

After **Iftar** **بعد الإفطار**

# Good stress, bad stress? ... Attitude key

By Kurt Dixon

The way in which the word 'stress' is used today usually carries negative connotations. In 1975, the endocrinologist Hans Selye coined the word 'eustress' (the Greek eu means 'well' or 'good' – thus 'good stress') when he published a model dividing stress into two categories: 'eustress' and 'distress'. Persistent stress that is not resolved through coping or adaptation leads to 'distress', which in time can lead to anxiety or depression. On the other hand, stress can also enhance physical or mental function, for instance through strength-training or challenging, stimulating work; in which case it would be 'eustress'. Perhaps, if we can change the way that we understand stress and the different ways it can influence our life, we can learn to better manage it.

## What is stress?

Stress is a general feeling of increasing pressure and a normal physiological response to perceived danger. We recognize these experiences by physiological sensations in our body, such as heart palpitations or tense muscles.

Humans, like all other animals, have built-in survival mechanisms designed to help us respond to threatening situations, also known as the flight-fight-freeze responses. These mechanisms are activated in the command center of our brain, the amygdala, which interprets sensory information (such as sounds and sights) and sends signals to the hypothalamus, which in turn commands other parts of the body to either 'fight' or take 'flight'. This of course happens in an instant and often we are not aware that it is happening. Perhaps you can recall your response when someone almost drove into you on the highway; your body automatically responds by releasing hormones that drive you into action in a threatening situation to keep you safe. During this, you feel jittery and experience a burst of energy once the adrenaline rushes through your body. Your senses become sharper, breathing becomes rapid and shallower, and more oxygen rushes to the brain.

While these "stressful" experiences are generally a normal part of life, the chronic over-activation of the stress-response can eventually lead to more serious health issues, such as burnout, depression, anxiety, or what we



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call distress. We can also engage in unhealthy behaviors when trying to cope with high levels of stress, such as having poor interpersonal relationships and over-eating, as well as other impulsive or over-indulgent behaviors. These behaviors may relieve distress in the short-term, but they may soon exacerbate the problem.

## What causes stress?

There are a number of factors that can contribute to extreme stress, including personal attributes, events, and even internal stressors, such as our beliefs and cognitions. The choices we make, the way that we treat ourselves (such as negative self-talk) and our faulty ways of thinking, can all create and maintain stress. Additionally, particular personality styles are more susceptible to experiencing stress. Over-achievers with rigid personalities and perfectionistic traits are more likely to experience stress, and it is often harder for them to admit failure or seek help.

There are many examples of day-to-day external events that are stressful and which cannot be avoided,

including raising children, commuting to work, maintaining relationships, experiencing major life-transitions (birth, death, loss, new experiences), meeting deadlines, social interactions, and the list goes on. Although we cannot change external events, we do have control over how we perceive and relate to them. If you have ever watched a National Geographic documentary with lions hunting zebras, you might have noticed that zebras continue to graze in close vicinity to where lions have just made a kill. That is because zebras do not ruminate about incidents that have just happened once the immediate threat has passed. Humans are wired differently, and still continue to mull over threats long after they have passed.

Many of us find ourselves under increasing pressure to perform consistently at levels beyond our abilities, within our work or our personal lives. Two psychologists, Yerkes and Dodson published an article on the relationship between stress and performance, noting that our ability to respond to growing pressure to perform increases, but only up to a point. Beyond a certain point, our performance starts to suffer and if the stress continues further, we eventually experience burnout or more severe symptoms, like depression or physical illness. On the other hand, if we feel unproductive and underutilized, we can become bored, which can also be stressful. So, striking the right balance between our personal resources and the demands placed on us is essential to ensure we continue to function in a healthy manner.

## Managing stress

A good place to start with managing stress is to start noticing the warning signs. Notice that I mentioned that we need to manage our levels of stress, not get rid of it or wish it away; that is because stress cannot be avoided. Our bodies are much like vehicles; they experience wear-and-tear and if we do not look after and maintain them, will eventually break down. By cultivating an acute awareness of the signs of stress, we are able to better respond to and manage it, and are better able to prevent distress. Our emotions, behaviors and physiological responses are often useful clues. Chronic fatigue, irritability, loss of pleasure, headaches, muscular aches, poor attention and

concentration, and increasing feelings of tenseness are all common signs of stress.

We can manage stress more effectively before it changes to distress by making changes to our lives. Exercising, healthy eating, getting a full night's rest and maintaining healthy social relationships are all useful ways of coping. Furthermore, we can also change the way that we perceive a situation or learn to relate differently to our thought patterns. Treating ourselves kindly by listening to when our bodies are wearying is another effective coping method. Knowing when to ask for help is also important, as talking to a professional when you have reached the stage of distress can provide some relief, in having someone bear witness to and share your experience. Health professionals can also suggest effective strategies that you may not otherwise have thought of, which in turn activates your ability to come up with your own solutions. Moreover, when we experience severe stress, medications are sometimes needed. Severe chronic distress over a period of time can do damage to our brains and medications help with restoring those functions.

