

**A** lot of supposedly fat-related diseases and health conditions sound suspiciously similar to those diseases and conditions that are also related to stress (for example, heart disease, high blood pressure/hypertension, arthritis, and some forms of cancer) — and no wonder! Living as Fat Girls in a fat-phobic society such as ours \*is\* stressful on a day-to-day level. So, those of us interested in promoting our personal health and well-being would do well to incorporate some stress-management techniques into our lives.

Some stress, of some sort, is inevitable to life in general, however. The key is learning to determine when you might be suffering from excessive, unhealthy amounts of stress. It's important to note that in many ways, it's chronic stress that's the real problem. Occasional bouts of acute stress are usually easier to deal with, while longer-term stress wears us down. (It's also true, however, that too-frequent episodes of acute stress can act in the same way as chronic stress in contributing to health problems.) There are many symptoms of excessive stress, including: headaches; neck and shoulder pain from excessively tense muscles; nervous twitches, tics, or general jumpiness; insomnia; increased susceptibility to colds, flu, and other illnesses, or illnesses that last longer than usual; jaw pains and toothaches from grinding teeth; headaches; appetite upsets (loss or gain); stomachaches and intestinal upsets, including constipation, nausea, diarrhea; increased frequency of cold sores or herpes outbreaks, mood alterations including irritability, anxiety, depression, and despair. (Whew!) Some more long-term effects of stress also include: a depressed immune system response, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and an increased risk for cancer and strokes.

Fortunately, there are a lot of strategies available to help alleviate stress, both in the short-term and in the long term, and on several levels, starting with individual changes and moving up towards more long-lasting and wide-reaching activities.

The two most important individual changes one can make to help reduce stress are to get enough sleep, and to eat nutritiously and regularly. These two are, in fact, probably the cornerstone of stress reduction. Eating and sleeping well ensure that your body has enough energy to cope with whatever is thrown at it during the day. Try to get around 8 hours of sleep if you can, or to take naps when possible. And try to eat nutritionally balanced meals. Detailed information on nutrition would fill another column (or two!), but one tip is to balance meals nutritionally through the week instead of day-by-day or meal by meal. This provides flexibility while still assuring good nutrition. Concentrate on getting enough vitamins and minerals, and don't worry so much about what \*not\* to eat as what to eat more of. Many fat women's anxieties and stresses center around food issues, so don't let the attempt to eat healthfully become another source of stress. Also, get lots

of fluids, preferably water or fruit juice if possible.

Movement can also help reduce stress, and help us feel more energetic and capable of handling life in general. Get out and move. Of course, finding ways to exercise in a fat-positive setting can be difficult, and again, suggestions on how to do so could take up another column. But some short suggestions include choosing to exercise in private, or better yet, with a group of other Fat Girls — consider, for example, scheduling a time to take over the neighborhood pool, or invite all your friends to go dancing somewhere. Find a level of activity that is comfortable for you — remember, the point is to reduce stress, not add to it.

There are a number of relaxation techniques that can help relieve the physical tension that stress produces in our bodies. Try deliberately tensing and relaxing various muscles in the body; this will teach you both how to recognize body tension, and how to dispel it. Plus, practicing can be a good stress-management technique in and of

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By Lori Ann Selke

itself. Tense and release shoulders, biceps, forearms and fists, jaw, stomach, calves, feet. Also, deep, slow, regular breathing can help calm and center yourself. (A lot of tension can be released through this method.) Try breathing from your stomach, hands on your belly so you can feel what's happening. Inhale slowly through your nose, filling your lungs up and pushing your stomach out. Hold for a moment, then slowly let the air out again through your mouth. Concentrate on feeling the breathing process, experiencing the sounds and sensations of breathing.

Another useful approach to stress reduction is what I call "sensual healing." Particularly for Fat Girls, it can be important to take time out to remind ourselves how much fun it is to have a body in the first place. Sensual healing encompasses a wide range of activities, from listening to good music, dancing, massage, soaking in a bubble bath, to filling your house with the smell of baking brownies. Some of my favorite suggestions include playing in the bath with animal sponges, bubbles, and lots of splashing; receiving an almond-oil massage; drinking mint tea after work, or buying myself flowers. Consider investigating herbal and aromatherapy techniques when trying this approach as well.

Another nice thing to do in the sensual-healing department is to surround yourself with images of big,

beautiful, fat women. Place them on your walls, taped to your computer, at work, wherever. (They can be hard to find! But worth the hunt. I like to collect postcards — they're cheap and relatively easy to find. Or cut out or photocopy your favorite pictorials from this magazine! If you feel the least bit artistic, have a go at making some images yourself, in whatever medium appeals to your artistic sense. Or just take photos of yourself or your fat friends looking happy.)

