



## Delta Gamma Well Aware

Encompasses eight dimensions: Social, Spiritual, Physical, Emotional, Vocational, Intellectual, Financial and Leadership Development

### Worry & Stress: Reducing its Harmful Effects

Have you ever made a mental note of the number of minutes or hours a day you spend worrying? While waiting in line or driving in traffic do you find yourself focused on the stressors in your life as opposed to your successes? Worrying and stress are an increasing part of our daily routines. While worrying does alert us of danger, habitual worrying depletes our bodies' mental and physical energy supply. According to researchers, older individuals who constantly worry are 2.5 times more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease as worrying elevates stress hormones which may damage the memory areas of the brain.

### Damages from Stress

The heightened state of stress affects both your body and brain. Specifically, the increase work required to manage stress strains the heart, stiffens blood vessels, weakens bones, and hampers immune response. Prolonged periods of stress also increases your risk of obesity and developing type two diabetes because of the high blood-sugar levels your body maintains for quick energy in order to cope with stress. Heightened stress may also encourage you to develop unhealthy habits such as smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of exercise, overeating, and social isolation.

Besides the impact on the body, the brain is also affected by chronic stress. Cortisol, the hormone that regulates stress, acts as a toxin to the neurons related to memory. Therefore, increased production of cortisol causes memory loss over a prolonged period of time.

### Strategies for Reducing Stress

The key to stress prevention is identifying the source and eliminating or reducing its impact. However, some stress cannot be eliminated. The following strategies are recommendations to diminish stress and its effects.

- **Act.** Contemplating and agonizing over a situation continues to heighten stress levels. Acting on the stress will help address the problem providing you with ownership of the issues and a sense of power to manage the situation. Acting may also take the form of research as learning more about an issue provides additional tools and knowledge to address the situation.
- **Imagine Positively.** Often our worrying stems from imagining and visualizing negative situations. Instead shift the negative images to positive images. For example, if you are worried about a friend and the potential of poor test results, imagine your friend receiving positive news and the celebration you will plan for her.

- **Relax.** Meditation and yoga enable you to focus on the present instead of focusing on the items that cause worrying.
- **Keep a Worry Journal.** Frequently many of our worries never come to fruition and instead live in our imaginations. By keeping a journal of your worries you can review these stressors and notice how many do not actually happen.
- **Be Active.** Physical activity reduces stress hormones, increases the production of endorphins which enhance your mood, and relieves muscle tension.
- **Decrease Caffeine Intake.** Caffeine increases feelings of anxiousness serving to heighten your stress.
- **Reduce News Intake.** Media often reports negative stories that may lead to anxiety. Consider decreasing your intake of negative news.
- **Touch.** Whether we pet our cat, hold hands with someone, or give hugs, touch may shrink stress by reducing the production of cortisol, a stress hormone. Giving touch, as opposed to receiving touch, reduces stress levels more significantly. Touch therapies such as Reiki, reflexology, massages, or chiropractic care also have positive effects.
- **Find a Listener.** Individuals, who are able to share their worries with another individual who actively listens, find their stress levels decrease. When identifying an individual to be your “listener” consider the following suggestions associated with successful listening: (1) reduce internal chatter enabling you to stay more focused on the other person, (2) ask open-ended questions to enable the other person to share more deeply and thoroughly, (3) avoid interrupting as it sends a message to the other person that what you have to say is more important, (4) do not share your opinion unless asked, and (5) shy away from sharing your story as it minimizes the experience of the other person.
- **Be with Nature.** Sitting outside, taking a walk in a wooded park or along the water, and other outside pastimes reduces heart-rates, helping to reduce low-level stress. Note: watching nature television shows have not been proven to have the same effect.

While we may not be able to completely eliminate stress from our daily life, the above strategies provide tools to reduce worrying and stress, ensuring our body and brain do not suffer from the harmful effects associated with stress. However, if worrying interferes with your daily life, seeking assistance from a mental health provider is most important.

### Resource

To learn more about stress and its effects or purchase informational stress packets visit [www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org), the website for the American Institute for Stress.

### References

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The healing power of touch. (2006). *Self-healing*, 1.

Viewing nature reduces stress but only if it's real. Retrieved July 14, 2008 from [www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org)

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