamus: There is *some* type of challenge, and your body needs to mobilize for it.

Part of this mobilization involves the sympathetic nervous system, which originates in the spinal cord. Cued by the brain, this portion of your nervous system prepares your body for action.

**Step 3: Your hypothalamus cues your *pituitary*, which in turn cues your *adrenal glands*.**

This whole system is known as the HPA axis, short for "hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis." You don't really need to remember this term, but if you do any other reading about stress, you're likely to run into it. In fact, optimally the HPA axis cues the adrenal glands to make higher levels of the hormone cortisol in the morning, and then gradually lower levels throughout the day until evening, when cortisol levels reach their lowest amount while you sleep. So, the HPA axis creates the circadian rhythm as well as the stress response.

**Step 4: As it proceeds, the HPA stress response releases a cascade of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, even while the sympathetic nervous system also releases adrenaline.**

We'll learn more about these key hormones later. First, let's focus on some of their most immediate effects, all of which are part of helping your body to mobilize for a challenge:

- You breathe faster, so you can get more air into your lungs in case you have to fight, flee, or otherwise exert yourself.
- Your heart rate increases and your blood pressure rises, so that you can get more blood into your muscles, making them stronger and giving them more stamina.
- Blood rushes from your stomach to your skeletal muscles, because in the face of a challenge, digesting food is clearly less important than being able to exert your strength.
- Your blood sugar rises and stays high, so that you have extra energy available for your efforts (which is why you are usually not hungry while you are stressed).
- Your stomach acid increases while your digestion overall becomes less efficient (which is why stress leads to so many digestive issues!).
- Your pupils contract, helping you to focus better.
- Your mind is flooded with stress hormones that, at least temporarily, can help you think more quickly and clearly, and with better focus. Recall how a caffeinated drink can make you feel sharper and quicker -- that's an artificial way of stimulating this response.

As you can see, the stress response is designed to help your body and mind respond at their best. You want the most physical strength and mental alertness that you can possibly have. The more important the challenge is to you, the greater your stress response will be.

Of course, as with many things in life, the key is moderation. Too much stress can have the opposite effect: your body becomes paralyzed and instead of fighting or fleeing, you freeze. Your mind feels "on overload" and you can't think clearly about what to do next. Instead of a pleasurable boost of energy, you feel a paralyzing jolt of fear. This is because the hormones and neurotransmitters which cue the stress response are thrown off track by recurrent and/or chronic stress, leading to imbalances throughout the body including in the digestive tract, immune system, hormones and neurotransmitters.

Ideally, though, the stress response deepens your access to your own power, giving you the physical and mental resources that you need for the challenge at hand. Whether you are fighting for your life, running a race, hurrying to meet a deadline, or asking the potential love of your life for a date, your stress response is there to help you perform at your best.

**KEY IDEA:**

***The purpose of the stress response is to help us mobilize our physical and mental energy for the challenges we face.***

**Step 5: The stress response subsides and the "relaxation response" begins.**

When the cortisol in your system reaches a certain level, it sets off a feedback response telling the brain to turn off the HPA stress response, so that cortisol levels come back to normal. As we shall see, this balance between the stress response and the relaxation response is crucial for optimal health. During the stress response, your body was geared for physical action and mental focus. Digestion was relegated to second place, as did healing, recuperation, and repair. Instead, all of your body's resources were focused on meeting an important challenge.

But what happens when the challenge is met, or when you can't pursue it any further that day?

Ideally, at that point, your breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate return to normal. Blood returns to your stomach, and your stomach acid levels rise. Your blood sugar drops, and you might even feel hungry.

The relaxation response is sometimes nicknamed the "rest and digest" reaction. This is a fairly accurate nickname since your best digestion takes place when you are most relaxed. Sexual arousal is more likely to happen in this phase, as well: it's often hard to feel sexy when you're focused on a challenge.

The relaxation response is also what makes it possible for us to sleep. During sleep, the body has the opportunity to repair any damage that occurred during the day, to rebuild what was torn down and to restore what was depleted.

Think of the stress response as a great expenditure of resources -- mental, physical, emotional. The relaxation response is when you have the chance to restore those resources: through sleep, through eating and digesting your food, through allowing your body and mind some "down time" to recuperate from their efforts.

In fact, optimal health occurs when we can expend our resources to the fullest -- and then restore them completely. Expend... restore... expend... restore: an endless cycle of stress alternating with relaxation. Illness occurs when this balance gets out of whack, most often when we are stressing our bodies relentlessly, with not enough replenishment and restoration.

