

exercise your way to health



stress

exercise plans
to improve your life

debbie lawrence and sarah bolitho



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Back Pain
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Type 2 Diabetes
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exercise your way to health



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Debbie Lawrence

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foreword

Stress is, of course, part of our everyday life. All biological functions require a stimulus; hunger and thirst, for instance, are regular stressors that provoke the essential reactions of eating and drinking. Our fight or flight response, by which the body is instantly prepared for physical activity in the face of potential danger, has been a major factor in human survival for millennia.

However, in our less primitive, more industrialised society, physical action in the face of threat and pressure is often impossible. An impoverished single mother, receiving yet another bill, cannot simply attack the postman; a driver caught in a traffic jam and late for an important meeting cannot simply leave his car and jog to the office. Under these circumstances, the stresses are not released and, over time, they can lead to serious health problems including high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep disturbance and bowel disorders.

Learning to manage stress appropriately and to react to it in a less-damaging fashion is a vital skill of modern living, and using exercise as the tool is the perfect biological response. This clear guide on specific exercise programmes designed to help you cope with stress is written by two very experienced professionals in the field; it is an excellent means of both prevention of ill-health and promotion of wellness. I recommend it to anyone who has ever felt stressed!

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introduction

The chances are that if you have picked up this book you want to know more about stress, how it affects your body and how you can manage or reduce your own stress levels. Perhaps you are concerned about your health because you are using other habits (alcohol, drugs, medication and/or cigarettes) to manage your stress? Well done! This is your first step in taking positive action to help yourself.

This book provides a simple overview explaining how stress levels can build up and the impact they have on our health. It is also full of valuable lifestyle tips and exercise ideas to help you make changes to your own stress levels and cope with stress.

Start exercising your way to health now!



part 1

understanding stress

>> What is stress?

Although most of us will feel stressed or under pressure at some point in our life, stress is not actually an easy thing to define. Stress is a psychological condition that influences how we feel, think about and respond to the events, demands and challenges in our daily lives, and affects our perception of our ability to cope with these demands and experiences.

Life provides us with many potential *stimuli* or *stressors* both big and small: the work we do, the state of the economy, paying our bills, our relationships with friends and family, the way we think about ourselves, queuing in a supermarket, driving in traffic, world peace, exams, whether we take enough exercise, our habits, getting married or divorced ... The list of potential stressors is endless and will change at different times throughout our lives.

However, not all stress is bad – we need some stimuli to function and to develop. It is when we are overwhelmed with stimuli or are less able to cope with them that stress takes over. It is a bit like watching a film: if it has a very complicated plot our minds have to work hard to try to make

sense of it so we may leave the cinema with a sense of frustration. Too simple and we may get so bored that we fall asleep. If we'd read the reviews or the plot line before going to the cinema, we might have had a clearer idea of the plot and been able to follow it – or decided it wasn't for us and chosen a different film instead. The reviews would have been a useful source of information, or 'resource'.

Coping with stress requires us to use our own resources – things that help us cope with the demands of life. They are often simple habits such as taking a breath before we speak, spending five minutes a day in quiet reflection, getting tomorrow's clothes or bag ready the night before, having a list of due dates for insurance and bills, and so on. Resources may also be more complex or may come from other sources such as visiting a therapist or learning new skills to help with our personal development; or they may be from the people around us such as babysitters, parents, friends and family, who already do, or would like to, help out.

So what are your existing resources? Try taking a pen and paper and writing them down, using the resources log in the appendices on page 000. On one side put your resources, and on the other describe how you use them. For example:

Resource

- Keeping close to my family
- My computer
- Being organised with paperwork

Uses

- Advice and emergencies
- Online shopping / banking
- Paying bills on time

If our coping resources are strong and we use them, we are better equipped to recognise and deal with unwanted stress, but if they are weak or we are reluctant to use them, we may not be able to identify when we are stressed or be able to cope with it. Developing these coping resources is like learning anything – practise, practise, practise! The more we do something, the better we get at it so the more we take a deep breath before we react in a stressful situation, the easier it is to do and it will eventually become automatic – which is good.