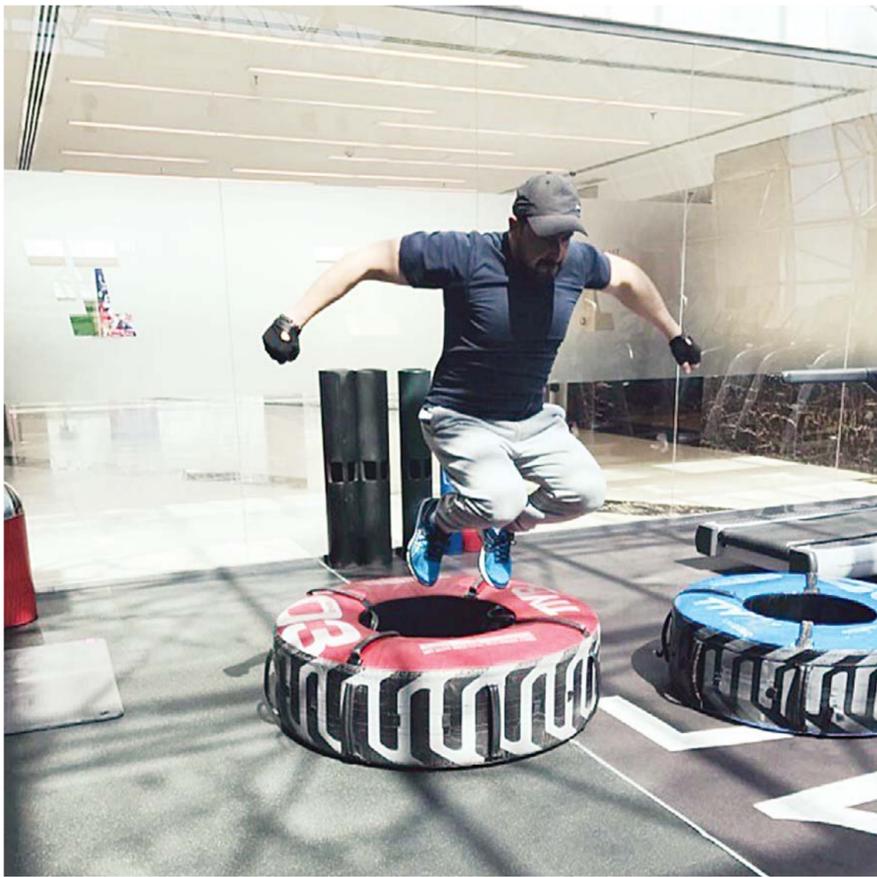
There are even coping mechanisms that you might not have thought of. For example, studies have found that cancer patients who are receiving treatment can even benefit from contact with dogs, as contact with pets has been shown to decrease levels of stress. So, if you are stressed and have pets, know that they too can provide relief.

What we don't realize is that we are sensitive but still robust and resilient. If we just learn to listen more carefully to our bodies, we can manage our lives better.

That being said, I leave you with two quotes by Selye as food for thought: "Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one", and "Man should not try to avoid stress any more than he would shun food, love or exercise."



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Adeeb Shuhaiber going through his routine. The type of exercise plan depends on body type and set goals.



'No better time than now'

# get fit ... have fun

By Adeeb Shuhaiber

Certified Fitness Trainer/Fitness Nutrition Specialist, Kuwait TV2 – FM99.7 News anchor/Presenter

The importance of physical fitness cannot be emphasized enough. In today's society we tend to live a more sedentary lifestyle. Therefore, there is a desperate need to increase daily activity to keep fit.

Regular exercise will maintain the performance of your lungs and heart, keep your weight under control, improve your overall muscle strength and above all ... it can be a lot of fun!

Kuwait ranked fourth most obese country on the planet according to a report published earlier this year. More than 50 percent of women in Kuwait – along with Libya, Qatar and Samoa – are considered obese according to the Global Burden of Disease Study published in The Lancet medical journal. Globally, nearly a third of adults and a quarter of children today are overweight. According to the report no country has turned the tide of obesity since 1980.

Keeping these facts in mind there is no better time than now to get fit. To start a fitness regime is always a challenge, but once you get into a routine in a few weeks there will be no stopping you – to me it is now a part of my life ... I like to call it "a good addiction".

One key to getting fit is eating right. Without a proper nutritional plan any amount of exercise will not give you the desired results. When I train clients I do emphasize this and give meal ideas. The best way to achieve this is to have a "meal prep" day, where you prepare your meals in advance. This may sometimes be difficult. It is therefore important that

when you eat without preparing your meals, you ensure you make the right choices specially if you are out or on the go.

General guidelines set by the USDA are based on an average diet consisting of 15 to 20% protein, 55% carbohydrates and 25 to 30% fats. However, please note this does not apply to every individual. After an initial body composition and performance assessment I will be able to give a clear guideline as to what path to follow.

This will also greatly depend on client goals and current status. Some clients may be aware of what food choices to make while others may require more coaching.

Try to follow these general macronutrient rules when eating: eat every 2 to 4 hours, eat lean protein and vegetables with each meal, eat healthy fats daily and if you are trying to lose excess fat the best time to eat carbs would be after exercise. Remember to always drink lots of water.

As I said earlier, exercise can be fun and challenging. With new techniques and equipment in the market there are so many ways to make it fun on a regular basis. I just bought some interesting new "gadgets" for

my private gym where I train. For example, a warm up needn't consist of running or walking on a treadmill but rather a set of jumping jacks, push-ups, pull-ups, battle ropes or the infamous burpees. This removes the monotony from a cardio regimen.

The type of exercise plan will depend on the body type and goals of the client. To start a programme I would recommend a full body workout targeting all muscle groups. If a client is very overweight it is preferable to commence an exercise programme focusing only on body weight exercises as opposed to the use of weights. As the workouts progress you can separate the workouts and focus on different muscle groups on each training day. For example, after a cardio warm up I target chest, biceps and abdominals on one day. The next day I will hit the back and triceps. Other days will include sessions for shoulders and legs. This is something that will be worked out as the training programme moves ahead.

You can follow me on Instagram @ fitnessstrainereddy. I offer private training in a well-equipped gym and outdoor workout area.

I wish you all a blessed Ramadan. Remember to keep fit and don't indulge too much in all those delicious Ramadan treats!



Adeeb at work ... a good addiction.