**KEY IDEA:**

***In a healthy body, the STRESS response is always balanced by the RELAXATION response. The resources expended through stress are always restored through relaxation.***

## **When Your Stress Response Just Won't Turn Off**

In a healthy body, the stress response turns on...and then off, allowing the relaxation response to take over. You work hard during the day, and then you rest in the evening. You gear up for a sudden challenge, and then you let go of the tension and return to a relaxed state.

In this balanced state, stress is tolerable, even enjoyable. At worst, life is full of manageable crises that are laid to rest at the end of each day. At best, life is full of exhilarating challenges that bring out your best, leaving you satisfied and fulfilled.

For many of us, though, the balance has tipped. We can begin to feel as though our stress response is permanently on, with not nearly enough relaxation to balance things out.

There are a lot of ways that your balance can tip too far towards "stress." Perhaps you are hit with a challenge that, at least for a while, seems too big for your system to handle, such as the unexpected death of a loved one or the chronic illness of a child. Perhaps you are facing a series of difficult situations, such as the loss of a job followed by a host of financial problems. Or perhaps you're simply dealing with unremitting stress, a seemingly nonstop round of days that are too busy, filled with too many demands from others and too little time for yourself.

Another way you can overstress your system is through what I call "synergy disrupters": seemingly trivial patterns that disrupt the synergy your body needs to function. Your body needs a regular infusion of protein, high-fiber carbs, and healthy fats, so when you miss or eat an unbalanced meal, that is a synergy disrupter. Your body needs regular, refreshing sleep, so skimping on sleep is another synergy disrupter. If you eat foods that your body can't tolerate well - foods that trigger an immune response or that contain pesticides -- that is yet another type of synergy disrupter. Many of my patients stress their bodies in this apparently insignificant way, creating numerous health problems as a result.

What happens when your stress response is "on" for too much for the day, either because of life events or because of synergy disrupters? In that case, your body is flooded far too often with *stress hormones*.

In the right amounts, stress hormones can be energizing, motivating, and exciting. But when your stress hormone levels are off, you might feel anxious, exhausted, unmotivated, edgy, irritable, or some combination thereof. You are likely to experience a variety of stress-related symptoms, including headache, indigestion, frequent colds or infections, skin problems, issues with menstruation or menopause, and sexual dysfunction. You are also putting yourself at risk for more serious disorders, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, autoimmune conditions, and cancer.

Part of why your stress response seems to remain permanently "on," is because your feedback loop has stopped working right. As you recall, when the HPA axis is operating in a healthy fashion, it triggers the release of cortisol...and then high cortisol levels turns off the HPA response. But when your system becomes overwhelmed or stressed-out, the feedback loop stops working properly! Cortisol no longer turns off the HPA stress response. Even though the stress is over, the stress response continues!!

Cortisol is an extremely powerful hormone. At the correct levels, it leaves us feeling energized and motivated. Too much cortisol, by contrast, continually disrupts our digestion, immune, nervous system and other hormones.

This is why balancing the stress response and the relaxation response is so important, both for your daily well-being and for your long-term health.

**KEY IDEA:**

***When the stress response is not sufficiently balanced by the relaxation response, both your daily well-being and your long-term health are at risk.***

## **Stress Hormones: The Doubled-Edged Sword**

Since both the positive and the negative effects of stress are initially transmitted through the stress hormones, let's take a closer look at two of the most important: adrenaline and cortisol.

### **Adrenaline: Preparing for a Challenge**

Adrenaline plays a crucial role in revving you up to meet challenges, take action and respond to threats. While "adrenaline rush" isn't exactly a scientific term, it's not a bad description of the way adrenaline flooding through your body can make you feel: keyed up, excited, alert, empowered.

Some people feel anxious and upset in response to this flow of hormones, and some people feel thrilled, almost to the point of becoming "adrenaline junkies" -- another unscientific term that has some truth to it, since people who become used to frequent adrenaline rushes might feel that life seems flat and dull without them. Like so much else in health care, however, your response to adrenaline depends both on your personal temperament and the particular situation you face. An emergency room doctor or nurse might be exhilarated by the life-or-death situations that each night brings...while dreading the news of a loved one's illness. An executive might revel in the challenges of brokering a deal...while feeling paralyzed by a spouse's request for a divorce. Each of us has our own personal relationship to stress -- and that relationship might also change over the years, as our relationship to life itself changes.

Whether you're filled with excitement or dread, however, adrenaline is involved any time you face a significant challenge. And when your adrenaline levels are either too high or too low, you are likely to experience a number of symptoms, including fatigue, depression, anxiety, brain fog, lack of motivation, and sleep problems.

