



PAIN & STRESS

the terrible twins

The South African Society of Physiotherapy brings you physiotherapist Sally Jane Shannon showing how stress and pain are linked – and how to cope with this.

Stress is a **normal, healthy** response to any situation that takes us out of our comfort zone. It actually helps us to better deal with these situations. For example: it motivates us to study for our exam, helps us prepare for a difficult conversation, gives us an extra boost of energy to sprint for the bus, etc. Sometimes stress is referred to as our “fight or flight” response – it prepares us to meet a challenge or flee from it. We actually **need some stress in our lives to keep us healthy!**



We are not, however, meant to **LIVE** in a state of constant stress.

When stress is poorly managed for a long time, it can leave us feeling tense, overwhelmed, worried or run down.

Too much stress over **too long** a period of time can affect us in many ways, including our immune system, memory, circulation, nervous system, mood, hormone production as well as our **PAIN**.

The Relationship of Pain to Stress & Anxiety

Pain can be a stressful experience and being in pain for a long time can cause anxiety and depression, but did you know that the reverse is also true? Being stressed, anxious or depressed can cause your tissues to become more sensitive.

Stress can **cause** or worsen pain. Stress can also affect how our injury responds to normal treatment.

This happens through a complex interaction between our stress, immune and nervous systems (to name a few).

Stress acts as an amplifier for pain

Have you noticed how a bad day at work or a hurtful conversation with a friend can make your pain worse? Stress can cause your body to feel as though it is under threat and, in an admirable effort to protect you, your brain ramps up your protective systems.



What helps to reduce stress

This might sound like doom and gloom but **take heart!** It isn't all bad news. The two factors that have been found to make the biggest difference to stress are **Exercise** and **Relaxation**.

Exercise doesn't have to mean going to the gym. It could be any movement-based activity that you enjoy – gardening, playing with your children, walking, dancing, etc. Movement helps your body to flush out the stress chemicals and boosts the “happy hormones” that make you feel good. Relaxation can also be achieved through many different activities – prayer, meditation, breathing exercises, mindfulness or simply sitting quietly and being still.

Other factors that seem to be helpful for good stress management include:

- 1) Having a **sense of control** over your health as well as confidence in dealing with your stressors.
- 2) Anything that builds your **resilience**. This means things like getting enough **sleep**, **laughing** often, **eating properly** and getting physically **stronger**.

- 3) It appears that **forgiveness** (letting go of conflict) may also play a role in reducing stress. Studies have found that the act of forgiveness can lower the risk of heart attack; improve cholesterol levels and sleep; and reduce pain, anxiety, depression and stress.

Did you know: **Exercise, Relaxation** (and the other factors mentioned) **have also been shown to reduce chronic pain.**



THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE: Stress does *not* need to dictate your health. Your anxiety does *not* need to control you. Take a deep breath and start making **small changes** to **make stress your FRIEND.**

Helpful Resources

- 1) How Stress Affects your Brain & What you can do About it – Madhumita Murgia
tinyurl.com/stressaffectsbrain
- 2) How to Make Stress your Friend – Kelly McGonigal
tinyurl.com/howtomakestressyourfriend
- 3) All it Takes is 10 Mindful Minutes – Andy Putticombe **tinyurl.com/tenmindfulminutes**

For more information, see **www.pmpg.co.za** and go to **www.saphysio.co.za** to find a physio near you!