How to Manage Stress to Prevent Emotional Distress

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How is stress affecting your life? Chances are, if you’re reading this blog, you’re concerned about how stress is affecting your life. Long term stress is not good for us, nor for our families and loved ones.

We recently posted a blog on Cortisol and Toxic Stress and how this hormone, now called the stress hormone, can affect your weight and even your relationship with food. (Cravings, anyone?)

So although we started our conversation about stress, I want to go back to it, to continue to shine some light on it. In this article, we take a deeper dive into how stress can turn into distress, and how we might challenge ourselves to “cambiarelchip,” and take better care of ourselves.

What is Stress? A simple definition of stress is that it is our body’s reaction to change. All of us have stress; it is a universal human condition. But what about when stress turns into distress? And what about when being in distress is your new normal? Do you feel irritable and tense a lot of the time? Do you have trouble sleeping at night or do you feel like you sleep too much? Do you feel like you are in a constant state of “nervous?” Does this sound like you? You might be experiencing what psychologists call “emotional distress.”

In their excellent book on change, Changing for Good, A Revolutionary Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward, Prochaska and his colleagues, Drs. Norcross and DiClemente, talk about emotional distress as the “fever of mental health,” and when I read it being described in that manner, it made perfect sense to me.

I remember my tías talking about their friends or relatives who were going through hard times... “Pobre, Gloria, she has suffered so much.” They would worry that Tía Gloria could get sick from suffering so much. Often, you would hear them say things like, “Le puede hacer daño al corazón.” (Fear that her suffering could harm her heart.) And those of us in the younger generation would roll our eyes, at what we perceived to be an Old Mexican Wives’ Tales. But now research is telling us exactly what our elders told us, and that is that long-term stress, AKA suffering, can make us physically and/or mentally sick.

Latinas are used to aguantar, putting up with unpleasant life events just to keep on keeping on. We are experts at putting a positive spin on things. Often, we are the rock of the family and rocks are strong and sometimes indestructible. But as resilient as we are, it is important to open our eyes and take a good look at what is really going on so we can manage our stress and prevent it from becoming distress. Call it long term stress, toxic stress, distress or sufrimiento. Whatever you call it, this kind of emotional turmoil can lead to more serious problems such as anxiety and depression.

We come from a culture that denies a lot of things when things go wrong. We pretend that everything is okay when it’s not. Nos hacemos de la vista gorda. (Vista gorda doesn’t mean your vision is fat. It’s a colorful expression that means to “to turn a blind eye.”)

We go into denial. And sometimes, Comadres, we need a little garden variety denial to get us through the day. But today, I just want to nudge you a little bit to get you to pay attention to
your stress levels.

When stress turns into distress, it’s bound to wear you out and wear you down. When this happens, we cope in the best ways we can, but it’s not always pretty, nor healthy.

I don’t know about you, but when I get stressed to my limit, I want cake. (Preferably chocolate cake. There is a great bakery in Santa Fe – The Chocolate Maven – and when I get stressed, my car knows the way. When I’m in Portland, I ride my bike to the bakery and that always feels more righteous.) And look, who can deny that once-in-a-while, cuando ya no aguantas, indulging in a piece of cake, ain’t going to kill you.

But the important point here is that cake is a mean mother. She can turn on you if you don’t watch it. One minute she’s telling you, “There, there,” and the next, she’s telling you “You’re a bad girl and deserve to be punished.”

Eating cake to manage distress is not “sustainable.” Over time, eating cake, or taking a few extra shots of tequila, mezcal or even a few more of those femmy margaritas, to cope with stress, is going to make you feel worse.

I tell you this because I know.

So, in keeping with the topic of self-acceptance, I want to gently remind you that the first step in managing your stress in a healthy way is to accept what it is. Shine a little light on it and accept it without judgement. Accept that sometimes when you are in distress, you may do things that are just plain unhealthy. Take your next step from a place of self-acceptance, without judgement and move on.

“Paso por paso,” is one of our favorite dichos at De Las Mías, and it works very well with managing your stress.

So, in the spirit of shining a gentle light on distress, see if you can’t come to terms with what is really going on. We want you awake and aware so you can take better care.

**Moving forward, recognize the tell-tale signs of stress from the National Institute of Mental Health:**

- Trouble sleeping
- Drinking more alcohol
- Overeating
- Feeling moody or cranky
- Having low energy
- Feeling down in the dumps
Use these tell-tale signs of stress to take extra care of yourself. Here are 9 things that mental health experts recommend for taking better care of yourself in times of stress:

1. Get regular exercise. A simple 30-minute walk will do wonders. It can lift your spirits and often change your mood.
2. Eat well. When you are in a state of emotional distress, the last thing you need is a crazy diet. Nurture your body with good healthy food and cut back on sugars and junk food. (Start using our Healthy Lifestyle Checklist available on our App!)
3. Have fun. This seems obvious, but you would be surprised how many of us just stop having fun when we’re stressed out. Make a list of all the things you do for fun and do as much as you can to cheer yourself up.
4. Practice deep relaxation and/or meditation. Be mindful of the tension you hold in your body and let it go.
5. Protect yourself from people who criticize you or put you down. It’s okay to avoid mean people. You know who they are.
6. Don’t believe everything you think. When we’re beyond stressed, distress can impair your thinking. Distress es muy mentiroso...it can make you think things that are just not true. Be especially aware of self-put downs or mean things you tell yourself. Don’t believe it.
7. Drink water. As you drink it, become aware that you are doing a loving thing for yourself.
8. Ask for support. Reach out to your friends, comadres and sisters and share your feelings.
9. Reward yourself when you do any of these 9 things. And then reward yourself for rewarding yourself. ¡Eso!

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**Sometimes, long-term stress turns into emotional distress.**

**Signs of Emotional Distress**

When long-term stress turns into emotional distress, we need to watch for signs of depression.

**Recognize the signs of depression:** If you have 2-3 of these signs over a period of 2 weeks or more, it’s time to get some help. Talk to your doctor, clergy or mental health counselor if you experience 2-3 of these signs for more than two weeks.

- Feeling sad
- Trouble sleeping
- Sleeping too much
- Feeling like nothing is fun or enjoyable
- Feeling low energy
- Not feeling hungry
- Overeating
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling like life is not worth living

Emotional stress can sometimes turn into anxiety.

**Recognize the signs of anxiety.** Here are some signs of anxiety that you can watch for. Talk to your doctor, clergy or mental health counselor if you experience 2-3 of these signs for more than two weeks.

- Constant or on-going worrying
- Feeling like you can’t relax
- Feeling irritable, moody, jumpy, or nerviosa
- Trouble sleeping
- Fears: like fear of the dark, fear of being alone, fear of crowds
- Heart symptoms like fast heartbeat, chest pains, tightness of chest

If you ever feel like you want to hurt yourself or have suicidal thoughts, please call this number: Call 1-800-273-8255. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Available 24 hours every day.

Spanish: 1-888-628-9454

Sources:


