**Less Stress Part 2 –**

**Make Your Environment Less Stressful**

When it comes to dealing with stressors and managing stress, we can have a great plan. We can have great motivation. We can have all the tools we need at our disposal. But if we ignore what's around us and how our environment affects us, we are ultimately doomed to fail. Because the reality is that an understanding of our environment and how things around us affect us allows us to work through or around those factors in our environment.

In this episode, I'll be focusing on how to handle the external things around you, your environment, and what you can do to increase your chances of success in healthier living, dealing with stressors and managing stress.

A quick story…a few weeks ago, I traveled for work. And when I travel, I usually take some exercise gear so I can maintain some semblance of a fitness routine, despite the challenges of exercising while traveling. And I thought I had a realistic idea of what I'd be able to accomplish during that trip. I figured I wouldn't have time exercise every day, so I decided to make it a recovery week. I'd get 15-20 minutes of stretching in each morning and possibly a massage at the spa to take care of some long-overdue muscle recovery that I'd been putting off. Well, needless to say, none of that happened. And it was because for me, the environment wasn't as conducive to my plan as I thought it would be. Long work days, evening events and working at night and early in the morning to get things done prevented me from setting aside the time needed to devote to my fitness. Instead, I prioritized sleep over fitness (which I don’t regret), because I was able to get adequate sleep each night. The point is that your environment gets a vote in your plan. Mike Tyson is quoted as saying, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." With everything that we attempt to do, with every goal that we have, we have to consider the external factors that will impact us.

Now, you may be thinking, "Look, I've lived with stress for a long time. So long, in fact, that it's normal to me. I've learned to live with it, and isn’t some stress just a part of life?" Well, you're right. You have lived with stress for a long time. It is normal to you. You have learned to live with it, and some stress is just a part of life. In fact, throughout the history of mankind, stress has served us well to preserve life. Stress provides a hormonal response to keep us alive.  If a tiger strolls around the corner, stress hormones are responsible for the fight or flight response. These are the same butterflies you get in your stomach when asked to do something that you're uncomfortable doing, like public speaking, for example. But the problem is that those intermittent stress hormones aren't meant to be elevated at constantly levels. Our lives today are filled with hundreds of smaller stressors that compound to keep us constantly worried about something. What was that ding on my phone? What did they think of my last social media post? Are they looking at me because of what I'm wearing? What did my boss think? I hope I can get through this. Do any of those thoughts sound familiar? Chronic stress, which is what we all experience now, is unhealthy. And the hormonal effects of chronic stress cause us to retain weight, which creates yet another stressor. We have to stop the cycle by taking action to counter it.

So the difficult thing in dealing with your environment as you try to reduce stress is that your environment is usually the thing that causes the stress that you're feeling. My advice is usually to control those things that you can control, but it's the things around us that we can't control that are causing us stress in the first place, right? But, although you may not be able to control some of those stressors like work, family, relationships, money or health, you can control some things in your life to help you manage and cope better. And indirectly, this will help you respond better to those stressors and how you feel about them. And ultimately that's how you can reduce your level of stress. So what can you do to help cope and to lower stress? The things that I always come back to are improving sleep, being more diligent at planning and organizing the time that belongs to you, exercising regularly, and eating better. And right away, you probably realize that these are the same things that generally lead to an overall healthy life. If you want to better manage stress, and those stressors are caused by things beyond your control, add some things to your life that you can control. Even small improvements in each of these areas of sleep, planning, exercise and diet can have huge benefits in your overall well-being and reduce the stress you feel.

I've been in the military for over 24 years now. I've had the opportunity to receive some of the best training in the world. And what makes good training effective is that it oftentimes puts you in uncomfortable positions, because it's in those times when you learn the most about yourself and you grow. You are intentionally stressed to see how you will respond and how to best improve. When many think of stressful or difficult military training, Navy BUD/S training comes to mind. BUD/S is the Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training that some of our nation's most elite special operators endure. And in talking to people who have gone through this training, I've been told that as difficult as it is, what makes it bearable for most is the coalescence as a team and going through the training together. When we're going through stressful times in our lives, the importance of a friend or support system cannot be overstated. If you want to not just make it through stressful times, but rather to thrive in those difficult times, don't go it alone. Enlist some help or lean on those close to you, or those going through similar circumstances. There is synergy in a group effort. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Another thing you outside of relying on a support system is changing your environment a bit to better your chances of success. Think about this…how do you feel when you walk in the house, the dirty dishes are overflowing from the kitchen sink, there are toys all over the floor, beds are unmade and the house is a mess? Whether we're talking about your home or apartment, your job, time commitments or your life in general, "housecleaning" is necessary. I should say that maintaining order is necessary. It's necessary to reduce stress and to keep you focused on the things that you need to focus on, versus worrying about things because of the disorder and disarray. Staying diligent about your environment, the things around you, your circle of friends, the number of obligations you commit [to...al](http://to...al)l of the things that go into your physical surroundings and personal network, your environment, affect how you feel. And it all affects how you approach situations in life, how you respond to things and the outlook you have of your situation going forward. Make your environment work in your favor, and you'll find that stressors are less frequent and easier to handle when they do arise.

Now I have to be honest. We all know that many times, stressors may spring from situations or circumstances that we didn't anticipate. Hurdles, if you will. But stress remains because we're forced to continue to navigate through those circumstances.  So, how do we handle those things? The stressors of life that pop up out of nowhere? Well, I've found that those hurdles that pop up are a lot easier to handle when I have some bandwidth in my life. And by having bandwidth, I mean when I'm not already maxed out on time, commitments, or on other obligations and responsibilities in life. When I'm thrown a curveball and I feel like I'm already at my limit, that's when the stress skyrockets for me. But if I'm in somewhat of a groove, staying disciplined in my life, planning prudently, and following a normal routine, it's easier for me to absorb those things that life throws at me. The way to handle things outside of your control is to have a handle on things you can control.