## Cortisol: The "X" Factor

The other key hormone involved in the stress response is *cortisol*. This little-known hormone is actually plays an even bigger role in our life and health than adrenaline. In fact, cortisol is so tremendously important in our health and well-being that I consider it the "x factor" underlying just about every health problem we face. When our cortisol levels are optimal, we feel terrific. When our cortisol levels are off, we feel anxious and unsettled; fatigued and unmotivated; or, sometimes, both.

After all, stress is the primary condition of life. And cortisol is how we experience stress. Whether we feel exhilarated, thrilled, and energized, or listless, jumpy, and depressed, cortisol is likely at the root of our experience.

Cortisol has a profound effect on our entire biology. It affects our endocrine system, which produces all our hormones, including thyroid hormone (which regulates metabolism), insulin (which regulates blood sugar), and our sex hormones (estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone, which regulate sexual function, menstrual cycles, and menopause). Cortisol has a profound effect on our digestion, contributing to a condition called leaky gut and disrupting the balance of healthy bacteria in our intestines. Cortisol also disrupts our immune system, leading to allergies, autoimmunity and/or inflammation. It also affects our *neurotransmitters*: the brain chemicals that determine energy, mood, mental clarity, focus, and sleep.

Cortisol cues our body to store carbohydrates as body fat, so it plays a huge role in weight gain, diabetes and fatty liver. It is a major contributor to anxiety and depression, as well as insomnia. When our cortisol levels are optimal, we feel mentally sharp, clear, and motivated. When our cortisol levels are off, we tend to feel foggy, listless, and fatigued. Cortisol also affects our blood pressure and circulation; our lungs, muscles, and bones; and even our skin and hair.

As a practitioner, my first step in almost every situation is to measure my patient's cortisol levels. Almost always, if someone is having health problems, their cortisol levels are out of balance. Until we can restore optimal cortisol levels, my patient's health problems will continue. And when cortisol levels return to optimal, good health will surely follow.

### **KEY IDEA:**

***Excessive stress throws our cortisol levels out of balance, and numerous health problems are the result. Restoring optimal cortisol levels is the key to good health.***

# QUIZ:

## Is Stress Disrupting YOUR Health?

Does stress play a significant role in *your* life? The sad truth is that many people do not realize they are stressed until it's begun to compromise their health. That's why the first step in reducing stress to *know* you're stressed.

Stress shows up in our minds and emotions as well as our bodies.

First, let's look at your **mental and emotional state** right now. Put a check beside every one of the following statements that you feel applies to you:

- I frequently worry or feel anxious about my life, work, health, or family.
- I often find myself search on the Internet about my health, especially late at night.
- I can never seem to get enough sleep and rarely sleep 7-9 hours at night.
- I often feel as though I can't turn my brain off.
- I am frequently overwhelmed.
- Much of the time, I am exhausted.
- I always seem to have long lists of things to do that I can never finish.
- I am often emotional, weepy, and distressed.
- I am frequently irritable, jumpy, or annoyed.
- I often feel as though I don't know what to do or where to begin.
- I often can't think clearly.
- I feel forgetful a lot of the time.
- I have too much to do and too little time to do it!
- I just don't feel like myself.
- I wish I could just "get away" or "make everything stop," but I can't even imagine being able to.

And now, let's have a look at **how stress might be showing up in your body**. Put a check beside every symptom that you experience frequently or regularly.

- Headaches or migraines
- Feeling light-headed or near fainting
- Increased sweating
- Frequent colds or infections
- Acne or "bad skin"
- Feeling stiff and achy all over
- Digestive problems: nausea, indigestion, heartburn, pain, bloating, bowel changes
- Fatigue
- Difficulty falling asleep

- \_\_\_ Unable to stay awake: falling asleep in front of the television, at a movie, or just sitting down for a while
- \_\_\_ Difficulty losing weight

Now, count the total number of checks above. Here's how to interpret your score:

**0 checks: Healthy stress/relaxation response.** Congratulations! You are experiencing minor, manageable stress and seem to have a healthy balance of stress response and relaxation response. Check out Part 2 for some additional suggestions to help keep you on track.

**3-5 checks: Moderate issues with stress.** You are usually able to balance your stress and relaxation responses, but the balance is probably tipping a bit too far on the "stress" side. The suggestions in Part 2 can help you rebalance your life and support your health.

**6+ checks: Significant issues with stress.** Like so many others, you struggle with a day that is too full of demands from others and offers too little time or support for yourself. Take heart—even 15 minutes a day can make a significant difference in how you feel, mentally, physically, and emotionally. Part 2 of this book offers suggestions that will fit even into a busy schedule and that can help you replenish your depleted resources.

