



MONTREAL PSYCHOLOGY CENTER

With so much written about how to manage stress, why are so many people still stressed?

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Go to any book store or surf the net for information on mental health and you'll find a plethora of information on how to manage stress. Much of it is good information; however, most of it is a re-hashing of research which is two to three decades old. The great majority of what is being published today has its roots in Meichambaum's Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) program developed in the early 80s. This is a scientifically-validated program which applies the tools of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to stress management. There are three phases in SIT: (1) identification of stressors, (2) acquisition of coping skills, and (3) application of acquired skills. First, clients engage in self-monitoring in order to collect data regarding current stressful experiences. The client is expected to provide information concerning conditions preceding the onset of stress, factors that worsened the sensation of stress, and the impact on emotions and physiology. Second, clients learn a set of coping skills meant to help them deal with their identified stressors. These coping skills include (a) cognitive restructuring or replacing automatic negative thought related to current challenges with more realistic/adaptive thoughts; and (b) several behavioral competencies including problem-solving techniques, time management skills, anti-procrastination techniques, relaxation techniques, and communication skills. Lastly, clients are encouraged to apply their new coping skills, first in imagery rehearsal, and then during real life stressors.

That's all very nice – so why are so many people still stressed? A stress program capable of producing enduring change must provide skills for coping with existing stressors and skills for dealing with new stressors. Present-day methods focus almost exclusively on providing relief from current stressors without paying enough attention to relapse prevention. To my knowledge, little is known about how effective we are at preventing relapse by preparing people to cope with new sources of stress. Based on the degree of stress in our society however, we can infer that the successes of our current methods have somewhat limited staying power.

This begs the question, what can we do to provide more enduring stress relief? The answer to this important question might be to attempt to alter the core beliefs or the very mindset responsible for generating stress. There is a great deal of evidence which indicates that stress is associated with the core beliefs of low self-worth (low self-esteem), pessimism, and the conviction that life events are uncontrollable (external locus of control). Thus, if we can teach individuals to be more positive about themselves and the future stress can be reduced significantly. Some of you might be asking, "Can we actually alter fundamental beliefs?" While the jury is still out on this question, preliminary evidence indicates that we can (Manning et al., 1994; Seligman et al., 1999; Godbey & Courage, 1994).

Interestingly, the same mindset that is at the core of why stress is so prevalent in our society is also implicated in happiness.



That is, happy people are more likely to have high self-esteem, be optimistic about the future, and believe that they can control what goes on around them. Successful attempts at improving self-esteem, optimism, and locus of control would therefore not only help people respond to stress more adaptively, it would also have the added benefit of providing the foundation for happiness. And, since happiness is incompatible with stress, cultivating positive emotions can be a powerful stress-reduction tool with long-lasting effects. The logic here is simple, in general, the happier we are the less stressed we'll be.

In the coming months, I will be providing stress seminars which go beyond what is currently available. My hope is that we can make the gains achieved through the existing stress management techniques more sustainable by:

- (1) altering the negative core beliefs associated with experiencing recurrent/persistent stress; and
- (2) fostering happiness by promoting the following behaviors; (a) living in the present, (b) creating meaning for one's life, and (c) building more intimate relationships.

If stress is a recurrent problem for you, re-visit my website soon for more details on my new stress management program.

The tools currently available to cope with stress have had staying power because they work. However, the pervasiveness of stress in our society speaks to the limitations of the available tools. It may be that the acquisition of effective coping skills temporarily negate the power of certain core beliefs to trigger stress, yet, as time passes core beliefs re-establish their power to impact perceptions and behaviors such that stress recurs. If the above is accurate, then a potential solution to the problem of recurrent or persistent stress would be to establish new and more adaptive core beliefs. It's time that our ways of dealing with stress evolve to be more enduring.