Another suggestion is to either get a pet for yourself, or spend time with someone else's. Sitting on the couch curled up with a cat, for example, can be extraordinarily relaxing. So can just staring quietly at a tank of fish, for that matter. But be sure you're ready for the responsibilities a pet involves.

Spending time with friends is another important stress management technique. Friends who you can vent to when necessary, and fat-positive friends who can understand the

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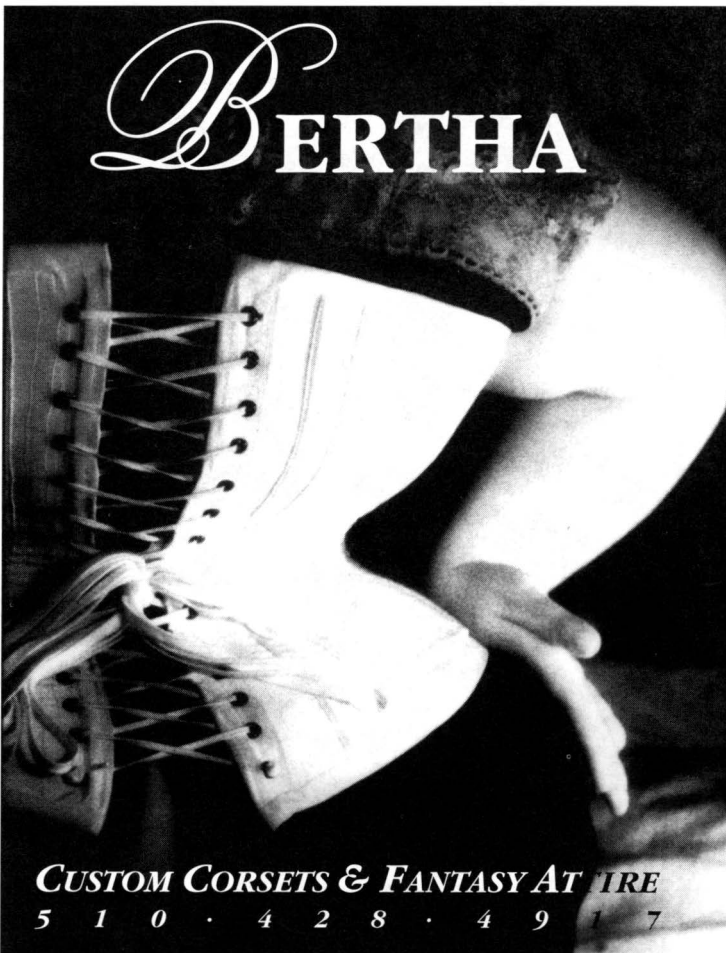
kinds of stresses you have to live with every day, are an important resource. Spending positive, "fun time" with these friends can be very relaxing and rewarding as well. They can provide an insulating layer between you and the phobic world-at-large. Just think of how less stressful shopping for clothes with a friend can be, just as an example.

While small-scale stress reduction is important, sometimes it can feel like it's addressing the symptoms without getting at the root of the problem — that is, without addressing the \*real\* sources of stress in our lives. Unfortunately, several of those sources are entrenched societal ideas about appropriate weight, size, and roles for women, and thus, are awfully hard to change. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try! Activism, and feeling involved in a movement to alter society's perceptions, can feel very liberating and invigorating, and is a good way of addressing, in the long-term, some of the sources of stress we all experience.

Not all activism has to be on the large scale, however. There are a lot of things that can be accomplished on the individual level. Write a letter to your congressman, or Lane Bryant. Or, write an article about fat issues and get it published somewhere. Put a bumper sticker on your car, or a sign in your window. Pull a prank of some sort (pranks can be truly wonderful stress-relievers!). Or print up a t-shirt or

sticker run and sell them or give them away to your friends. Organize a group in your hometown, or a protest at a local diet center. Hold an event, of whatever scale you feel like you can manage. A dance party for fat women, say, or maybe a sleepover. Joining groups that promote larger-scale actions, and participating in them, can also be a way to approach larger-scale activism.

Pick whatever level of activity you're comfortable with — remember, the idea is to \*reduce\* the overall level of stress in your life. Don't stress out over stress reduction! Don't take on too much at once, and put yourself and your needs first. None of this is supposed to be a chore — and if it starts becoming one, stop! Stress reduction is one of those things that, ideally, should be healthy and fun at the same time.



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