## Stress Solutions

So, what's the solution? How do we get our cortisol back to a healthy level?

First, I encourage my patients to avoid synergy disrupters by eating and sleeping in the ways their bodies need. In Part 2, I will share with you my recommendations for how to support your body physically through diet, sleep, and exercise.

Some of my patients come to the conclusion that they need to make significant changes in their lives, either to reduce sources of stress or to alter their attitude to stress. Sometimes they seek help from a therapist, religious counselor, or meditation instructor, discovering new ways to respond to stressful situations or rethinking situations that they find especially stressful. Some make major life changes like finding a new job, starting a business, going back to school, leaving a relationship, or beginning a new relationship. They embrace the notion that life will always be stressful in some way, but they decide to choose challenges they will find more fulfilling.

In many cases, though, much smaller solutions can have an enormous impact. In Part 2, I share with you a cornucopia of 15-minute stress remedies that can help you restore and replenish your resources. As you will see, these remedies have been scientifically shown to create health benefits, often by lowering cortisol levels while inducing the relaxation response.

As I say in my book [The Stress Remedy](#), we all have individual stress responses. My goal is always help each of my patients support their bodies to create an optimal stress response. The simple remedies I offer in Part 2 are an excellent way to begin.

**SIDE NOTE:** I often suggest that my patients take specific herbs and supplements to help support healthy cortisol levels. As this is a huge subject, I won't be talking about it in this brief e-book. But if herbs and supplements are something of interest to you, you might wish to explore the options in my online shop at <https://www.drdonistore.com> or learn more about this approach in my book, [\*The Stress Remedy: Master Your Body's Synergy and Optimize Your Health\*](#). You might also wish to check out my [Stress Remedy Program](#), which includes a 21-day meal plan, protein shake powder, and leaky gut healing supplements. If you feel you are experiencing adrenal distress, you can also download my 35-page eBook [A Guide to Adrenal Recovery](#) for free, simply by signing up for my [Weekly Wellness Wisdom](#) newsletter.

Alternatively, if you feel you need more personal attention, I encourage you to [set up an appointment with me](#) or with another functional medicine practitioner.

## Part 2:

# Rebalance Your Stress Response in 15 Minutes

One of the best things you can do for your health and well-being is to rebalance your stress response. If you can optimize the levels of your stress hormones, particularly cortisol and adrenaline, you'll have the energy and motivation to respond to the next challenge in a healthy way.

I find it fascinating that so much new research supports the effect on our stress hormones of such seemingly simple remedies as listening to music, gardening, or sitting quietly with a cup of tea, not to mention such time-tested stress relievers as yoga and meditation. Of course, you don't need to understand the science to try out any of these "stress remedies." But I think that knowing how powerful they truly are will help motivate you to find 15 minutes to rebalance your stress response, reset your brain chemicals to healthier levels, and then return to face your day.

### Prevent Stress by Caring for Your Body

There are several ways to ensure that stress plays a positive, energizing role in your life, rather than allowing it to become a source of ill health. One key way to prevent stress from derailing your health is to eat, drink, sleep, and exercise in the ways that best support your body:

- **Eat according to your physiology.** A key aspect of minimizing the stress on your system is to eat in a way that fits your physiology. The least stressful and most supportive way to nourish yourself is to eat five or six small "half-meals" each day, with each small meal including the correct balance of proteins (40%-45%), carbs (40%-45%), and healthy fats (10%-20%). At least one of those "meals" can be a protein shake or smoothie. This way of eating helps to balance blood sugar, optimize cortisol levels, and correct your metabolism.
- **Drink plenty of filtered water.** To find the amount you need, divide your body weight in half. That's how many ounces of water you need to drink throughout the day, even if you don't "feel thirsty," and you need even more if you are drinking caffeinated beverages, if you are engaged in vigorous physical activity, or if you are in a hot climate. Your thirst monitors don't really reflect your body's need for water, yet when your body becomes even slightly dehydrated, your stress response begins.
- **Get 7.5-9 hours of refreshing sleep each night.** We all need sleep -- and we need it even more if our waking hours have been full of stressful challenges. Even when we experience these challenges as positive -- a new romantic interest, an exciting project at work, a vacation full of thrilling adventures -- our body needs time to relax and recover from the demands of the day. In fact, while we sleep, our cells go through a self-cleaning process that is essential for long term wellbeing.
- **Exercise at least 15 minutes a day, five days a week.** Your body was born to move, and when it doesn't get that opportunity, you will find it very difficult to maintain optimal health. Of course,

exercise itself is a form of stress -- a physical challenge to your body -- but paradoxically, it also helps to release stress. Several studies have shown that regular exercise is associated with decreased anxiety and depression, as well as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.<sup>1</sup>

## **Stress Remedy Type 1: Reconnect with Yourself**

A plethora of research demonstrates that stress has a major impact on depression and anxiety. This makes sense when you consider how significantly the stress hormone cortisol affects our *neurotransmitters*, the biochemicals that determine mood, energy, and focus. Fortunately, the research also demonstrates that the stress response can be rebalanced through yoga, meditation, and massage therapy.