So now let’s talk a little bit about what it actually looks like to tackle stress as you consider the things and people around you in your environment. I talk about the healthy living triad of fitness, nutrition and stress management. Well, when it comes to stress management, you can do one of three things. You can counter the stressors, manage the stressors, or remove the stressors. Let's start with countering stressors.

By now, you know that adding small habits to your lifestyle, from exercise to healthy diet choices is the way to go.

The primary ways to counter stress is to exercise, eat well, and ensure you get enough rest. Exercise releases endorphins that quite literally make you feel better. And both exercise and better nutrition contribute to a better functioning body, which addresses one of the stressors that many of us have...our health. But I'm going to encourage you to get some rest too.

Sleep is one of the most overlooked and underestimated ways to counter stress. Today, we have busier lifestyles, more demands on our time, and that equals more stress. The demands of life tend to force us to prioritize time and efforts, and sleep often becomes the area where we compromise. I've seen this in myself over and over again. The National Sleep Foundation reports that 6 out of 10 Americans have sleep problems.

I cannot stress enough the importance of adequate rest. Those getting less than 6 hours of sleep a night increase their risk of cardiovascular disease by almost 50%, and the risk of stroke by 15%. Lack of sleep increases stress and negatively affects hormone levels (making us more susceptible to weight retention, by the way). And a lack of rest affects the immune system, making our bodies more susceptible to illness. On the other hand, benefits of sleep include increased energy levels, clearer thoughts, alertness, and better memory.

So, what are some things that you can do? First, control what you can control by going to bed. Most sources recommend 7.5 hours of nightly rest for adults, but sleep needs vary from one individual to the next. Optimally, you should get enough sleep that you wake up on your own (before your alarm goes off). When it comes to your support system, enlist the help of those in your household so that you can get to bed earlier. Discuss and set expectations such as others watching TV in another room vs. the bedroom when it's time for you to go to bed.

The quality of your rest is important too. Invest in a comfortable mattress. Turn off email and social media alerts. In fact, put the phone away altogether about a half hour before bed. And don't make checking your phone the first thing you do when you wake up. Finally, dark and quiet environments with cooler temperatures typically make for better rest.

The busyness of life will continue, but it’s important to make an effort to give yourself rest. Rest enables us to cope with the busyness of life, and leaves us healthier and feeling better. Remember, less rest equals more stress.

So if getting sleep is a way of countering stress, what are some ways in which we can remove our stressors? Sometimes we overlook this option, thinking that we're just stuck with the hand we're dealt. Well, I'm here to tell you that you do have the right to control portions of your life, believe it or not. You can, quite literally, incorporate more white space into your schedule. What?! That's crazy talk! Look, it's ok to take some time back for yourself. And how do you do that? By saying 'no.' By reducing your commitments. By reducing the number of things you're obligated to. Saying 'no,' goes back to the concept of controlling the things that you can control. And having fewer commitments means there's less in your "bag" that you need to carry. This gives you the opportunity to add some white space to your schedule. We've talked about the people around you, and the support system that's a part of your environment. Those close to you can help. But you have to make your intentions known. Sometimes those close to you won't know that you're tapped out, but once you let them know that, they're likely to understand when you say, "I can't commit this weekend guys. I have got to take some time to recharge." By being deliberate about giving yourself more time, the number of commitments drop, the more time you'll have to yourself, the less stress you'll have and the more pleasant it will be to be around you! Not to mention the fact that you'll free up some time to exercise, and likely improve your diet as you have more time to seek out, or prepare, and eat healthier food options. So those are thoughts on how to remove stressors.

Now finally, the third option of managing stress. Sometimes you can't just get rid of commitments and things in your life that cause stress. But when you can't get rid of it, you can attempt to manage it better. And largely, this comes down to planning and better organizing your time. What are some ways in which I do this? A basic step is to have a calendar... and use it to schedule what you'll do. This will allow you to identify times when you're overcommitted, but more importantly, it will bring some order to a usually chaotic time management system (that’s assuming you even have a time management system at the moment). Again, we’ve talked about how those around you in your environment have an effect on you. Well sometimes you can benefit from friends or coworkers by dividing and conquering things that need to be done. You know, it's called time management for a reason. You don't get any more or any less time than anyone else. So it comes down to how you manage your time. And while the amount of time in your life that's left for you to manage does depend on your level of obligations, commitments and involvement, how you manage the time you have will determine how effective you are at managing stress in your life as well.

Enough talk about stress? Remember, you can counter stress, remove the stressors, or manage those things that you can’t eliminate. The impact of stress in our lives is huge, but when we take the right approach and tackle stressors by considering how to leverage our environment, the things and people around us, we can lead a life of lower stress.

That’s it for this episode. I hope there’s at least a nugget that you can use here. Remember, if you like this, please leave a rating or a comment, and spread the word! And if there’s something else I can provide, drop me a line so I can give you the help and advice you need.

And don’t forget to download my “25 Healthy Habit Ideas for Busy Lifestyles” if you’re looking for a tool that can help you out with simple ideas on where to start. You can find it at tdfitness.net.

I’ll be back next month with the next episode in this Less Stress series, when we talk more about the process of reducing stress in your life. Have a blessed one! Coach T, out!