

IS

# STRESS

Really Killing You?



By LaKeisha Fleming

It was a typical Tuesday afternoon as I drove to pick up my son from school. The sun warmed my face, and a gentle breeze made the drive seem casual, pleasant, peaceful. Seemingly out of nowhere, my vision became blurry in one eye. My head began pounding mercilessly. I had to drive with one eye open, while fighting dizziness, to make it to a safe stopping place. I felt like I could hardly breathe. I was in trouble. Something was terribly wrong. A visit to the doctor would subsequently confirm what I already suspected: I was stressed out, and physically paying the price.

The American Institute of Stress (AIS) notes on its website that 2014 data shows 77 percent of Americans "regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress." Night sweats, heart palpitations, teeth grinding, nausea, vomiting, and extreme fatigue are some of the many physical signs that can point to excessive stress levels.

But everyone deals with stress. In fact, merely living life invites it — from work to juggling family schedules to traffic (downtown connector, anyone?) Job pressure, money concerns and health were cited as the top causes of stress by AIS and the American Psychological Association's 2014 statistics. Stress truly is a part of life. However, allowed to run rampant, stress can wreak havoc, leaving you physically, mentally, emotionally and even spiritually bankrupt.

Concerning, yes. Problematic, of course. But potentially deadly? Absolutely.

According to the Heart MD Institute, chronic stress, untreated for years, can lead to a multitude of heart problems. Although cholesterol and fat are often labeled the main culprits, the effects of stress can lead to heart attacks, heart disease, enlargement of the heart, and heart failure.

Stress can be a strong contributor to hypertension, as well as arterial disease. Gastrointestinal problems, such as gastritis, ulcerative colitis, and irritable colon can develop. While not deadly but certainly worthy of mention, obesity, menstrual problems, and psoriasis are potential stress-related problems. Loss of appetite or eating disorders can evolve. Insomnia is a frequent complaint of those combatting stress. A weakened immune system, leading to constant colds and sickness, is a byproduct of stress. And an upset stomach, along with constant headaches, is symptomatic of a stressful lifestyle.

Stress can lead to constant worrying and the inability to focus. Depression and anxiety can follow. Feeling overwhelmed, as if things are completely out of your control, is common; likewise, you might be easily agitated, frustrated, or moody. And of course, with so much weighing on your mind, quieting your thoughts to achieve some inner peace can seem virtually impossible.

Indeed, not getting a handle on stress can have dire consequences.



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The good news is that there is hope. Once you start listening to your body and recognize you are dealing with stress, you can look for a solution. There are a lot of ways to handle stress. The decision on how to proceed is up to you.

- I know my first step was to CUT BACK! I was running a small business, freelance writing, taking care of my two sons, volunteering at church and at my son's school, involved as a board member of my neighborhood association, and working with my husband in other business ventures. I was spreading myself too thin, taking little or no time for myself, and constantly on the go. In fact, it was a badge of honor in my mind to always be busy. I saw warning signs, I felt symptoms, yet I proceeded – that is, until my body gave me no other choice. Don't let this happen to you. Prioritize your life in a way that makes sense for you, and still allows you time to relax.
- Learn that the word "no" is a complete sentence. It can be a challenge initially. I

know it was for me. However, once I took ownership of my time and my schedule, it became easier to say no to one thing, so I could say yes to something more important to me. And it made me happier, calmer, and wouldn't you know it – less stressed.

- When you feel yourself getting stressed, stop everything. Breathe. Closing your eyes and breathing deeply can have a profound effect on your physical body, while also allowing you the opportunity to refresh and refocus, even if briefly.
- Regularly take breaks. Start small. Begin taking 15-minute breaks, daily. And a "break" of reading emails, checking texts or listening to voicemail does not qualify! Watch the sunset, take a bath, read a book, watch some mindless TV, meditate, pray. Work your way up to taking longer periods of time each day. Build days of respite and vacations into your schedule. One of my favorite things to do is take a "me" day. That may include grabbing my favorite magazine, and going somewhere for several hours just to read and relax – alone.

- Talk to someone. This can include a trusted friend or family member, although you may need to seek the services of a trained therapist. Counselors can prove invaluable, providing coping techniques and mechanisms to lower your stress level.
- Other helpful hints you can follow: eat properly, drink plenty of water, and get your rest! Naps aren't just for kindergarten anymore. If you can sneak in a power nap, even if it's just on the weekends, do it!

We do all have to deal with stress on some level. The key is learning how to handle stress, instead of letting it handle – or break – you.



*LaKeisha Fleming is the founder and president of Vision 2:2 Productions, LLC, a multimedia production company creating content for television, film and the internet. She is also a prolific writer, and her company provides magazine article, blog, script and press release writing services, among others. She's a loving wife and a proud homeschooling mother. Follow her blog at [www.andthatsmyreality.com](http://www.andthatsmyreality.com).*



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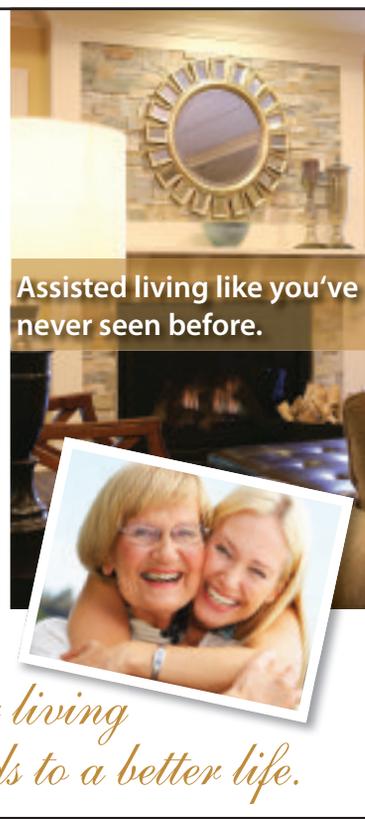
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