For example, a very exciting study conducted by Aetna Insurance among 239 employees explored the effects of a therapeutic yoga program and a mindfulness program. People in both programs showed significant improvements when compared with a control group that was given no treatment. Gains were recorded in the areas of perceived stress, sleep quality, and "the heart rhythm coherence ratio of heart rate variability," which is a scientific measure of stress and heart function.<sup>2</sup>

Another study of 24 emotionally distressed women revealed that their stress had significantly decreased after they participated for three months in an Iyengar yoga class-participation that also improved their psychological outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Yet another study discovered that yogic breathing could reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>4</sup> A fourth study found that mindfulness meditation-a program that trained participants to pay attention to their body and their breathing-helped people modify their brain waves, which suggests to me that they could thereby modify their stress response.<sup>5</sup> A similar study conducted by Spanish researchers found that people in the health-care industry-a notoriously stressful environment-were able to reduce their stress significantly by taking a class in mindfulness.<sup>6</sup>

Yoga and meditation require some study and effort. Listening to music, though, is something that you can do easily, almost anywhere -- and yet the stress-balancing effects of music have also been well-documented. Research shows that music decreases cortisol levels while raising *endorphins* -- hormones that contribute to improved mood and a sense of wellbeing. Listening to music also stimulates an increase in oxytocin, the bonding hormone, as well as being shown to relax muscles and improve mood.<sup>7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup>

A team of Portuguese researchers investigated the role of music in relieving stress among pregnant women awaiting amniocentesis. They discovered that even half an hour of listening to music both decreased blood levels of cortisol and resulted in the women reporting themselves as less anxious. These effects were significantly more pronounced than among women who spent the same amount of time either reading magazines or sitting in the waiting room.<sup>15</sup>

In Taiwan, researchers explored the effects of music on stress among nurses, given that nursing is a particularly high-stress profession. A group of 54 nurses were studied while either sitting quietly or listening to soothing music that they themselves had selected. Measurements of heart rate, blood pressure, finger temperature (a stress indicator), and cortisol levels showed that music was

significantly able to affect all four of these measurements, helping the nurses to balance their stress response with a relaxation response.<sup>16</sup>

I find it fascinating that simply listening to music can alter the level of stress hormones in our blood, as well as relaxing our muscles and lowering our blood pressure. I think it's a powerful testament to the ways that stress is often experienced on many levels -- mental, emotional, physical, biochemical -- all of which affect our health and well-being. Our goal is never to eliminate stress completely. That only happens when you're dead! Rather, our goal is to balance our stress response with a relaxation response, so that our bodies have the chance to replenish their resources in time for the next challenge.

## **Stress Remedy Type 2: Connect with Others**

Connecting with others physically or emotionally has been shown to increase *oxytocin*, a stress-reducing hormone related to bonding. For example, massage has the ability to rebalance the stress response by decreasing cortisol, a primary stress hormone, while also increasing serotonin and dopamine. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that helps create serenity, optimism, and self-confidence, while dopamine is associated with motivation, excitement, and pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, research shows that talking with a loved one can decrease cortisol, increase endorphins and oxytocin, relax muscles, and improve mood. As the mother of a young girl, I was fascinated by an article in *Scientific American* that reported on a study in which young girls were given stressful tasks. Some of these girls were then allowed to call their mothers, while others were not. The girls who talked with mom showed decreased blood levels of cortisol and increased levels of oxytocin, the bonding hormone that also helps to rebalance the stress response. Girls who hugged their mothers in person had a similar response.<sup>18</sup>

Connecting with dogs and cats also has a positive effect on levels of cortisol, endorphins, and oxytocin, as well as relaxing muscles and improving mood. A recent study published in the *International Journal of Workplace Health Management* showed that employees who were allowed to bring their dogs to work showed a decline in stress throughout the work day, even while people who had no dogs or who did not bring in their dogs reported increased stress.

