

HPA-D Treatment - Part 3

Hey, everyone. In this presentation, we're going to continue discussing the treatment of HPA axis dysfunction, in particular, behavior and lifestyle modification. As I mentioned before, I believe that this is arguably the most important aspect of healing HPA-D, and there are several different considerations within this category: reducing perceived stress, controlling light exposure, getting enough sleep, optimizing sleep hygiene and sleep nutrition, optimizing physical activity, time outdoors, play, and pleasure. So, let's talk about each of these in a little more detail.

Reducing perceived stress



Reduce total exposure to **psychological and emotional stress**



Mitigate the **harmful effects of stress** you can't avoid

Let's start with reducing perceived stress, which, as you know by now, is one of the four key triggers of HPA axis dysfunction. There are two areas of focus here. One is reducing total exposure to psychological and emotional stress, and the second is mitigating the harmful effects of stress you can't avoid.

Reducing stress

1

Learn to
say NO

2

Avoid **people who
stress you out**

3

Go on a
news fast

4

Give up **pointless
arguments**

5

Limit your
to-do list

6

Stop **internet
debating**

In terms of reducing the amount of stress you experience, there are a few simple tips that we can offer our patients.

The first is to learn to say no. It's really important for us to know our limits and be aware of overcommitting ourselves. The second is to avoid people who stress us out. Of course, this isn't always possible, but often we do have a choice to limit our time with these people who might be prone to drama or conflict if we can't avoid them entirely.

The third suggestion is going on a news fast, or at least limiting your exposure to the news. So much of media coverage today is sensationalistic, and I myself like to keep up with current events, but you can find more neutral sources of news and use the internet, of course, to just get the information you need and not be bombarded with a bunch of other stuff you don't need to know about.

A fourth suggestion is giving up pointless arguments, particularly internet debating, which is number six, but I listed these separately because you can get immersed in pointless arguments off the internet as well. This is just a big energy drain and a stressor, and generally, it doesn't do anything to advance your goals, particularly if both sides are entrenched, as they often are, and that's in some ways the definition of a pointless argument.

The fifth suggestion is to limit your to-do list. This might seem somewhat counterintuitive, especially if you've taken my productivity course, but part of that course, if you recall, was reducing or eliminating unnecessary commitments and obligations that do not help you get closer to achieving your mission and purpose in life, so ask yourself which items on your list are essential, and then see if you can cross anything off that isn't.

Finally, number six, which we already briefly discussed: reduce your exposure to online stress. Debating people in comments threads and on Facebook and things like that is rarely fruitful. Very rarely do people actually change their opinion or point of view based on that kind of dialogue. Ask yourself as you're doing it if it's really furthering your mission and getting you closer to where you want to be or just adding unnecessary stress.



Of course, our patterns of thought affect our perceptions of stress, so consider these different strategies for decreasing the stress that we can't avoid in our life.

Number one is to reframe the situation, so this means looking at it in a more positive light or in a different context. For example, if you find yourself stuck in traffic, can you enjoy a podcast or use that time as an opportunity for contemplation and solitude instead of struggling against something that you can't control?

Number two is to lower your expectations and standards. There is that saying: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." You know about the 80-20 rule, which we discussed in the productivity course, so let good be good enough. In some situations, of course, there are times where you have to strive for that extra 20 percent, but in many cases, doing that just adds unnecessary stress.

Number three is to practice acceptance. This means learning to accept the things we can't change. That doesn't mean we give up, submit, or stop trying to make positive changes in the world, but it

does mean that in each moment we recognize that the moment is as it is and that struggling against the moment as it is just creates additional suffering.

Fourth is to practice gratitude. Try keeping a gratitude journal and writing down three things from each day that you're grateful for and how your actions contributed to those, if they did.

Number five is to cultivate empathy for yourself and for others, and this is something that can go a long way toward reducing stress because it allows us to have compassion for ourselves and other people and understand where they're coming from and be less identified with our position.

Number six is to manage your time. Having careful boundaries around your time, again, learning to say no, which we talked about a couple slides back. These things are really important when it comes to reducing or mitigating the stress that we can't avoid.

Stress is, of course, inevitable, and it isn't even all bad. In fact, there are some studies that suggest that how we perceive stress actually affects how it impacts our body. For example, if we are having palpitations, sweaty hands, and other physical symptoms that could be associated with stress, and we interpret that as excitement or just a normal part of energy moving through our bodies in response to an event that is happening in our life, that actually has been shown to change the way that stress impacts physiology, whereas if we interpret those signs and symptoms as something bad or harmful, then those symptoms actually will be more harmful. This is relatively new research, and it shows that how we frame the stress that we experience and even the physical sensations that it produces can have a big impact on stress's effect on our life.

When the total amount of stress we're experiencing at any given time exceeds our ability to cope with it, that is another situation where stress starts to reek havoc on our health, and this is where stress management becomes vitally important. It starts with a commitment to yourself. Taking time for yourself is not selfish. It helps you to be the best mother or father, spouse, friend, employee, employer, or person overall that you can be. This is obvious when we say it out loud, but it's too often overlooked.

General tips for stress management



Start **small**



Make it a **priority**



Be **gentle** with yourself



Choose a **mix of practices**

There are a number of different clinically proven ways to manage stress from yoga to deep breathing to biofeedback, and we'll discuss some of them in more detail shortly. Before we do that, I want to start with some general tips you can offer your patients about beginning a stress management practice.

The first is to start small. If you're new to meditation, for example, just start with five minutes a day instead of committing to an hour a day. Then you can gradually increase that time as you become more accustomed to the practice, and this is far more likely to lead to success than if you start with a big commitment right up front, that you'll be more likely not to follow through with.

Second, make stress management a priority. Consider actually scheduling it into your calendar just as you would any other important task for the day.

Third is to be gentle with yourself. It's okay to miss a day, and it's okay if you don't feel like you're good at it. That's not necessary to follow through with your commitment, and it's inevitable that when you're starting something new you're not going to be good at it, so don't let that get in the way.

Fourth is to choose a mix of practices that is the best fit for you. Some days sitting still on the cushion, sitting meditation practice, might feel almost impossible, but yoga or another movement-based practice such as tai chi could be a better fit, so find a combination of practices that you can use in different situations.