

A LINE ON LIFE

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Controlling Stress with Exercise*

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In a previous article, we covered some negative aspects of stress. In specific, we discussed the competitive, time-urgent, **Type A personality** that is two to three times more likely to die from a coronary problem. Does this mean that our competitive American ideal leads to an early death? Are there ways to reduce negative aspects of stress?

To answer this, we need to take a closer look at the Type A personality. The three major components of the Type A personality can be summarized as:

1. Speed-impatience
2. Ambition-competitiveness
3. Hostility-anger.

Of the three, only **hostility** seems to have no redeeming value. In previous years, a large group of men and women had been measured on a hostility scale. After 20 years, high hostility Type A people in this group were 50% more likely than low-scoring Type A people to have coronary problems. In fact, the higher hostility scorers had higher rates of death due to all measured causes.

In another study, 225 male physicians were measured on a similar hostility scale. Twenty-five years later, those with high hostility scores had coronary problems and mortality rates that were five to six times higher than low scorers.

Items from the hostility scales were carefully analyzed. Rather than just hostility, the scale seemed to reflect even more an attitude of **cynicism** — a contemptuous distrust of human nature and motives. It seems as if this cynicism factor leads Type A persons to have both high hostility and high mortality rates.

A more recent study by psychologists Salvatore Maddi and Suzanne Kobasa (1984) studied people who seemed to have many Type A traits and high stress. However, these people did not have higher rates of illness and death, and they were labeled **hardy personalities**. The study measured 700 AT&T executives who were working at the time of the stressful changes of the AT&T divestiture. The study compared 200 executives who indicated high stress — 100 who stayed healthy and 100 who got sick. The healthy executives were not younger, wealthier, better educated, nor of higher status than their sick colleagues. Both groups seemed to have traits typical of the Type A personality. However, in contrast to their sick colleagues, hardy personalities seemed to have three viewpoints that contributed to better health:

1. They had a sense of personal **commitment** to self, work, family and other stabilizing values.
2. They had a sense of personal **control** over their lives and their work.
3. They had a tendency to see life changes as **challenges** to master rather than merely as threats or problems.

If we are under a great amount of stress, how can we reduce its negative consequences? Vigorous exercises are a good anti-stress tool. Endurance exercises include walking, running, bicycling, swimming, rowing, and other activities. In fact, endurance exercises are **eustress** (pronounced "YOU-stress"). The term means

"good stress." When under other types of stress, people who exercise regularly stay healthier than those who do not exercise.



To reduce health risks (especially for your heart and lungs), about 3-4 times a week you need to spend at least 20-30 minutes at one or more of the above activities. To tell if it is eustress or not, your **heart rate** is your best indicator. Immediately after exercise, count your pulse for 10 seconds. Multiply this number by 6 to get your exercise heart rate for one minute. To estimate what your heart rate should be, first subtract your age from 220. After exercise your heart rate should fall between 60% and 80% of that figure. For example, if you are 40 years old, your exercise heart rate should be between a minimum of 108 ($180 \times 60\% = 108$) and a maximum of 144 ($180 \times 80\% = 144$). For a 50-year-old, the rate should range between 102-136.

Another method for keeping eustress from going sour is the "talk test." If you feel yourself becoming short of breath, see if you can talk comfortably while exercising. If you can, your level of exercise is right for you. If not, slow down. (Of course, if you are swimming, it is more difficult to do the talk test.)

The hardy personality can use endurance exercises in another way — to increase the sense of personal control over one's life. Sometimes you cannot avoid harmful stress, like an illness or impending divorce. It is important that you distinguish between what you can and cannot control. When your life feels out of control, you can regain some sense of control by taking on a new challenge. You can choose a new task to master. This could be almost anything - learning how to swim, making pots, tutoring a foreign student in English, just to mention a few alternatives.

**Exercise not only strengthens the body,
it gives you a sense of control over your life.**

However, endurance exercises seem to reduce harmful stress in two ways. In addition to exercise providing physiological eustress, you are gaining a psychological sense of control over your own life that helps to protect you from harmful stress. With each exercise session, you will be reducing the negative effects of stress and increasing eustress.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1995, pages 354-362.