A review of research on pet owners found that owning a pet -- particularly a dog -- had numerous health benefits. Some of these benefits might have resulted from the exercise that dog owners get from walking their pets, which forced the owners to be less sedentary. But the study also found that pet ownership was associated with "improved mood and emotional state," lower blood pressure, and other stress-balancing effects.<sup>19</sup> Even short-term exposure to a dog lowers cortisol levels and heart rate.<sup>20</sup>

As a cat lover from way back, I was happy to come across a University of Minnesota study finding that owning a cat was associated with reduced risk of death from heart attack or stroke. While this reduced risk might be attributed to a number of factors, we can certainly infer that decreased stress is at least partly responsible.<sup>21</sup>

These studies are important, because they show that relationships to other living creatures -- whether human or animal -- are significant factors in our health. Next time you feel like calling a friend or playing with your pet, imagine the extraordinary impact that connection can have on the levels of stress hormone in your blood, as well as on your mood, energy levels, and sense of well-being. The positive effects of connection are not just "in your head." They are also in your biology.

### **Stress Remedy Type 3: Give Your Brain a Break**

A fabulous way to rebalance your stress response is to give your brain a break. Reading an enjoyable book or article, sipping a cup of tea, or eating a square of dark chocolate are all ways to lower stimulating neurotransmitters and cortisol and bring your brain chemistry back into balance.

Of course, the best possible break for your brain is 7.5 to 9 hours of refreshing sleep each night. But throughout the day, reading, tea, and chocolate can also help soothe your brain.

As with other stress-balancing effects, research has shown that both reading and drinking tea can decrease cortisol, increase endorphins and oxytocin, relax muscles, and improve mood. Reading works its magic quickly: just six minutes of reading has been associated with a slower heart rate and muscle relaxation. Drinking tea likewise has significant stress-balancing effects.<sup>22</sup>

Now, here's some news that you will really like: An article in *LiveScience* reported on a study linking the consumption of that amount of chocolate each day for two weeks with decreased levels of cortisol. Remember, though, that chocolate still contains sugar and lots of calories, so make sure you're eating the chocolate in moderation!<sup>23</sup>

### **Stress Remedy Type 4: Enjoy Nature**

Getting out into nature, whether for a bike ride, some cross-country skiing, a leisurely stroll, or simply to sit quietly in the sunlight, has been known to lower stress and bring all of the body's core systems back into balance. Gardening, caring for plants, and enjoying nature have all been shown to decrease cortisol, boost endorphins and oxytocin, relax muscles, and improve mood. So has simply taking a walk.

A survey reported by the Alzheimer's Association focused on the stressful role of caregivers. According to the survey, 60 percent of the caregivers studied reported that they felt relaxed when they gardened. A study conducted in the Netherlands found that gardening could actually help to lower cortisol as well as boosting mood among people who had just finished a stressful task.

One of the reasons that gardening and spending time in nature help to rebalance the stress response is because anything that requires "involuntary attention" helps us to restore our resources. As you recall, the stress response helps us mobilize ourselves to exert ourselves physically and focus our minds. Our pupils even contract to help us look more sharply and attentively. Letting our eyes go soft and our attention go where it will helps balance the focused intensity of the stress response.

A literature review concerning the elderly engaged in gardening in natural settings found numerous benefits, including stress reduction as well as decreased pain, improved attention, less agitation, fewer falls, and less need for medication and antipsychotics.<sup>24</sup>

In my opinion, the rebalancing of the stress response was a significant factor in the other benefits because the cortisol produced by the stress response is so deeply involved in the neurotransmitters that determine our mental and emotional functioning, and our pain response.

Nature is such a powerful stress-balancer that even if you can only look at pictures of natural settings, you will derive a significant benefit. Many health-care facilities are taking advantage of this fact by decorating rooms with images of nature and natural objects, so if you find it difficult to spend much time outdoors, consider this alternative for yourself.

### **Stress Remedy Type 5: Experience Emotion**

An extraordinarily effective way to rebalance your stress response is to experience emotion, which is known to stimulate both the hormones and the neurotransmitters that lower stress. Studies show that **laughter** can lower your cortisol levels while raising your endorphins and oxytocin, relaxing your muscles, and improving your mood.

Numerous studies have linked laughter to lowered cortisol. For example, a 1989 study published in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* linked "mirthful laughter" with decreased cortisol levels.<sup>25</sup> Again, once we understand the powerful effects of cortisol, we understand that rebalancing cortisol levels would itself support immune function, reduce pain, and reduce the risk of numerous diseases in addition to those of the cardiovascular system.

