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A Stress Odyssey

You don't need a rocket scientist to tell you when you're feeling stressed, but maybe you need one to tell you why, says Harriet Griffey. A space-age test devised for cosmonauts may have the answers.

Are you feeling stressed? Yes, of course you are. It's a stupid question, really - Christmas is just around the corner; work, children and your in-laws are demanding time and attention; neglected partners, seasonal illnesses - and who knows what else - are lurking in the wings to upset your carefully scheduled plans. We are told constantly that we live too fast and do too much, but few of us really know how stressed we are, and what effect it may be having on our health. Having altruistically agreed, for the purposes of research, to have my own stress risk assessed, I did a little totting up beforehand, using the Holmes & Rahe Schedule of Recent Life Events. The list was quite impressive: the recent death of my mother; my father's illness; my status as a single parent with two sons (one a teenager); a new partner; harassment from the Inland Revenue; a chronic back complaint; unpredictable work patterns; deadlines - even the Christmas season itself scores 12 points - and it seems I am close to an 80 per cent probability of developing an illness. Not a bad time to check out my real stress levels, and find out what I can do to counter the effects.

I went to the Penninghame clinic in central London to undergo my personal stress audit. Prior to my appointment I had to send off saliva samples and hair samples, to assess my adrenal stress index (the adrenal gland releases a hormone called cortisol in response to stress, an excess of which can be detrimental). Also included in the assessment was a consultation with a cranial-osteopath and naturopath. Perhaps the most revelatory part of the whole assessment was the GDV (Gas Discharge Visualisation) technique. Designed by Russian physicists in the 1990s when it was used to assess the stress levels of cosmonauts, it works by measuring the energetic discharge from the fingertips, via the application of a minute electrical charge. Stress-related illness is an increasing problem, not least because stress-related litigation in the UK rose from 516 cases in 2001 to 6,248 cases in 2002, so the relevance to companies of carrying out a physiological and

psychological stress audit on those 'most at risk is striking. That does not apply to me, as I am freelance, but the Health & Safety Executive are quite clear that employers have an obligation to carry out a stress audit of employees at risk. "It's very interesting, when assessing people, to ask how stressed they think they are," says Elena O'Keeffe, GDV operator and stress analyst at the clinic. "Some people come in complaining of terrible stress, but show fewer emotional or physiological signs of it than you would expect. While others, who claim to be perfectly relaxed and unstressed, show enormous levels of internal stress. And this is why the GDV Technique is so helpful in evaluating where the effects of stress are being felt, and what is needed to relieve it."
Recent studies of this technique have shown that a GDV operator can distinguish between external environmental influences on the body, such as those found in the modern workplace, and the internal stress-inducing factors, such as a nutritionally inadequate diet, lack of exercise and poor breathing habits. Clinical trials in both the US and Russia were carried out over 2000-2001 showing that the information gathered in this way was statistically reliable. Not only that, but the GDV test is non-invasive, quick and efficient: all that is required is that each fingertip is photographed, and the patterns that are revealed from the gas discharge give a picture of the body's energetic field. That's the science bit - but what did the GDV test show? Rather reassuringly, it showed that, emotionally at least, I deal very well with stress. I have, it seems, a (very good) stress resistance level of 3.5 (the range is 1-10). And my ability to deal with stress is apparently to do with my ability to respond to change. Mind you, we must bear in mind that this was a test carried out by someone with no knowledge of my character, other than what had been shared in the five-minute conversation prior to the test.
However, on the physiological side I was exhibiting a fair degree of stress on the GDV reading. There was an indication of a high adrenal function - borne out by my adrenal stress index results - an irritation in the colon showing a degree of irritable bowel syndrome, low activity in the liver, and a back problem writ large.
The downside of dealing well with stress emotionally, it would seem, is that the effect is accommodated by the body. Research has identified that the human body cannot handle long-term, low-grade stress without some kind of maladaption. What happens is that the body rewires itself to exist in this "hyper" state, so that even when the stresses are no longer present, the body still thinks they are. This is typical of high achievers in the workplace, who tend to experience burn-out and are also at greater risk of cardiac disease.

My next appointment at the Penninghame clinic was with Dr Tsenko Mack, who specialises in cranio-sacral osteopathy, which she uses to assess stress levels in the body. "I start by focusing on the tension between the sympathetic and parasympathetic parts of the nervous system," Dr Mack explains. "The nervous system is like the conductor of the body. To try and relieve localised areas of stress without putting the nervous system in neutral is not very productive. Areas of localised stress become more accessible to treatment once the nervous system's control is neutralised."
Finally, my nutritional state was assessed. The effects of long-term, low- grade stress can be aggravated by poor nutrition. In my case, magnesium levels were low - which is very common in women - and as magnesium helps the muscles to relax, this is important. As my cortisol levels were very high in the morning, this suggested low night-time blood-sugar levels and insomnia. Nutritionist Deborah Eagle recommended I took a supplement to

help balance my blood-sugar levels. Increasing my protein intake at meal times, she said, would also help.

Although my stress levels are manageable, the assessment means that the steps I take to address the impact on my physical health are the right ones. Of course, the lifestyle changes I ought to make are important too, but they will just have to wait. At least until after Christmas.

See www.penninghame.com for further information about the stress risk assessment; see www.korotkov.org for more about GDV

You know you're stressed, so now what?
It's all very well identifying stress now do something about it.

Meditation
This allows the mind and body to calm themselves. Professor David Fontana, who has practised meditation for more than 25 years and has a PhD in psychology, recommends meditation to relieve stress and anxiety, promote relaxation and enhance creativity. His book, *Learn* to *Meditate* (Duncan Baird, ?9.99), is an excellent, straightforward introduction.

Exercise
Regular exercise releases muscle tension and encourages mood-enhancing hormones. Walking, running, swimming, taking a yoga class or learning Pilates will help to relieve stress and also improve sleep.

Bodywork
If your body is in a constant state of muscular tension, it is difficult, without external help, to unblock. Hands-on therapies, from massage to osteopathy, can help make all the difference.