

From Stress to Strength

Part 2- Strategies to Beat Stress

Dealing with stress is something I'm still trying to manage. It's my nemesis but I'm working on it. The top tips below are some useful nutrition and lifestyle strategies you can use to try and reduce the impact that stress has. I've chosen 5 that I think are particularly beneficial. I've mastered all but one over the past few years when trying to reduce my stress. I've chosen one at a time and focused on that one alone to try and get it right. The hardest one for me is having more time to myself, to relax and not think about everything I need to do. I thought this one would have been the easiest. It involves not having to do anything but it definitely is the one I have found the most challenging.

Tip 1: Reducing refined sugar

Why? - This can cause your blood sugar to spike which in turn puts pressure on your adrenals and increases cortisol. Keeping your blood sugar stable also can reduce cravings, improve energy, sleep and mood and also help balance hormones.

How? – Swap any high sugar snacks like cakes and biscuits for lower sugar option: have some berries and handful of nuts, a couple of squares of 70% dark chocolate. Keep the sugary snacks for occasional treats. You could also make your own healthier version of treats (see my Snickers bar recipe to try in the recipes section - this totally stops me craving chocolate).

Tip 2 - Including protein

Why? – Eating enough protein plays a vital role in our health and wellbeing and is involved in many, if not all processes in the body. Therefore, making sure we get enough of it is important when dealing with stress. One example is that protein is needed to make chemical messengers called Neurotransmitters, they play an important role in our mood and sleep which can both suffer when we are stressed.

How? – include protein foods in each meal and snack: meat, fish, eggs, dairy, nuts, seeds, beans, lentils. Often breakfast is a meal where people struggle to include protein. Try poached eggs and spinach on wholegrain toast, Greek yogurt with berries and seeds. If you love your toast swap your usual butter and jam for nut butter and sliced banana.

Tip 3 - Increasing fruit and veg

Why? – Including a variety of fruit and vegetables will provide you with a nutrient dense diet and provides a range of vitamins and minerals. These are often depleted when we are stressed, like the B vitamins, vitamin C and magnesium. They also increase fibre which will support digestive health and help balance blood sugar as fibre slows down the digestion of our food (keeping energy stable and increasing satiety).

How? – Green leafy veg in particular is great for stress as they include the three micronutrients mentioned about (and many others). Add them to soups, smoothies, salads, they are also great with eggs.

Tip 4 – Eat Healthy fats

Why? Eating the right kinds of fat has many benefits - it makes hormones, helps us repair ourselves and provides us with energy, just to name a few. Stress is also inflammatory, so can overwork our immune system and use up lots of energy, including omega three fats which have anti-inflammatory properties.

How? Healthy fats include nuts, seeds, olive oil and avocados - try and add them to your meals e.g. handful of nuts with your oats, olive oil in a salad dressing. Oily fish is a great source of anti-inflammatory omega 3 so try and include 2-3 portions of fish like salmon, mackerel or sardines per week. There are also vegetarian sources like walnuts and flax seeds.

Tip 5 – Increase YOU time

Why? This takes pressure of our adrenals and promotes what we call 'rest and digest' mode as opposed to 'fight and flight mode' which is the state we are in when we are stressed, busy or even have negative emotions. In the rest and digest state we are calmer, our heart rate is normal and our digestive system is working at its best (fight and flight mode switches it off so if you're stressed a lot your digestive system could suffer). This strategy can also help improve your mood and anxiety.

How? It is really important that you choose something that YOU want to do. It needs to be an activity that can help you switch off. Some examples could be having a relaxing bath before bed, going for a relaxing walk somewhere green. Some people enjoying practicing mindfulness through meditation but it could be by mindful walking or colouring. Creative activities like knitting or being outside with nature and gardening can also work for some people.