Laughter is a powerful stress reliever; other emotions can be as well -- especially if they are shared. A study conducted among young female students who were given stressful tasks to perform and then invited either to talk about their negative emotions or to talk objectively about the task. A second portion of the experiment compared students who spoke emotionally and received empathic responses with students who spoke emotionally and received no response. While simply expressing emotions and receiving empathy did not in itself relieve stress, believing that communication had been heard and understood did relieve stress.<sup>26</sup>

**Writing in a journal** is also a terrific way to balance your stress response. A study published in *Psychotherapy Research* found that people in therapy who wrote about their emotions had less anxiety and fewer symptoms of depression than a control group of patients that did no writing. The journal-writers also made better progress in therapy.<sup>27</sup>

Research likewise linked expressive writing to fewer symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and depression.<sup>28</sup> And a study published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology* showed, once again, that when post-traumatic disorder survivors engaged in expressive writing, their cortisol levels dropped and their mood improved.<sup>29</sup>

## Making Time for Stress Remedies

If I had to guess at the most common sentence I hear from my patients, it would probably be, "But I don't have time!" Almost by definition, almost all of my patients feel stressed and overwhelmed, which, as we have seen, is a major contributor to the health problems that caused them to come to me in the first place. And since they do feel stressed and overwhelmed, suggesting that they make time to balance their stress response -- to get adequate nourishment, sleep, and exercise, let alone to take even 15 minutes a day for the stress remedies I have described in this book -- can often seem to them as though I am simply adding to their list of stressors, rather than helping them find relief.

I must admit, I often share these feelings. As a busy practitioner who maintains offices in three separate locations several hours apart, and as a single mother who shares joint custody for a very active 11-year-old daughter, I know what it feels like to feel stressed and overwhelmed. I know it can be challenging to find a few spare minutes in a busy day, and I know that it can sometimes seem impossible to muster the mental energy to try something new -- even something as simple as sitting in your backyard enjoying a moment of sunshine, or putting on your headphones and listening to 15 minutes of music on your lunch hour.

So if you, too, feel busy and overwhelmed, take heart. You *can* rebalance your stress response, and you *can* find time to put some of these stress remedies into practice. Here are my suggestions for how to make time for stress remedies:

- **Start small.** If you can't find 15 minutes, try for 5, or even one. When you wake up in the morning, give yourself 60 seconds to breathe deeply and clear your mind. When you lie down to go to sleep, try meditating for just 60 seconds. Use these little changes to inspire you to work your way up to bigger ones.
- **De-stress your meals.** One of the greatest stressors you can subject your body to is eating while stressed. As we've seen, digestion takes place during the relaxation response, while the stress response mitigates against good digestion, creating still more mental and physical stress. Even if you only have 15 minutes to eat, try to make that a special, stress-free time. If you're eating at the office or on the run, put on your headset so you can listen to soothing music while you eat and take 10 deep breaths before you take your first bite. Eat slowly, chewing and savoring every mouthful. You will be amazed at how creating calm and peace around your mealtimes helps you replenish your mental and physical resources.
- **Pick your favorite stress remedy.** What means most to you? A chat with mom or with your best friend? A beautiful piece of music? A delicious square of dark chocolate? A steaming cup of fragrant tea? You can enjoy each of these remedies in less than 5 minutes-but to do so, you have to know how much you will enjoy them and commit to making them happen:
  - Schedule in that phone call with your loved one -- even if it's only 5 minutes long. Often when we are stressed, we begin to feel as though "nothing will make any difference" and we stop taking care of ourselves.

- Bring headsets with you so you can listen to music in those little downtimes that you can't use for anything else: while you're waiting for a call to be returned, when you're traveling, in the few minutes before a meeting or an appointment begins. Now that you know how powerfully music can rebalance your stress response, take advantage of its power!
- Buy yourself a bar of chocolate when you go shopping and then wrap each square separately when you get home. Every morning, drop a square into your bag or briefcase.
- Carry your own teabags, portable water heater, or thermos so you can take a 5- minute "tea break" whenever you have some "between" time.
- **Remember that rebalancing your stress response will make you more efficient!** You'll be a better worker, parent, friend, and spouse when you're feeling relaxed, clear, and replenished. Taking a 15-minute or even a 5-minute break at work will make the next several hours far more productive. Taking 15 or even 5 minutes away from your family will make you better able to enjoy them and nurture them when you return. It can be hard to interrupt the flow of one stressful demand after another with a refreshing, rebalancing "time out." If you can manage it, though, you'll be struck by how much better you function as a result.

Throughout two decades of practice, my respect for the power of the stress response and for the importance of balancing it with the relaxation response has only grown. Stress is the essential condition of our lives, the root of our experience, and the foundation of our health. A healthy stress response can be the basis for a fulfilling and joyous life. I wish you all the best on your journey towards vitality and balance.

I hope you found some useful information in this brief introductory e-book. For more detailed information on stress and stress remedies, I encourage you to check out my 340-page book, [\*The Stress Remedy: Master Your Synergy and Optimize Your Health\*](#), available at [www.TheStressRemedy.com](http://www.TheStressRemedy.com).

**For step-by-step guidance implementing Stress Remedies**, you might want to check out my [Stress Remedy Program](#). There's a 7-day program for a quick reset, and a 21-day program, which includes supplements to get you started with healing the leaky gut. Both programs come with a gluten-free, dairy-free, egg-free and sugar-free meal plan, a pea protein powder to make protein shakes, and daily email tips to help you implement "CARE" activities:

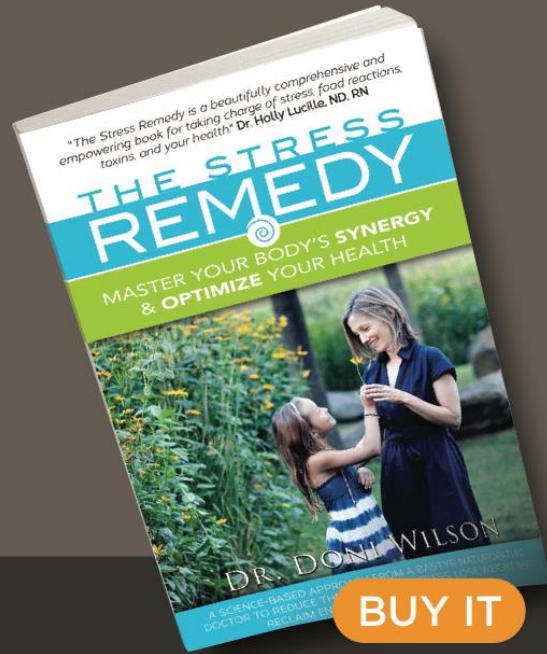
- Clean Eating
- Adequate Sleep
- Reducing Stress
- Exercise.

The Stress Remedy program makes it easy for you to integrate everything you've learned in this eBook, with personal guidance from me along the way.

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## About Dr. Doni Wilson



**Dr. Donielle (Doni) Wilson** is a nationally celebrated naturopathic doctor, certified professional midwife (CPM), doula and nutrition specialist, who is dedicated to maximizing the health of women, men and children, through natural approaches. She has a doctorate in naturopathic medicine from Bastyr University, as well as a bachelor's degree in nutrition and a bachelor's in science from Oregon State University. She is also the author of the book [\*The Stress Remedy: Master Your Body's Synergy and Optimize Your Health\*](#), in which she explains how and why we experience stress, how it impacts our health and wellbeing, and how we can reclaim our health naturally. She is also the creator of the [\*Stress Remedy Program\*](#) -- a popular nutritional regimen that reduces

inflammation, heals digestion, supports detoxification, and brings the body back to a state of optimal health.

Dr. Doni started her career in a naturopathic clinic helping patients with environmental and food allergies. There, she created a specialized approach to food intolerances and "eating for health." She then established started her own naturopathic practice in 2001. Deeply dedicated to addressing ailments related to stress, Dr. Doni went on to develop a methodology that examines how stress impacts each of us differently. Through this approach, she devised a variety of treatments for stress- related illnesses that include utilizing nutrients and herbs to balance hormone and neurotransmitter levels. Her approaches make life-changing differences in health conditions such as depression, anxiety, PMDD, insomnia, and more. She also helps women with hormone imbalances, menstrual irregularities, cervical dysplasia, difficulty conceiving, and recurrent infections.

Widely renowned in her field, Dr. Doni was awarded the NYANP Naturopathic Doctor of the Year award in 2004. She has served as the president and executive director of the New York Association of Naturopathic Physicians (NYANP), and is a member of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP), Connecticut Naturopathic Physicians Association (CNPA), American Association of Naturopathic Midwives (AANM), Pediatric Association of Naturopathic Physicians (PEDANP) and Association for the Advancement of Restorative Medicine (AARM). She is regularly called upon to discuss naturopathic medicine in the media and has recently appeared in *First for Women Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *Inspiyr Magazine*, *Elle Magazine*, *Easy Eats Magazine*, *Natural Health Magazine*, *Kiwi Magazine*, *Mind Body Green*, *Energy Times*, *Integrative Clinician Journal*, *Integrative Medicine Journal*, and *Fox News*.

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